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Abstract

This thesis represents the first Cultural Studies analysis of the 1980s entertainment form commonly known as ‘alternative comedy’, which emerged against the backdrop of social, industrial and political unrest. However, the use of the term ‘alternative comedy’ has obscured a diverse movement that contained many different strands and tendencies, which included punk poets, street performers, chansonniers and improvising double acts. This thesis goes some way to addressing the complex nature of this entertainment space by recognising the subtle but important differences between New Variety and alternative cabaret. Alternative cabaret was both a movement and an entertainment genre, while New Variety grew out of CAST’s theatre work and was constructed in opposition to Tony Allen’s and Alexei Sayle’s Alternative Cabaret performance collective. Taken together, alternative cabaret and New Variety comprise one part of the alternative space that also includes post-punk music, and were the cultural expressions of the 1980s countercultural milieu.

Alternative cabaret and New Variety were the products of cultural change. Each genre has its roots in the countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s and it was the knowledge that agents had acquired through participation in these movements that helped to shape their political-aesthetic dispositions or their *weltanschauung*. As well as political activism, rock music influenced performers and promoters and contributed much to their art. In this sense, this was as much a post-punk avant-garde movement as it was a cultural intervention.

This study charts the development of alternative entertainment in 1980s Britain and its transformation into the multi-million pound comedy industry that it is today (S Friedman, 2009). This study also analyses how the alternative space was constructed and how it was eventually destroyed by the internal and external pressures that acted upon it. I have used the written and oral testimonies of those who were involved in the space and used my own recollections from 14 years of performing comedy and promoting cabaret clubs.

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This thesis is dedicated to my late parents Ray and Dorothy, and to my daughter, Lola, and my grandsons, Joshua and Nathaniel.

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1. Introduction

*Armalite rifle and the Holy Trinity
Used against you like Irish jokes on the BBC*

~Gang of Four, 'Armalite Rifle', 1979

*The game of culture is not static. It is one which is inescapably changing,
generating its own dynamism like an internal combustion engine*

Robbins, 2000: xxiv

Culture and society are not static: they are in a constant state of flux. Changes in tastes do not occur in isolation from society or the materialism of history. On the one hand, they are produced organically by the people, who use whatever means they have at their disposal to create cultural innovations that in turn produce new tastes and new cultural discourses. On the other hand, dominant tastes are reproduced by the dominant cultural formation and are the products of their judgements, which are then projected onto the public-at-large; the consumers of cultural artefacts (Bourdieu, 1993, 2003). The near-complete control of cultural production by the dominant class, who reproduce their social class through their cultural and social institutions, is responsible for the circulation and recirculation of stale ideas. Producers on the dominant field of cultural production are rarely innovators; they are followers and little more than the appropriators of motifs. From time to time, movements emerge to challenge the dominance of stale and/or reactionary ideas. It is these movements whose arrival on the field compels the dominant field to either accommodate or recuperate the movement or parts therein, which in turn gives the outward appearance of transformation at the very least.

This thesis is a study of the alternative performance space, (shortened to 'alternative space') an entertainment space that emerged during the 1980s, which challenged the staleness of Britain's official entertainment world by

constructing a second world in opposition (Bakhtin, 1984). Alternative promoters and performers, many of whom had been participants in the countercultures of the 60s and 70s, wrote these spaces in response to the conservatism, nostalgia and hierarchies of the official entertainment world. Their talent in creating these spaces was informed by a DIY ethic that can be found in the post-punk counterculture and the avant-garde (McKay, 1996: 4; D Andrews, 2010). Hebdige's (1993) claim that punk was a form of rock music and an avant-garde movement appears to reinforce the notion that the cultural forms that followed it were touched by its unstated philosophies of shock and agency. As a momentarily-dominant rock genre, punk's alleged demise in 1977 had opened up a space for new cultural practices and practitioners, many of whom had taken advantage of greater access to Higher Education or attended arts schools (Itzin, 1986; Lidington, 1987). Amateur performers flourished in the 1980s and their use of bricolage to create new performance styles from an assortment of cultural genres marks them out as self-taught practitioners of whichever entertainment discipline they belonged to. One of these genres was alternative comedy (alt com), a new form of comedy that was performed by amateurs, many of whom were in their early twenties. Taken together, these performers; their disciplines and practices constitute an alternative space, which also accommodated oppositional political discourses that were denied a voice in the official world. My study discusses how this space was constructed, and thus complements and extends the work of previous researchers of the alt com genre (Double, 1991; Ritchie, 1997; C Craig, 2000), by discussing the space in which this new form of comedy was incubated and nourished. This thesis asks a simple question: what was alt com?

Given the temporal proximity of alt com to the post-punk music genre, the phrase, "Comedy is the new rock 'n' roll", generally attributed to Janet Street-Porter, has a ring of truth to it (S Lee, 2010: 1). Indeed, Oliver Double (1997) briefly considers rock and comedy's affinities in *Stand Up! On Being a Comedian*, his manual for novice comedians. When approaching this subject, I made a point of revisiting the post-punk music that I had listened to in my early twenties in the hope of finding clues that explained how the alternative space had been inscribed. I deduced that it was within this DIY music movement that similar practices and tactics were employed to challenge the dominant hierarchies and stale customs of the official music world (De Certeau, 1988).

What I found was fragmentation, experimentation, democratisation, and a philosophical engagement with the world, which can be witnessed the music and lyrics of Gang of Four, Wire, The Au Pairs and Crass's communalism and autonomous control of the means of cultural production (Reynolds, 2005: 424).

My interest in this subject is rooted in my interest in post-punk, and my work as a comedian and compère-promoter of Cabaret A Go Go (CAGG), an alternative cabaret (alt cab) club that I co-organised at The Broken Doll pub in Newcastle in the late 1980s. After four years with CAGG, I moved to London in 1990 to take up increasing offers of work on a cabaret circuit that was transforming itself into a comedy circuit. My experiences as a professional practitioner have given me a unique insight into the inner mechanics of the alternative space and the comedy industry, and provided me with access to people who would have otherwise been unknown to other researchers. Many of the participants in this study are not household names, but their stories are equally as valid and as useful to the overall narrative of the 1980s, as those who have become stars. This study is both an ethnography of a historical community of people that combines autoethnography and case study. My autoethnography is a critical analysis of my personal narrative and a reflection of my role as a professional performer (M Andrews et al, 2013), while the case study examines the history of the Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre (CAST) as a principal agent in the cultural transformations of the 1970s and 1980s.

To excavate this period of history, I have used face-to-face interviews and questionnaires to uncover the cultural capital of the participants, while archival and textual materials functioned as maps and diagrams to the site of study (De Certeau, 1988). My 15 interviewees were a mix of performers and promoters that I had selected on the basis that they were present during each of the evolutionary stages of the space's development. I was keen to interview Roland Muldoon because he and CAST are the focus of the case study. CAST, a subversive theatre company, had played a pioneering role in political fringe theatre, which led to the formation of the alternative theatre movement in 1968 (Itzin, 1986). However, arts funding cuts imposed by the Thatcher government in 1981 forced many alternative theatre companies to close (Kershaw, 1993; Peacock, 1999). In response, CAST launched New Variety, which contemporised the language of variety theatre by combining alt com, street performance, punk poetry and music. Although they appear in literature about

alternative theatre (Itzin, 1986; S Craig, 1980; Kershaw, 1992; Peacock, 1999; Hughes, 2011), and the Sixties counterculture (Doggett, 2008,) their role in fostering alt com and laying the foundations for the current comedy industry has arguably been downplayed and their role in defining the ethical parameters of the circuit, and their contribution to the reconstitution of variety as a form of live entertainment has been elided. Indeed, in Michael Grade's *Story of Variety* (BBC, 2011) series on BBC4, New Variety was absent from his discussion. This thesis aims to address this injustice.

In addition to Roland Muldoon, I interviewed performers like Dreenagh Darrell and Dave (Igor) Thompson who did not appear on the New Variety circuit either for personal reasons or because they found themselves at odds with the Muldoons' socialist politics. I set out to interview at least two performers from each period of the space's evolution. Some of those performers who were there from the beginning include Tony Allen of Alternative Cabaret and avant-garde variety artist Martin Soan, while musical comedian and bandleader Ronnie Golden, and poet and comic Mark Kelly joined shortly thereafter. Others like stand-ups Julie Balloo and Bob Boyton began their careers in the second period a couple of years later. I have also included Noel James and Stewart Lee, who joined the circuit during its transitional period. Other interviewees include promoters like Ivor Dembina of The Red Rose Club and song parodists, Skint Video, who were New Variety regulars, and appear separately as Steve Gribbin and Brian Mulligan. Early into the study, pilot questionnaires were sent to punk poet Mark Hurst, who played a crucial role in the survival of the Hackney Empire and Ian Saville, the socialist magician, who was also a member of Broadside Mobile Workers' Theatre, and CAST's rivals (Saville, 1990; Muldoon interview). Hurst and Saville were also involved in the Hackney Empire Preservation Trust (HEPT), which was established to oversee the restoration of the Hackney Empire. Comedian Wendy Lee and the vinyl record executioner, Woody Bop Muddy also took part in the questionnaire phase of the study and represent two very different comic strands: the latter was an absurd grotesque; the product of the art school, and the former was a political comedian. Newcastle-based comedian Anvil Springstien, who began as a street performer and is the only Northern performer featured in this study also took part in the pilot questionnaire stage.

The alternative space was largely invisible to television audiences before the success of *Saturday Live* and therefore the medium has played a major role in shaping the public's perception of alt com. Alt com represents an ostensible break with the comedy that passed before it and in this sense, it can be considered 'avant-garde'. Historically, the avant-garde sought to challenge the staleness and impotence of dominant art forms, alt com adopted the same ethos. Alt com is sometimes associated with television shows like *The Young Ones* (BBC2, 1984) or even *Not the Nine O'clock News* (BBC2, 1979 – 1982; Sabotage Times, 2014). Television's impact on alt com has ensured the image that has been lodged in the public's collective memory is one of Ben Elton 'talking politics' on *Saturday Live* or the anarchic humour of *The Young Ones*. This thesis discusses a live entertainment phenomenon from which those programmes drew their talents rather than comedy shows that *made use* of alt com.

The comedy of the pre-alternative era can be separated into three broad categories: trad comedy, whose direct ancestor is variety theatre; Oxbridge comedy, which is characterised by its whimsy and obscure references, and includes almost anything from the satire boom to television comedies like *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and *Not the Nine O'clock News* (S Friedman, 2009, 2011), and what I call the 'demob comedy' of the post-war years (*The Goon Show*, *Hancock's Half Hour* and so on), which had petered out by the middle of the 1960s, but which was influential on the Oxbridge comedians (Wagg, 2004). I use the term 'demob' because the comics and writers who were involved in shows like *The Goons* had served in the military during the Second World War and were demobbed (demobilised) afterwards. Demob comics and writers had been produced through the Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA) or its successor Combined Services Entertainment (CSE), which provided entertainment for forces personnel during the war. After the war, many of these performers gravitated towards The Windmill Theatre in London, a rather risqué venue that was recognised for its nude *tableaux vivants* rather than its theatrical productions (Ritchie, 1997). *The Goon Show* especially, was subversive, surreal and contained many memorable catchphrases and running jokes (Ritchie, 1997; Greenslade, 2005). Alt comedians were not opposed to demob comedy because its artists were neither Oxbridge-educated nor trad comedians. Trad comedians must not be confused with variety theatre veterans

like Arthur Askey, Ted Ray and Frank Randle, who enjoyed continued popularity after the war. Randle was the exception to these comedians: a popular subversive comic, he was the antithesis of his comparatively clean contemporary, friend and rival, George Formby, who had even had a show banned for obscenity (C P Lee, 1998: 32-49; Medhurst, 2007: 72). By contrast, those comics whom I refer to as 'trad comedians' emerged into the world of the working men's clubs (WMCs) in the 1950s and 1960s and formed a generational break with the comedians of the variety and music hall eras, and the pre-war WMC period (Double, 1991: 137). What distinguished these comics from their earlier counterparts was their use of bad language and innuendo (Double, 1991: 137). Complaints were made by club agents and trade magazines like *Our Club* about the WMC comics of the 1960s and 1970s for their use of obscene language and the telling of smutty, or so-called 'blue' jokes (Double, 1991: 137).

Oxbridge comedy was written and performed by graduates who had been produced by the Oxford Revue and Cambridge Footlights system and were the product of their social conditioning. The comedians and writers who were responsible for the so-called satire boom took an irreverent position against the parental culture of deference and order, but were not political activists and adopted a position of ostensible ideological neutrality (Ritchie, 1997; Carpenter, 2001). Oxbridge comedy was a balancing act between schoolboy silliness, surreality and symbolic displays of erudition. An example of this kind of humour can be found in the *Monty Python* sketch "The Philosophers' Football Match", which depicts a football match between continental philosophers at the *Olympiastadion* at the 1972 Munich Olympics, which is refereed by Confucius, the only non-European philosopher present in the piece (YouTube, 2015). The sketch relies on a knowledge of philosophy and the individual philosophers in the sketch in order to 'get the joke'. It is, for all intents and purpose, laden with the symbols of class power and alienates those who do not possess the code to the references contained within the sketch (Bourdieu, 2003; S Friedman, 2009). Thus, while *Monty Python* may have been funny, its appeal was limited to those with the correct kind of cultural capital to decipher the obscure references contained within their work.

The form of comedy that became known as alt com was therefore opposed to trad comedy as much as it was opposed to the middle class whimsy

of Oxbridge comedy (Wilmot, 1989). However, I would argue that alt com has been mythologised and romanticised and memories of the period are selective and tend to gloss over the reality of the space, which was much more concerned with variety and experimentation than political hectoring. I would also argue that television programmes like *Ben Elton: Laughing at the 80s* (Channel 4, 2014) and *The History of Alternative Comedy* (BBC2, 1999) have contributed to this mythologisation, thus the image we have of 1980s entertainment is of a tension between two forms of comedy: one political and philosophically engaged with the world, and the other steeped in postcolonial discourses of difference and bourgeois elitism. This, however, masks the variety of performance styles that could be found within the space and how trad forms of entertainment were rejected in favour of new, often eccentric kinds of performance that were the products of the imagination.

We cannot underestimate the impact of music - particularly rock - on the shape and character of alt cab, New Variety and alt com. Rock music's role in the lives of my participants is evident from the data I collected at the questionnaire stage of the research. My own work in comedy was partly shaped by the sound of rock music, especially post-punk music as well as the politically conscious hip-hop of Public Enemy and the neo-psychedelic sounds of Ride. Yet there is an assumption that punk was a primary influence on alt com and the space as a whole. To an extent this is true but only in terms of attitudes and comedy rhythms. If anything, punk's recuperation opened up new spaces of possibilities that were created by, to paraphrase the language of the Situationist International, its disruption of the "spectacle" (Bourdieu, 1996: 20 - 5; Debord, 1957; Marcus, 1989: 19-20). It was into this gap that post-punk inserted itself as a DIY music movement (Reynolds, 2005: 2; Gracyk, 2011: 74). Therefore, I argue that the key to understanding this period can be found in what is referred to as the post-punk era of 1977 to 1983, which apparently post-dated punk (Reynolds, 2005: 8; Gracyk, 2011: 74).

I argue that there are structural similarities between post-punk music and the alternative space and both should be seen as sites of *countercultural* production. However, the term 'counterculture' as George McKay (1996: 6) notes is problematic and comes with considerable baggage and like post-punk, it is also ill-defined. If culture is, as Williams (1988: 87) says, "...one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" then the word

'counterculture' is equally complex. The word 'counterculture' tends to be associated with the symbolism and mythology of Sixties psychedelia and the anti-war movement (McKay, 1996: 6). I would suggest that this is a parallax view of countercultures and whenever they are discussed, the *cultural* aspect is rarely, if ever, mentioned. By simply referring to something as 'countercultural' because it opposes something is not sufficient an explanation without discussing what means were used to construct the space in which a particular countercultural formation operates. I argue that we need to pay more attention to the *cultural* side of the countercultural equation and recognise that it is from within these *ad hoc* spaces that new ideas are formed to challenge the staleness of the dominant or official culture. Left-libertarian countercultural formations contributed to the space's ideological orientation - as vague as it was. The alternative space in which these countercultural formations operated included alternative theatre companies and the underground press. But what was alternative theatre?

Alternative theatre was a form of popular theatre that provided a space for the circulation of left-wing ideas and can broadly be described as a left-wing cultural space. The term was used to refer to both a movement, and employed as an over-arching term that covered a range of theatrical forms from socialist theatre to community theatre and Theatre in Education (TIE) and was dedicated to the principle of taking theatre to non-theatre going audiences (Itzin, 1986; S Craig, 1984; Peacock, 1999; Muldoon interview). It was in alternative theatre that many of the alternative space's artists had their first experiences of performing. To emphasise this shared ancestry, alternative theatre companies appeared in the pages of the long-running *British Alternative Theatre Directory* (McGillivray, 1989, 1990), which were listed alongside cabaret (alt cab) artists (rather than comedians) and cabaret clubs. Indeed, *Time Out* magazine, which championed alt cab/New Variety from the beginning, began publication in 1968 to provide a listings service to the burgeoning alternative theatre movement (S Craig, 1980: 16), and was therefore part of this *countercultural* milieu. A glance at the Fringe Theatre section of any issue of *Time Out* between 1979 and 1982 reveals the embryonic circuit was considered to be an adjunct of alternative theatre by its journalists, who had yet to classify it as a distinct genre.

'New Variety' and 'alt cab' were also spaces that were defined by particular kinds of cultural capital that were produced through political-cultural

activism. The construction of the entire space utilised tactics (De Certeau, 1988: 47) that were the product of countercultural practices, and deployed to resist the 'symbolic violence' of the official world (qv. Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 140). Bourdieu and Wacquant describe 'symbolic violence as "the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity". At first glance, this appears to resonate with Gramsci's (2003) idea of cultural hegemony, which refers to the state's and the ruling classes' control of the population through its domination of cultural production. In both cases, the social agent is either unaware of the symbolic violence acted upon them or accepts it as a natural state of affairs (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 140-173; Gramsci, 2003: 12). Symbolic violence can therefore refer to the trad comedians' racist, sexist and homophobic jokes, which were used to reinforce the dominant culture's position and keep minority groups in their place through the medium of humour. In this sense, the innocent and jocular appearance of a racist or sexist joke masks its violent intentions and is defended with a curt 'it was just a joke'. Symbolic violence also reveals itself in the way in which space is denied to cultural producers from minority backgrounds, or who otherwise express themselves contrarily to the socio-cultural norms of the dominant culture (Debord, <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/report.htm>).

Countercultural producers respond to this exclusion by creating their own spaces in which they can practice and develop their art. As social spaces, these exist as second worlds in opposition to the official world of legitimated culture and are governed according to the laws established within them (Bakhtin, 1984: 130). New Variety and alt cab, the two constituent elements of the alternative space, fit the criteria for inclusion as *countercultural* phenomena because of the tactics they used to create individual spaces within the urban environment (De Certeau, 1988: 47). In their turn, each genre is also defined by the way in which they use the physical space. Their construction, I argue, is carried out according to the political-aesthetic dispositions of the respective proprietors who stamp their individual, but no less symbolic, mark on the venue.

1.2 What follows

This thesis will proceed with a review of the relevant literature that includes a discussion of my Bourdieusian conceptual paradigm, which is drawn

principally from *Distinctions* (2003) and *The Field of Cultural Production* (1994). I have found Bourdieu's (1986, 1993, 2003) concepts of habitus, capital and field most useful because they provide a nuanced approach to analysing class power than the determinism of its Marxian counterpart. Moreover, they have provided me with the tools to interrogate the dynamics of cultural transformation and the perennial struggles between social formations on the terrain of cultural production. For me, the utility of Bourdieu's concepts rest on his claim that his theories were works in progress; this gives them their flexibility as analytical instruments (Robbins, 2000: 4; Bennett, 2007: 2). With this in mind, I have adapted Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, in particular, to explain the countercultural practices that existed within the space. Hence, I propose to use the term '*countercultural capital*' to describe a particular kind of cultural capital that is produced and possessed by those who work in underground political and cultural fields. Bourdieu (1986: 47) says:

Cultural capital can exist in three forms: in the *embodied* state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the *objectified* state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc.; and in the *institutionalized* state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee.

(Bourdieu, 1986: 47)

My concept of *countercultural capital* is broadly in agreement with Bourdieu's formulation with the exception of its institutionalised state. Within *countercultural* formations there are no certificates or formal educational institutions, and the markers of prestige are conferred by peers upon other peers. In the alternative space's case, honours were awarded by audience plaudits and the press's praise. *Countercultural capital* is used in this thesis to refer specifically to the kind of *culturalised capital* that is produced by and through broadly libertarian socialist/anarchist movements and the performance spaces within the alternative space, and because this study deals with CAST,

who would describe themselves as libertarian socialists (McDonnell, 2010; Muldoon interview), its use is therefore germane. Likewise, the concept of the habitus has also been extended to accommodate my concept of the *countercultural* habitus, which informs what I refer to as the ‘political-aesthetic’ disposition or produces rebellious tendencies. I have borrowed the concept of political-aestheticism from the historic avant-garde and its oppositional cultural-political practices, which match those of the alternative space. Indeed, I use the term ‘space’ to refer to a location on the more general field of restricted production (Bourdieu, 1993: 36), which governs small-scale production and what Bourdieu (1993: 36) calls “art for art’s sake”.

In Chapter Three I discuss my methodology and why I chose the methods used in this study. I began with the assumption that I needed to collect individual stories from people who were performers or promoters through face-to-face interviews. I was also aware that availability would be an issue. With a project of this kind, it was inevitable that the methodology would evolve as new information became known. This project began as an attempt to write a cultural history of alt com but responses to the pilot questionnaire revealed there was more to this world than stand-up comedy, and many participants were keen to stress the variety of performance styles that appeared at clubs. Moreover, the words ‘cabaret’ and ‘variety’ kept making appearances in these interviews, and it was in the second year of this study that I decided to focus on alt cab and New Variety as live entertainment genres in their own right and relegate alt com to a comedy genre that was present in the clubs. Although my early interviewees would frequently make allusions to countercultures and left-wing politics, there was a concomitant resistance on the part of other participants who claimed vociferously that the space was not dominated by people shouting, ‘down with Thatcher’ (Gribbin interview). However, I needed little convincing because as someone who co-organised a cabaret club, I was fully aware that the scene was neither dominated by stand-up comedy nor was it as political-ideological as has been suggested. I was therefore keen to get to grips with the idea of alt cab and New Variety being the product of the cultural expressions of the countercultures of the 1960s and 1970s, and devised a questionnaire that would help me to obtain specific data about this topic.

Because this study deals with historical cultural phenomena, audience measurements and real-time observations were not possible. Interviews with

people who were involved in the alternative space were thus crucial to this study because they were witnesses to the events that took place before and throughout the 1980s. I have made use of autoethnography as a means of interacting with the data that I obtained through the interviews, but also because I am a participant-researcher who once played the circuit and therefore have a contribution to make to this study. To get a sense of what kinds of entertainment were being opposed by alt cab and New Variety, I watched hours of television footage from light entertainment programmes like *The Comedians*, *The Wheeltappers and Shunters Social Club* and *Seaside Special*. Alt com is generally associated with the anarchic comedy of *The Young Ones* (BBC1, 1982) and *The Comic Strip Presents...* (Channel Four, 1982) and so this was also relevant viewing. The British Library Sound Archive was useful for audio and video recordings of cabaret shows and for programmes like *The Cabaret Upstairs* (BBC Radio 4) *The Cabaret at the Jongleurs* (BBC2) and *The Late Show* (BBC2, 1990) in which I appear briefly in a segment about Black Comedy. I have also spent some considerable time trawling the Hackney Empire Archives at the University of East London in an effort to fill in the gaps in CAST's and New Variety's history.

Chapter Three is followed by a general history of popular entertainment in Chapter Four, which deals with music hall, cabaret, WMCs and includes an outline of political cabaret and agit-prop theatre. I have subtitled this 'in search of models' because music hall, variety, cabaret and agit-prop theatre have all been cited as possible influences on alt cab and New Variety (Wilmot, 1989; Lidington, 1987; Double, 1991; C Craig, 2000) and I was eager to examine these genres and get some answers. Continental art cabarets (the cabaret-artistique, for example), rather than commercial cabarets, are included because of their ancestral relationship to the political cabarets of Russia and Germany, which in their turn, provided the template for agit-prop and political fringe theatre companies of the 1960s and 1970s (Stourac and McCreery, 1986). As an entertainment form in and of itself, the phrase 'New Variety' necessitates the inclusion of a discussion of music hall and variety theatre. This is because of the Muldoon's *new* form of variety theatre has to be placed within a general history of entertainment and its relationship to other forms needs to be considered.

My general findings are presented in Chapter Five, in which I chart the development of the space from its inception in 1979 to end of alt cab in 1992. Here, I comment on the data collected from my participants and *Time Out* and offer my own perspective through the lens of my autoethnography. Within this chapter I offer two case studies: Alexei Sayle and Martin Soan/Malcolm Hardee/*The Greatest Show On Legs* to illustrate two of the tendencies that operated in the space. *Countercultural* capital was used symbolically through performances, and in the creation of an identifiable aesthetic, which has its roots in the countercultures of the 1960s and 1970s. Cultural and *countercultural* capital determined individual approaches to performance work, and rock n roll was an important influence on many participants. The DIY/bricolage ethic was taken from punk and became the guiding principle of the alternative space and was utilised to create new styles and genres from scratch. In this, it is similar to the post-punk music scene that used the same techniques in the pursuit of innovation. The memory of a circuit full of stand-up comedians railing against the Thatcher government is exploded as a myth. The truth is that there were very few stand-up comedians on the circuit between 1981 and 1986 and the most common performers that could be found in the clubs were punk poets and street performers. *Countercultural* capital was reproduced through cabaret (sic) workshops like those at Jackson's Lane Community Centre, which produced new talent for the circuit.

The alternative space also democratised social relations between performers and organisers, and like the post-punk record labels, agreements were based on handshakes and the middle men were eliminated. This was an entertainment scene created for and by amateurs; promoters opened clubs because they loved entertainment and not because they saw a possibility of getting rich quick. Yet the alternative space particularly shared much more in common than democratised social relations with post-punk: performers played with content and form, and were philosophically engaged with the world around them. Many participants explained how they made no money in the early days and were either forced to claim unemployment benefit or hold down a day job. Performers only began to make money during the transitional phase (see Appendix), which began in 1987 after the success of *Saturday Live*, when clubs began to put 'as seen on television' on their publicity materials.

In Chapter Six, I discuss CAST's work from their origins in the anti-war counterculture of the 1960s, through to their work in anti-racism and feminism to the acquisition of the Hackney Empire and the end of the New Variety genre in the early Nineties. As a political theatre company, CAST was responsible for catalysing the alternative theatre space. Most importantly, CAST presents New Variety formed a bridge between the first wave of alt cab/alt com and the clubs that followed. They introduced variety to the alternative space by giving space to punk poetry and street performers rather than a small group of performers who were linked by their connections to political fringe theatre. More importantly, New Variety provided a degree of continuity between alternative theatre and the alternative space, and laid down a marker for others to follow.

I conclude this thesis in Chapter Seven by reflecting on my findings and discussing the implications of my work. New Variety and alt cab were separate genres that were defined by their respective use of space. New Variety introduced variety to the nascent alt cab circuit, while retaining a separate identity and space outside of alt cab. This study has raised a number of questions that have yet to be answered and provided me with directions for future studies. Topics include areas that have received little or no academic attention and these are: what were the contributions of punk poets and street performers to the alternative space? Black comedians were few in number but they faced a constant battle against tokenism and casual racism and they were often ghettoised. How did they cope with this and why was a separate black circuit created when the alt cab circuit was supposedly an egalitarian space? In 2013, I presented a paper to conference on the sartorial styles of the performers and their significance. The alt cab scene outside of London has never been properly discussed but was it any different to the London circuit and if so, how?

The comedy landscape has changed dramatically over the course of three decades and, for a while, popular entertainment had also changed. However, while we have new forms of stand-up comedy, the variety field was left to wither on the vine. It is this that has been lost to us. We are long overdue a variety revival.

2. Previous literature

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the 1980s entertainment scene that is generally referred to as 'alt com'. My reading for this study has been eclectic because the amount of available material on alt cab and New Variety is limited. Some authors have mentioned these genres as part of another study related to comedy (Wilmot, 1989; Double, 1991; C Craig, 2000; Cook, 2001), and others (S Craig; 1980; Itzin, 1986; Kershaw, 1992; Peacock, 1999) have included CAST in their work on alternative theatre. Tony Lidington (1987) makes alt cab the focus of his paper for *Theatre Quarterly*, while Lisa Appignanesi (1984) devotes a short chapter to it at the end of her book *The Cabaret*. Bill McDonnell (2010), a former performer with CAST, concludes his journal article "Jesters To The Revolution – A History Of Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre (Cast), 1965 – 85" with a mention of New Variety and this has been of some use for its critical take on CAST. Roland Muldoon's book *Taking On The Empire* (2013) was published during the course of this investigation and discusses the period immediately before and during his time at The Hackney Empire to his departure in 2005, and has been useful for filling in gaps. Finally, Sam Friedman (2011) has mapped the changes in comedy tastes in his thesis. To date, it is the only piece of academic research into this period that uses a Bourdieusian paradigm. However, there is no mention of CAST, New Variety or alt cab in his work.

2.1 Related academic work

The academic studies that exist on the period are almost exclusively devoted to alt com. To date, there have been three such studies into various aspects of stand-up comedy which place alt com at or near the centre of the investigation, with alt cab and New Variety receiving mentions or being ignored altogether. Oliver Double's (1991) thesis is the first academic study of stand-up comedy and seeks to establish a new theoretical paradigm for the genre. It is also the first academic study to include a discussion of alt com alongside trad comedy. Double (1991), a former stand-up comedian himself, begins from the epistemological position that the study of comedy has often been part of wider investigations into laughter, including forms of non-humorous laughter such as

tickling (1991:12). Double (1991: 1-3) claims the study of humour has been traditionally approached from the position of the dominant group and has been subjected to the kinds of clinical approaches that involve the viewing of crude forms of humour and the use of devices to measure responses in the subject (Double, 1991: 2)¹. These purely scientific studies do not consider the changing nature of humour (Double, 1991). Double (1991: 14) insists that humour is not inflexible or universal and exists as part of an “ever-changing everyday discourse” and is a product of our culture. Double (1991) draws from existing philosophical and psychoanalytical theories of humour, the oldest of these are the superiority theories of Aristotle and Hobbes, which rest on the premise that “We laugh at jokes, because they make us feel superior to the joke’s victim” (Double, 1991: 15). The superiority theory was succeeded by the incongruity theory (Lippitt, 1994). Proponents of this theory include Thomas Hobbes as well as Francis Bacon, Arthur Schopenhauer and Søren Kierkegaard (Double, 1991). The incongruity theory recognises the use of mismatched ideas and language misuse (Double, 1991). Both theories were eventually superseded by Sigmund Freud’s (1966) psychoanalytic theories of humour, which situate joke-telling in the relationship between the unconscious mind and the appreciation for particular joke types. Freud’s relief theory posits that the joke builds up tension that is released by the punchline in the form of laughter (Freud, 1966: 143-170, 2005). However Double (1991) rejects both Freud’s psychoanalytical and earlier superiority theories, seeing them as too deterministic for his purposes. Yet he admits that the sexist and racist jokes told by trad comedians operate from a position of superiority (Double, 1991). His grounds for putting these theories aside rest, in part, on the culturally idiosyncratic nature of joke appreciation, noting that perceptions of incongruity are deeply rooted in one’s culture and what may be appear incongruous in one country may not translate as well or at all in Britain (Double, 1991). Incongruity also implies a degree of subversiveness, because it disrupts the logic of everyday life.

According to Double (1991) there are three traditions of stand-up comedy: music hall/variety, working men’s club and alt com. Stand-up comedy can include music, characterisations and one-liners but not comic monologues, which can often *include* characterisations (1991, 1994). Stand-up can also

¹ Jason Rutter’s (1997) approach involved measuring laughter ‘in situ’. Rutter worked within comedy clubs in Manchester in an effort to break free from the purely clinical approach to the study of laughter.

involve a solo performer or double acts that use music or improvisation (Double, 1991; 1994). Contemporary stand-up comedy has its origins in Music Hall song and gradually developed into joke-telling and comic monologues by the 1930s (Double, 1991). With the decline of the variety theatres in the 1950s and 1960s, stand-up comedians migrated to television or the WMCs (Double, 1991: 125-190). In the WMCs, the performers adhered to the customs and practices that were established during the variety theatre era. Double (1991: 125-190) refers to the comics of the WMC circuit as “club comics” to make a distinction between them and the comics of the variety theatre era. For Double (1991: 125-190) WMC comedy is divided into two periods: the early years (pre-1960) and the later years, which included the period Double (1991) was researching his project. During the early years, the comedy was much more orientated towards the working class, while in the later years the issue of class was mostly elided in favour of so-called ‘blue’ jokes and the racist and sexist humour with which the WMCs eventually became associated (Double, 1991: 125-190).

The appendix in Double’s (1991: 375-480) thesis includes an account of his time on the northern circuit, in which he provides more detail of the clubs that appear in his 1994 journal article for the *New Theatre Quarterly*. These are the only existing texts written about the northern circuit, which was invisible to many Londoners (Double, 1994). On this circuit, one could still find jugglers, poets and other speciality acts after they began to disappear from London clubs (Double, 1994). Double (1994: 256) notes the concern among comedians with what he calls the “blanding out” of the London circuit and writes “This atrophying of originality was inevitable, given the fact that alternative comedy has become a job of work for performers and promoters alike, and that the interest of television has given comics the feeling that every gig is an audition for the big time”. Thus, Double (1994) offers a reasonable explanation for how a stylistic uniformity descended on the circuit, which was manifested in the preponderance of white male stand-ups talking about more or less the same subjects, and the London circuit itself was becoming increasingly obsessed with safety and commercial sensibilities in order to meet the demands of television. Double (1994:4) observes that there was still excitement and danger in the Northern clubs and notes “While the London scene is criticized for its blandness and lack of variety, regional gigs can be almost too varied”. However, some

Northern audiences still needed to be educated out of their expectations, which had been shaped by their experiences of so-called mainstream entertainment.

Chris Ritchie's thesis draws from Henri Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* (1991), which claims that everyday life has been colonised by outside forces like technology and the media. Adopting this as his epistemological starting point, Ritchie (1997: 12) claims that alt com was a comedy "moment" that addressed the alienation of late capitalist societies. He argues everyday life is "a struggle between the lived and the observed" and stand-up comedy helps to explain that tension (Ritchie, 1997:18). For the first time, alt com allowed comedy to transcend the commodity relations of the trad comedians before being commodified by the end of the 1980s (Ritchie, 1997: 20). Ritchie (1997) approaches comedy from a similar realist position to Double and places alt com within a tradition of British comedy subversion. He limits alt com to a moment in time between 1979 and 1981, and his reason for doing this is because alt com had ceased to be alternative² (Ritchie, 1997: 19). Like Double, Ritchie (1997) also draws on extant philosophical meditations on humour, and claims that comedy subversion was first identified by Plato. It is from this point that he proceeds along a course that leads to Bergson's (1999) idea of comedy as a purgative that cleanses anti-social elements from our characters in order to maintain societal equilibrium (1997: 51). He claims that the subversive trend first emerged in Britain during the post-war years and was characterised by radio programmes like *The Goon Show*, which jettisoned the standard joke format in favour of silliness and absurdity (Ritchie, 1997: 109).

Political satire could be found in print form in periodicals like *Punch*, but as a form of live entertainment it was virtually non-existent until the satire boom of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Ritchie (1997: 112) sees the satire boom as "cliquey" because its producers were friends and colleagues at Oxbridge and/or had attended the same public schools, and had overlapping projects, which covered print, live comedy revue and television (*Private Eye*, *The Establishment Club* and *That Was The Week That Was* [TW3]). Therefore, because of its social relations, Ritchie (1997: 112-116) claims that the so-called satire boom had a limited effect on British audiences because of the background of its producers and the mode of production. In order to decode the joke's

² This cut-off date coincides with the Comic Strip's migration to television and the near collapse of the Comedy Store (Wilmot, 1989; Cook, 2001).

references, one has to have the right kind of education (Ritchie, 1997: 116). Satirical production remains ‘cliquey’ and continues to be dominated by the Oxbridge-educated middle classes, but it is only a fraction of that class, whose scions are working out their tensions with the older generation that are responsible for its production. Writers of legitimated mass-produced satire are fully situated in the cultural establishment by virtue of their class position and the fact that they are given license by media’s gatekeepers to mock members of their own class³. Thus, their satire paradoxically becomes a form of establishment carnivalesque.

Catriona Craig’s (2000) thesis is closest to mine in terms of its focus, because she places the subject within a historical popular cultural milieu and considers the political dimension of what she refers to as ‘alternative performance’, by interrogating alt com’s claims to working class authenticity and radicalism. She bases her study on Bakhtinian (1984) carnivalesque and works from the basis that alt com was not a revolutionary force for change but, rather, a kind of safety valve; a form of entertainment that spoke to the political positions of young left-leaning London audiences (C Craig, 2000: 290). C Craig (2000: 24) acknowledges that alternative comedians sought to:

‘master’ political discourse by joking about topics of national importance, (like unemployment, Northern Ireland, the Falklands War); topics which are normally presented by serious and ostensibly neutral speech by politicians or the news media

(C Craig, 2000: 290)

Here, C Craig (2000) identifies the role of comedians in offering an oppositional discourse to mainstream political discourse and considers the lack of an alternative vision being articulated by the opposition Labour Party to the Thatcher government. Thus, she argues this “left a gap in the public debate that the performers and audiences of Alternative Comedy attempted to fill” (C Craig, 2000: 24). What C Craig (2000) is alluding to is a lack of space in the official world for the articulation of oppositional discourses and, in this sense, the circuit

³ Some satirists will even appear on the Queen’s honours list (Thorpe, 2012). I am thinking here of Armando Iannucci who was awarded an MBE, thus begging the question of who is permitted to perform and write satire for mass audiences.

fulfilled the role of a second world. However, while political ranting may have been true of some alt comedians of the early period, C Craig (2000) assumes that the circuit – as a space - was dominated by these types of comedians and therefore fails to see the numbers of other kinds of performers on the circuit. C Craig (2000) defines alt com as a live form of entertainment, and disregards television comedies like *The Young Ones*, which were written and performed by comedians from the nascent circuit. For C Craig (2000: 40-41), alt com and alt cab are interchangeable terms and she claims the use of the word ‘cabaret’ implies an “unarticulated political agenda”. C Craig’s (2000) work is informed by her experience as a comedy reviewer for *The London Student*. Therefore, her take on alt com is partly informed by her empirical position as a comedy consumer and reviewer. To this extent she takes the position of an audience member and is interested in what she calls the “unusual power of the heckler” in the performer/audience relationship (2000:2).

C Craig (2000) departs from Double (1991) and Ritchie’s (1997) utilisation of philosophical enquiries into humour and draws from Purdie’s (1993: 21) mastery of discourse to analyse alt com and argues that people laugh at jokes because they confirm their assumptions of the world. This claim appears to chime with the Hobbesian (n.d.) concept of superiority (Lippitt, 1995b). Yet, rather than being based on Aristotle’s or Hobbes’s formulations, Purdie’s (1993: 21-22) work is actually drawn from Lacan’s theory of communication and, especially, his concept of Symbolic Law. Thus, C Craig (2000: 22) argues it is the use of language as a Saussureian (1983) system of signs, rather than the mental image of the joke’s butt *in its setting* that produces the laughter and not, as Freud (1966) insists, the release of repressed emotions (Freud, 1966; Lippitt, 1995a; C Craig, 2000). She argues that jokes are ‘signposted’ to give a “deliberate suspension of sense-making” and are marked by changes of tone or the use of stock phrases and/or catchphrases (Purdie, 1993: 7; C Craig, 2000: 23). Laughter thus becomes an agreement between the audience and the joker in which the Symbolic Law has been broken (Purdie, 1993: 59; C Craig, 2000: 22).

C Craig’s (2000) analysis of popular culture draws from Morag Shiach’s (1989) *Discourse on Popular Culture*. She claims that popular culture is seen as a contested term and is the site of discourses and middle-class anxieties. This is because popular culture has mass appeal and has the potential to be

politicised, and takes an opposing position to the dominant culture (Shiach, 1989; C Craig, 2000). This leads C Craig (2000) to question the working-class claims of political fringe theatre companies like CAST and 7:84. It is worth briefly mentioning that discourse as a concept was developed by Michel Foucault (1980, 1991, 1998) in his work on power and institutions, thus political discourse is the language and ideas that are produced by institutions, society and individuals, which informs and guides action, and is also responsible for the production of ideology.

Although C Craig's (2000) thesis is chiefly focussed on stand-up comedy, it includes a case study of Sheffield-based female cabaret trio, The Chuffinelles, and this allows C Craig (2000) to explore alt com's roots in alternative theatre and to closely examine its claims to be working class (C Craig, 2000). Here she (2000) observes how contemporary popular culture was intended to be used as a means of connecting alternative theatre companies with their working-class audiences and notes the possible tension between the ways in which the producers see their plays and how audiences receive them.

In the only peer-reviewed article about alt cab (as opposed to alt com), Tony Lidington (1987) compares it to 20th century avant-garde movements, noting that such movements are rarely "self-consciously defined" (Lidington, 1987: 107). Artistic movements were opposed to the systematised study of art and the galleries that were responsible for circulating stale ideas. Like the artistic movements before them, alt cab's artists wanted to sweep away impotent and reactionary forms of entertainment that were rooted in traditions established eons ago. Lidington (1987: 108) claims that variety theatre was a "tired format" by the end of the 1950s, and observes that live entertainment was polarised between two extremes: the WMCs and talent shows at one end and the large-scale venues and television with the glamour of its star attractions at the other. Lidington (1987) insists that much of the impetus for the alt cab movement was punk's political positioning and its demystification of the music industry's social relations. Punk poetry, he argues, was closely associated not only with protest but with punk rock itself, and the poets moved easily from a musical context to cabaret bills (Lidington, 1987: 108). Alt cab also attracted a large number of street performers and art school graduates (Lidington, 1987: 108). According to Lidington (1987: 108) performance arts courses produced graduates that were well-versed in art/performance theory, deconstruction and

reconstitution and recalls a “high proportion of the people” he interviewed “had received some form of higher education which directly related to their present work” (1987: 112). Here we can see an indication of the way in which cultural capital shaped performances and informed the audiences that attended the clubs. This is a theme that would be developed later by Sam Friedman (2009, 2011) in his thesis and subsequent journal article and one that I develop in this study.

Lidington (1987: 116) observes that cabaret offered a freedom not available through other forms, and this led to a preponderance of overtly political acts in the early 1980s. This coincided with the politicisation of what he refers to as “dissident performers” who had chosen not to pursue conventional careers in entertainment, either because they could not afford the training or because the traditional training grounds for these kinds of performers – the variety theatres and concert parties – had long vanished (Lidington, 1987: 116). Yet for all their political positioning, very few performers on the circuits were aligned to political parties (Lidington, 1987: 117). It was only CAST that booked performers whose level of political commitment matched their own left-wing views (Lidington, 1987)⁴. The notion that the circuits were overwhelmingly populated by ranting political comedians is a myth, but it is one that still persists.

Stephen Wagg (1998, 2002) shares Ritchie’s view that the satire boom had a limited effect but also notes the pivotal role played by David Frost⁵. Wagg (1998: 332) observes that the satire boom left two important legacies: the first was the authorisation of a permissive and populist-orientated discourse of British politics and the second was “the creation of career opportunities for those adept at developing ironic renditions of current affairs”. In essence, the satire boom emerged from within the culture of dominant classes making it little more than “a minor ‘revolt of the privileged’ (Wagg, 2004: 256). Before the boom, the Cambridge Footlights, which produced the performers-writers of *Beyond The Fringe*, had historically made very few references to politics except for a mention of Fabian socialism in 1910 and “sporadic, fearful references to the spread of Bolshevism” in the 1930s (Hewison, 1984; Wagg, 2004: 258). The

⁴ Ideological ‘vetting’ was also practised by Bristol based post-punk band, The Pop Group. Band members, Mark Stewart and Gareth Sager, were adamant that anyone joining the band should hold left-wing views (Reynolds, 2005).

⁵ Frost had worked within British broadcasting while still a Cambridge undergraduate having joined the BBC in 1956 (Wagg, 1998; Carpenter, 2001).

satire boom may have contained a good deal of irreverence, but it avoided declaring support for one political party or another. Wagg (1998) suggests that unlike the middle class Oxbridge satirists, alt comedians broadened the scope of political discourse by introducing issues such as racial and sexual politics into stand-up comedy. He points out the reason for the scarcity of political satire in Britain was that, unlike the United States, Britain had no tradition of popular politics; hence the political field has been traditionally seen as an exclusive space that is dominated by the aristocracy and landed gentry (Wagg, 2004: 258). Politicians were treated deferentially by entertainers and the media until *Beyond the Fringe* and the 'satire boom' when they were transformed into figures of fun (Ritchie, 1997; Wagg, 1998, 2004; Carpenter, 2001). The space for oppositional discourses, both humorous and political, was minimal to non-existent and anything that existed outside of a narrow range of permitted discourses was not considered to be worthy of inclusion⁶. In the United States, however, comedians like Bob Hope, for example, acted as court jesters to several Presidents and were granted some degree of comic license (Wagg, 2004: 244-272). Even so, like the court jesters of history, Hope *et al* knew how far they could push the joking (Wagg, 1998: 244-272).

In his working paper on Edinburgh Fringe comedy, S Friedman (2009), interrogates Bourdieu's concept of the field in relation to comedy, and concentrates his focus on the period between 1979 and 1981, which corresponds to the first wave of alt com.

During this short period, 23 young stand-up comedians initiated a significant re-evaluation of British comedy now popularly known as the 'Alternative Comedy Movement'.

(S Friedman, 2009:5)

For me, the 'Alternative Comedy Movement' is merely part of a larger post-punk milieu that includes alt cab. He observes how, during this period, a new range of comedy genres were introduced, which utilised high art forms and displaced the single, gag-driven stand-up genre that had dominated the field

⁶ In political discourse, this is called 'The Overton Window'. It is named after Joseph P. Overton, former director of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in the United States, and refers to the range of socially acceptable political opinions. In fact, the range of opinions permitted is in the gift of political pundits, politicians, programme makers and lobby journalists who set the terms of debate.

since the days of music hall (S Friedman, 2009: 5-6). He observes that many alt comedians combined more than one genre and this corresponds to post-punk bands like The Pop Group, which combined the musical genres of punk rock, funk, dub reggae and free-form jazz onto which were added left-wing politics (Reynolds, 2005: 73-79 ; S Friedman, 2009: 22). The introduction of what he calls “cerebral forms” was also a defining characteristic of alt com, but these forms broke with the wit of the Oxbridge comedians in the sense that they made use of the politics of everyday life and were matched to the educated habituses of the audiences.

Audiences were expected not just to listen and laugh, as in the ‘trad’ era, but to possess the tools to engage with complex ideas and themes

(S Friedman, 2009:18)

Alt com demanded more from audiences than mere disinterested listening; unlike the mass sub-field in which “business is business” and goods are produced to reach the largest possible audience and maximise profit (S Friedman, 2009: 4-5). S Friedman (2009: 19) argues that alt comedians were responsible for “championing a form of distinctly ‘critical’ observational stand-up that asked audiences to see humour in the weaknesses of their own lives, not others”. Of course, not all audiences were willing to engage in this way, with the punters at the late show at the Comedy Store being particularly resistant to complex ideas.

S Friedman (2011) sees the change in comedy tastes at the end of the 1970s as the product of new positions being taken by new entrants to the field of cultural production. Using a Bourdieusian paradigm, he concludes that,

British comedy is, to some extent, now being mobilized by the culturally privileged as an instrument of distinction. Those who have assembled high cultural capital resources via socialization, education and occupation, are activating these reserves through distinct modes of comic consumption.

(S Friedman, 2011: 37-38)

Although S Friedman (2009) is right to identify the shifting patterns of comedy tastes as a signifier to the changes in the comedy field itself, and point out the role that embodied cultural capital plays in defining these tastes. However, it is equally important to map how these changes took place on the field during the 1980s, which ultimately led to the disappearance of variety and the establishment of the stand-up comedy circuit that emerged in its place. This thesis identifies the pressures within the field and outside it that led to further changes.

2.1.1 A word about satire

The 1980s tend to be remembered for a flowering of political satire, therefore it may be useful to understand the meaning of this word and its origins. The word 'satire' comes from the Latin word '*satura*', meaning 'full' and was extended to mean 'a mixture full of different things' (Highet 1962: 231). The word originally had culinary connotations, and this is possibly a reference to the spicy and varied nature of the comedy platter (Highet 1962: 11-12). What is also important to remember is that satire does not appear in Ancient Greece as a form in its own right (Highet 1962: 11-12). For instance, the word itself is never fully defined and the Roman satirist, Juvenal, claimed that there were two types of satirists: the one who likes people but thinks of them as blind and foolish and the one who despises most people (Highet 1962: 11). Satire has been described as a distorting mirror that exposes all manner of defects (Highet, 1962: 232). Matthew Hodgart claims "the perennial topic is the human condition" (1969: 7). Humans are flawed and no matter how hard they try to get things right, they end up creating more problems (Hodgart, 1969: 7).

Satire employs irony, sarcasm and ridicule and requires a degree of freedom to operate (Hodgart 1969: 32). People enjoy watching a big bully getting his comeuppance by a little person and this is what makes satire funny – it speaks to power. If satire does not offend the powerful or hold them to ridicule, then it is not doing its job. Hodgart (1969: 33) argues, "The enemies of satire are tyranny and provincialism, which often go together". Satirists working in fascist Italy were assaulted, murdered or had their presses destroyed (Mascha 2008). In Britain, satirists are not subjected to physical violence but are, instead, silenced through the use of symbolic violence, which is applied by threatening the offender with a libel suit in the High Court. The mere threat of a

defamation suit is often enough to provoke a retraction and an apology from the author, cartoonist or comedian. *TW3*, despite its close association with the Oxbridge comedians and the social capital held by them, was cancelled because the programme seemingly posed a threat to the Conservative Party's chances of winning the 1964 General Election (Carpenter, 2001: 86). Therefore, on the one hand, even within the official world, the work of the officially-sanctioned satirist is subject to censorship. On the other hand, officially-sanctioned satire does not speak to power because it comes from the same wellspring as the power it claims to be addressing. By 1979, however, this would begin to change, in a live setting at least, when alt comedian began to produce forms of political satire that were both related to their personal experiences of activism and that of their audiences.

2.2 Fields

2.2.1 Habitus, capital and field: an overview

Bourdieu's (1986, 1993, 2003) concepts of habitus, capital and field allow us to conceptualise the dynamics of the social space and analyse how class power on any given field is sustained, opposed or transformed (J F Lane, 2000; Robbins, 2000). Bourdieu's concepts allow for some degree of flexibility but socialisation – particularly education- plays a crucial role in the formation of the habitus and without it, the use of the word 'capital' becomes a meaningless term (Robbins, 2000; Bourdieu, 2003; Bennett, 2007). Bourdieu (2003) refers to the process of cultural immersion as 'enculturation' and it is within the family and educational institutions that appreciation (tastes) for cultural forms is inculcated. Tastes for particular forms of culture are the product of an accumulation of cultural capital, which can be described as the knowledge of cultural artefacts and practices that provide the basis for making judgements (Bourdieu, 2003, 1992; Webb et al, 2002; Reed-Danahay, 2005). Cultural capital is accumulated in what Bourdieu (2003) called the habitus, which is responsible for guiding our cultural choices or 'having a feel for the game' (Robbins, 2000; Webb et al, 2002; Reed-Danahay, 2005). The habitus is the internalisation of structures, values and tastes or "the internalisation of externality" as Derek Robbins (2000: 16) puts it, while Claessens and Dhoest (2010: 50) maintain the habitus is a "framework for the interpretation and evaluation of cultural products". In any

case, the habitus helps us to classify cultural products and forms the basis for our tastes. However, the habitus is not fixed and although it is partly constructed in one's formative years by familial and educative socialisation, there are independent variables - gender, sexuality, social class and ethnicity, for example - which contribute to its shape (Fowler, 1999; Robbins, 2000; Bourdieu, 2003, 1992; Webb et al, 2002; Reed-Danahay, 2005).

There are four kinds of cultural capital: embodied, objectified, symbolic and institutionalised (Bourdieu, 1986, 1993, 2003; Webb et al, 2002). Embodied cultural capital is produced via socialisation and the education system, but it can also be acquired autodidactically⁷ (Bourdieu, 1986, 2003). In its objectified form, it becomes a fetish-object⁸. The third kind is symbolic, meaning that the knowledge and objects acquired can be transformed into symbols of prestige (Bourdieu, 1986, 2003; Robbins, 2000; Thornton, 1997; Webb et al, 2002; Reed-Danahay, 2005). This is the kind of accumulated capital that each entrant to a field brings with them as 'baggage'. Institutionalised capital refers to titles, honours and degree certificates that confer prestige on the holder (Bourdieu, 1986, 2003; Robbins, 2000; Thornton, 1997; Webb et al, 2002; Reed-Danahay, 2005). Bourdieu (2003: 28-30) insists that it is the kind of cultural capital, rather than its amount that confers status upon the individual, therefore specific kinds of capital will inform specific kinds of tastes and produce a disposition that is rooted in social class. Thus, the embodied and institutionalised cultural capital produced through the educational institutions of the bourgeoisie, the public schools and Oxbridge, for example, are seen as having a greater social value than that produced by the state school sector and post-1992 universities, and we see how this is fetishised by the cultural industries – particularly the BBC, which draws many of its executives and top-level producers from the Oxbridge/public school cohort. The production of cultural capital in these institutions produces what Bourdieu (2003: 28-30) called the bourgeois "aesthetic disposition". However, aesthetic dispositions can be produced within any social or cultural formation and within countercultural formations, this I suggest becomes a *political-aesthetic* disposition.

⁷ This refers to self-guided learning.

Related to the concept of symbolic capital is symbolic violence, which is a form of non-physical violence that is exercised upon others by those who possess the superior weaponry of class power and privilege (Bourdieu, 2011: 51-52; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 140-173). Racist and sexist jokes can be seen as forms of symbolic violence, which can then be internalised as a natural state of humour in which it is necessary, to paraphrase the trad comedian, to 'laugh at oneself'. Tastes that are imposed on the subaltern class by the dominant class or a minority group's lack of visibility in the media (through mechanisms of exclusion, which are generally expressed in technical terms) are therefore forms of symbolic violence that stem from the dominant group's use of symbolic power, which may include the use of institutionalised cultural capital. In this case, the tastes of the dominant group may be utilised as a weapon of oppression and subjugation, or presented as a form of natural law.

Tastes are the outward markers of social status and nowhere can this be seen more vividly than in tastes for music and food, which are deeply rooted in the body and are attained early in life (Bourdieu, 2003: 179-180). Legitimate cultural artefacts are given their social value by being consecrated by cultural cognoscenti, who occupy their positions via the field of education. Thus, the cultural forms that are consumed by the bourgeoisie, for example, are seen as having greater legitimacy than those forms consumed at the lower end of the social spectrum on account of the social value assigned to them by the consecratory authorities: the universities, academies and conservatoires (Bourdieu, 2003: 11-96). Furthermore, many cultural artefacts produced for mass consumption can only achieve semi-legitimation because they lack the 'correct' criteria for full legitimacy and it is within this group that we may find mass cultural products whose social value is regarded as inferior to artefacts that have achieved full consecration (Bourdieu, 2003; Friedman, 2011). The traditional stand-up comedy of Granada Television's *The Comedians* (1971-1993), for example, can be thought of in this light, because light entertainment's commissioning editors and producers were drawn from the relatively legitimated entertainment fields of variety/Music Hall and 'Oxbridge' comedy, and were vested with the authority to make judgements, which were based on tastes that were formed in their class habitus. In the Fifties, the commissioning editor's expertise, formed through their work in the related field of live entertainment and their seniority on that field, was a highly prized commodity for the executives

working in what was the new medium of television and these experts could use their judgement to identify and classify suitable talent for a network's light entertainment output. For the television audiences, a willing participant in this game, the cognoscenti's tastes were thus internalised by them, and embodied as cultural capital to be utilised on future occasions to categorise similar forms of entertainment. Therefore, the light entertainment field changed very little throughout the 1960s and much of 1970s until pressure from without was exerted upon it, since pressure to change from within was minimal.

Fields are social spaces in which capital is produced, reproduced and circulated. They are not structurally fixed: all fields share common characteristics and possess laws and forms of language that are specific to them (Robbins, 2000: 39-40; Bourdieu, 1993, 2003). Thus, the field of cultural production is a site of institutions, rules, regulations, conventions, categories and titles, which constitute an objective hierarchy and are collectively referred to as the *doxa* (Bourdieu, 1993; Webb et al, 2002; Reed-Danahay, 2005). The *doxa* of the entertainment field in the years prior to 1979 had been established during the Music Hall period and was imbued with the language and attitudes of colonialism and post-colonialism (Senelick, 1974: 168). The field is also the site of position-taking and new entrants to the field will adopt a position relative to others on the field, hence it is also the terrain on which struggles between opposing forces for control of its hierarchical principles are played out (Bourdieu, 1993: 40-45; Robbins, 2000; Friedman 2011). These principles are divided into the dominant and autonomous hierarchical principles (Bourdieu, 1993). The former refers to dominant cultural production and is characterised by the scale of its production (Bourdieu, 1986, 1993). The autonomous principle refers to the field of restricted production or 'art for art's sake' (Bourdieu, 1993: 36-40; Robbins, 2000; Webb, et al, 2002) and governs the realm of low budgets and small-scale production; the so-called cottage industries and niche markets. This is the domain of alt cab, an *underground* form of entertainment, which took place in rooms above pubs or other unorthodox performance spaces. The autonomous principle is opposed to the mass cultural industries; the music industry and television light entertainment, for example, which produced trad comedy (S Friedman, 2011: 5). *Countercultural* production therefore takes place on the field of restricted production, because artefacts are produced on a small-scale and its products are niche.

Fields are transformed when new agents enter the field with their cultural dispositions; the capital they carry with them from other fields is used symbolically on the new field (Bourdieu, 1993: 76 -77). According to Bourdieu (2017: 254) transformations also rely on internal conflicts and “an external movement” that is “linked to social change in the audience”. In the case of the dominant comedy and entertainment fields, this was achieved through a combination of the symbolic use of *countercultural* capital, the rise of Thatcherism and cuts to arts spending. In this way, the new underground field of alternative entertainment impacted on the dominant field of entertainment, whose form of comedy was steeped in the same aesthetic conservatism that had dominated entertainment since the 1930s. Comedy has been traditionally seen as a low-brow art form and this view dates to the separation of the ‘serious’ and variety theatres in 1843 with the new physical genres of comedy being condemned as “unsophisticated and coarse” (Saville, 1990: 8; S Friedman, 2009: 5). Comedy continued, more or less, along the same trajectory from the days of Music Hall and variety theatre by relying on the same ideas and circulating familiar but stale humorous motifs like the mother-in-law or the presumed stupidity of the Irish, which gave it a sense of universality. None of this could change without some kind of pressure being exerted on the field from outside. Bourdieu argues:

When newcomers are not disposed to enter the cycle of simple reproduction, based on recognition of the ‘old’ by the ‘young’ – homage, celebration, etc. – and recognition of the ‘young’ by the ‘old’ – prefaces, co-optation, consecration, etc. – but bring with them dispositions which clash with prevailing norms of production and expectations of the field, they cannot succeed without the help of external changes.

(Bourdieu, 2016: 57)

He goes on to say that these changes can be “political breaks”, such as political upheaval. For us, a political break occurred in 1979 with the election of the Thatcher government and the rise of the far-right in the late 1970s. Trad comedians, for their part, refused to recognise the young comedians and vice versa. Alt comedians refused to pay homage to the old guard, who they saw as out of touch and outdated. Alt comedians were dismissed as ‘unfunny’ by the

trad comedians, and so the scene was set for conflict between the fustiness of trad comedy, which was bound up with nostalgia and disconnected from the politics of everyday life, and the new broom of alt com that was about to sweep it away.

Bourdieu breaks with previous sociological analyses of art by insisting on examining the conditions of production rather than consumption. In *The Rules of Art* (2017), he critiques middle class art appreciation for ignoring the social conditions that have produced artworks. For Bourdieu, the artist has been the subject of mythologisation: the ‘starving artist’ and the ‘tortured soul’ elevate the artist beyond their material existences and place them on pedestals, while ignoring the social conditions that have produced them. Bohemianism is a word that has been associated with the avant-garde and has often been used without any consideration for its origin. Its contemporary definition tends to float between eccentric behaviour, hedonism and unconventional lifestyles regardless of whether they are associated with artistic practices or the “art of living” (Bourdieu, 2017: 56-57). Bohemianism has its origins in the 19th century and Bourdieu argues that two bohémias co-exist at different times “but with very different social weights at different times”: one is dominated by what he calls “proletaroid intellectuals” on the one hand and the “penniless bourgeoisie” on the other (Bourdieu, 2017: 57). Moreover,

The structural affinity between the [literary] avant-garde and the political vanguard is the source of *rapprochements* – for example, between the anarchist intellectuals and the Symbolist movement.

(Bourdieu, 2017: 251)

For the purposes of this thesis, I shall be using the term ‘bohemianism’ to refer to unorthodox lifestyles that tend to be associated with the hippy subculture or social practices within art colonies. Today’s definition has drifted a short distance from its original meaning. However, we can see structural affinities between the countercultures of the Sixties, and the various small left-wing and anarchist groups and their relationship to the punk and post-punk countercultural milieu.

Drawing from Bourdieu’s work on habitus and capital, S Friedman (2009, 2011) argues comedy tastes are contingent on one’s level of education (getting

the joke), the mode of production and the social class that produced them. Traditionally, these modes were split between the variety theatres, the Oxbridge/public school-educated writer-performers and the 'demob' comedians that were produced through the Entertainments National Service Association or ENSA. This remained the case until the mid-1970s and the arrival of Billy Connolly, Victoria Wood and Jasper Carrott (Wilmot, 1989: 13-36). However, such performers were a rarity and in 1979 the comedy field was transformed from a low-brow form to something slightly high-brow with the appearance alt com (S Friedman, 2011: 1-3). For S Friedman (2009, 2011), alt com was an exemplar of Bourdieu's sub-field of restricted production. The range of genres that appear under the rubric of alt com/alt cab resonates with the post-punk musical milieu, elements of which offered a similar critical and intellectual engagement with the world (Reynolds, 2005; Gracyk, 2011). However, the aesthetic dispositions of the alt performers were alien to traditionalists, and they were excluded from the dominant field of cultural production until they could 'learn some manners' and submit to the field's *doxa* (Ray, 2007).

The celebration of amateurism together with the DIY ethic of the space were matched to the habituses of the post-punk generation, who had benefitted from greater access to higher education, but who had also engaged in a variety of political activities like Rock Against Racism (RAR), anti-apartheid and even the Smoky Bears Picnics that were held in Hyde Park from 1980 -82 (Lidington, 1987; Reynolds, 2005; Free Festivals website). Their tastes, formed through participation in political movements and contact with likeminded people at university or art school, broke with the prevailing tastes of television light entertainment, which often pandered to the lowest common denominator (Wilmot, 1989; Ritchie, 1997; Claessens and Dhoest, 2010; S Friedman, 2011). Moreover, alt performers spoke the same language and wore the same clothes as their audiences (Hebdige, 1993). Here, Sarah Thornton's (1997) concept of subcultural capital may be useful in explaining how performers used their knowledge of music, politics and comedy styles in symbolic displays of cultural capital. According to Thornton (1997: 11) "subcultural capital is embodied in the form of 'being in the know', using (but not over-using) current slang". In this way, the alt performers' habituses were matched at the level of language and 'hipness' and thus they were able to relate directly to the experiences of their

audiences through their use of argot and knowledge of subcultural and *countercultural* practices.

2.2.2 *Countercultural capital and the habitus clivé*

To date, C Craig's (2000: 78) thesis is the only study that has mentioned alt com's countercultural roots. She writes of a "worn-out counterculture of the Seventies" and cursorily acknowledges the contribution of the Sixties counterculture, which she associates with the "myth of the underground" (C Craig, 2000: 293). For me, however, the use of this word is problematic, because it is vague, and its meaning is often taken for granted. Moreover, it limits 'countercultures' to a specific moment in time when, in fact, there is a continuum of countercultures stretching back over millennia. Generally, the use of the word 'counterculture' to describe something that opposes another thing, avoids the question of what tools an individual or group has at their disposal to challenge its opposite and/or seeks to transform spheres of social relations. Such questions demand answers, for to utilise the word 'counterculture' as a vague reference to an equally vague oppositional formation in a particular moment glibly obscures the means - strategic, tactical and otherwise - by which groups or individuals challenge authority and orthodoxy.

George McKay (1996: 3) provides a useful examination of the countercultures of the 1980s and 1990s and has made a valuable contribution to the study of these movements by redefining them as "cultures of resistance". However, this does not complete the picture because it also seems to me that the word 'counterculture' is related to the term 'avant-garde', which also comes with considerable baggage. Bourdieu (2003: 96) claims that the counterculture "may well be the product of the endeavour of new style autodidacts to free themselves from the constraints of the scholastic market". Here Bourdieu (2003) may be referring specifically to the production of avant-garde art-forms that are created by artists whose learning is self-guided, hence his use of the term 'autodidactic'. *Countercultures* and *avant-gardes* are both opposed to orthodoxy and the circulation of stale ideas and outdated practices. Therefore, I propose to extend and develop Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital by introducing the concept of *countercultural capital*, which includes the kind of capital that is produced/reproduced within *countercultural* or *avant-garde* movements. This form of capital functions in a similar way to cultural capital and is thus

accumulated in the habitus and is used to inform choices. Though Bennett (2007: 2) claims that Bourdieu saw the habitus as unified, towards the end of his life he began to work on the idea of the habitus clivé or split (cleft) habitus that accommodated contradictory aesthetic dispositions. Bennett (2007: 2) explains that Bourdieu conceived the habitus clivé “as a consequence of the contradictions he experienced in coming from lowly social origins to achieve high scholarly distinction”. Bennett (2007: 2) also observes the conceptual evolution of the habitus, indicating the unfinished nature of Bourdieu’s work. According to Robbins (2000: 1-5), Bourdieu regarded his concepts as works in progress, thus they have a great deal of elasticity as conceptual tools. The concept of the habitus clivé, while it is useful for determining the consumptive habits of social groups, cannot solely explain the instinctive urge to rebel, resist and subvert. Furthermore, when Bourdieu proposed the habitus clivé, he did so to refer to the split within an individual who is socially mobile and carries his/her cultural capital with them into their new lives - though it is partitioned within the habitus (Friedman, 2016: 1-3). Yet, it is possible as Bennett (2007: 2-23) argues to apply the concept of the habitus clivé to those who possess subversive impulses, since it is not possible to flaunt such impulses in every aspect of everyday life. Indeed, what I am suggesting is that there is, for some, an instinctive predisposition to subversion and those with the right levels of *countercultural* capital are attracted to *countercultural* formations and are receptive to, and make use of, forms of non-guided education and DIY as a production method. Anyone possessing a *countercultural* capital will be able to ‘size up’ a situation or object’s potential for subversion, perversion or inversion. It is the ‘feel for the game’ but the game in question is a mirror image of the dominant cultural game.

Countercultural formations occur on either side of the right-left binary, and like Thornton’s (1997) subcultural capital, *countercultural* capital transcends social class. Yet her elision of social class obscures the historical social tensions between classes, particularly those of post-war British subcultures from the teds in the 1950s to the New Romantics of the early 1980s, and their relationships to the dominant culture. Moreover, Thornton focusses entirely on the consumptive habits of subcultures and does not refer to production of cultural artefacts: in the case of punks and post-punks, this is a crucial, yet missing piece of jigsaw puzzle. For the purposes of this study, I am referring to

the *countercultural* capital and formations that are produced through forms of socialisation that take place within a broadly left-wing/left-libertarian paradigm. Groups or formations that fall within this remit include, for example, the free festival movement, minor left-wing parties and spaces like Crass's anarcho-punk commune and the autonomous business activities that were part of it (Hesmondhalgh, 2010; Reynolds, 2005: 424). The latter is an exemplar of the kind of DIY and self-sufficiency ethic that can be traced back to the more politically-inclined hippies, who formed so-called 'off-the-grid' communes and the Diggers of the 17th century. Although anti-Thatcherism can be considered countercultural, it was not a movement but a position or sentiment that was common to other *countercultural* formations, which included CND and the Anti-Apartheid Movement. Zones or spaces are created and controlled by countercultural formations for purpose of producing/reproducing *countercultural* capital. These can include social events like festivals or meetings that countercultural capital is produced, reproduced and circulated. This can be regarded as embodied *countercultural* capital.

The beauty of Bourdieu's (1986, 2003) concept of capitals lies in their convertibility. This convertibility would apply, for example, to engineering knowledge obtained through a recognised institution of higher education that is then used to construct puppets or machinery for political fringe theatre or demonstrations. *Countercultural* capital can often include other types of cultural capital that have been converted. In common with subcultural or cultural capital, *countercultural* capital can be converted into economic capital and in this instance the holder of *countercultural* capital can thus be accused by his or her former peers of 'selling out', especially if it is used to mock or ridicule movements for the purpose of entertainment in the official world.

Countercultural capital in its objectified state functions similarly to objectified cultural capital. In this mode, it is the objectification of specific kinds of music, banners and other objects that are utilised in the creation of a countercultural space. Objectified forms of *countercultural* capital can be utilised symbolically. According to Thornton (1997: 3) the symbolic form of subcultural capital is outwardly projected as "hipness". Similarly, the symbolic form of *countercultural* capital can be projected outwardly as a form of 'hipness' or 'coolness' – especially if this is related to drug-taking and bohemianism or other forms of socially deviant behaviour. Thus, 'coolness' is relationally positioned

against the 'uncoolness' of orthodoxy; the mainstream and the 'straights' (people deemed as 'uncool'). However, countercultural capital goes beyond notions of coolness and is therefore not confined to notions of fashionability. For example, wearing a Che Guevara T-shirt with its image of the revolutionary isolated from his history cannot confer *countercultural* capital on the wearer. If anything, it can mark the individual as a dilettante and a fraud. *Countercultural* capital can, however, be manifested in forms of technical and organisational competence and is particularly evident in one's tactical *savoir faire* for creating a space. In its symbolic state, therefore, acts of subversion are symbolic displays of *countercultural* capital and this can take the form, for example, of *détournement*; the transformation of the familiar into something unfamiliar (Debord, 2005).

Although there are some similarities between subcultural capital and countercultural capital, there are some marked contrasts between the two. One substantial area of difference can be found in the media's role in the circulation of capital. For Thornton (1997), the media is central to the circulation of subcultural capital. For *countercultural* capital, the opposite is true. Generally speaking, the mainstream media is opposed to anything countercultural and those who participate in countercultural activities are criticised for their lack of worldliness and their lifestyles, which appear to be out of synch with the mainstream lifestyles and the dominant social relations that are mediated by television and newspapers. Another major difference between the two concepts occurs in the producer-consumer dynamic: *countercultural* producers are an important component of the countercultural space. Thornton (1997) downplays the role of the producer, preferring to focus on tastes and consumption. I would suggest that tastes drove the creation of the space for without them, the idea of a space outside of the official world might never have materialised. Using the punk counterculture as an example, the producers were also consumers: they consumed punk rock music but also formed their own bands; produced their own clothing and styles from bricolage. Thus, they could not be defined solely in terms of their consumption. Furthermore, youth subcultures can be defined by their relationship to the parental culture (Hebdige, 1993), while countercultural formations can be defined in terms of their resistance *and* their subversive tactics but, more importantly, they can also be defined by the spaces they construct or occupy (McKay, 1996: 8).

Oppositional politics and activism generally played its part in shaping the lives and dispositions of many of the participants (Saville, Smart, Ward questionnaires; Allen, Kelly, Gribbin, Muldoon, Boyton interviews) and this was especially the case with performers from the 1979 to 1986 (see Chapter 5). Activism itself can be thought of as *countercultural* capital of a particular kind because it requires the investment of time, energy and occasionally [converted] economic capital. Alt performers who made use of politics in their material usually came from backgrounds of political activism (Ritchie, 1997; C Craig, 2000) and this differentiates them from the satire boom's protagonists, whose anti-authority stance was driven by more generational tensions with the parental culture of their social formation (Hall and Jefferson, 1988). However, as in the case of cultural capital, it is not so much the quantity that matters as the type of capital the individual possesses (Robbins, 2000: 32-37; Bourdieu, 1986, 2003). Thus, an alt comedian who was also an activist may be regarded as more authentic by audiences than one who talked about politics but who was not an activist. In this sense, the latter lacks the same type of *countercultural* capital as the activist-comedian, whose authority on matters pertaining to their political activism rings true with an audience. The *countercultural* classificatory system has been internalised within the class habitus and drives them to expose a parvenu through silence or heckling.

2.3 Spaces

2.3.1 Official and unofficial worlds

Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) theory of carnivalesque is integral to this study because it helps to delineate the tension between popular culture and mass culture. Such forms of culture assume a position against the dominant or official culture and these can take the form of spaces that have been constructed by youth subcultures or *countercultural* formations (Hebdige, 1993; Thornton, 1997; McKay, 1996). Alt cab and New Variety were not revolutionary in a political sense but were, instead, spaces that provided London's left-leaning 'hip' audiences with a place to laugh at the seriousness of the world outside and to briefly escape the brutality of the Thatcher project (C Craig, 2000). Bakhtin (1984: 34) argues "carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing

truth and from the established order". The cabaret club offered a liberatory moment in which one could laugh at a comedian's personal foibles or their mocking of politicians, but the effect was always temporary. The world outside did not change while one was inside the clubs and when one left the club, one returned to the outside world with its emphasis on duty, work and social deference. For Bakhtin (1984: 1-58) there are two worlds: the official and the unofficial or second world, which is constructed in opposition as a temporary space to allow the letting off of steam. The second world belongs to the people and over the centuries, this world has been steadily colonised by the official world (Bakhtin, 1984: 1-58). In Britain, this encroachment of the official upon the unofficial accelerated at the beginning of the Nineteenth century with the passage of last of the **Inclosure Acts**, which enclosed common land and closed down the popular fairs (Kift, 1996: 17-20). The impact of state power on the fairs displaced its performers to the public houses and inns where it went through evolutionary stages until it became Music Hall (Kift, 1996: 17-20), and in this sense alone, the Music Hall seems to equate to a form of carnivalesque, because it was constructed in opposition to the officially sanctioned forms of entertainment (Bakhtin, 1984: 1-58; Medhurst, 2007: 68-71). Similarly, the early alt cab and New Variety circuits can be seen as unofficial spaces that were constructed in opposition to the official world that housed officially sanctioned (but semi-legitimated) forms of entertainment: the WMCs, commercial cabarets and television light entertainment. Although, the word 'counterculture' is generally understood to refer to any kind of opposition to the orthodoxy, it can be extended to include the unofficial world of alternative performance and the carnivals themselves. Carnivals were also celebratory events that also savagely mocked and satirised official feast days (Bakhtin, 1984: 5). Bourdieu (2003) argues that new entrants to fields of art and literature traditionally paid their respects to the previous generation, this did not happen either with alt cab; performers ridiculed the customs of the official world of entertainment because they saw them as stale and impotent. It was only in a specifically constructed space away from the official world that oppositional, experimental and subversive forms of entertainment could be developed.

Carnival was concerned with the idea of bodily excess, and laughter was a central to the experience (Bakhtin, 1984: 145-195; Medhurst, 2007: 68-71). Bergson (1999) approaches humour from the position of laughter, which is, in

the crudest of terms, a response to a stimulus. Laughter, like the orgasm, has been subjected to mystification because of a tendency to over-rationalise its nature. Unlike Freud, Bergson gives us a meditation of the organic nature of humour; he talks of “the mechanical encrusted onto the living”. This allows us to see humour as a living thing. Bergson (1999: 8) says,

For the comic spirit has a logic of its own, even in its wildest eccentricities. It has a method in its madness. It dreams, I admit, but it conjures up, in its dreams, visions that are at once accepted and understood by the whole of a social group.

There is a humanity here that is lacking in Freud’s analysis. Bergson is also talking about communities, both imagined and real, and this gives us a clue to how laughter works as a community-affirming mechanism. Conversely, the comedian can be likened to the shaman, whose role it was to cast evil spirits from the group. We can see this in both the tellers of racist and non-racist jokes to their respective communities. Critchley (2004:68) sees this as cultural, and argues,

Humour is a form of cultural insider-knowledge, and might, indeed, be said to function like a linguistic defence mechanism. Its ostensible untranslatability endows native speakers with a palpable sense of their cultural distinctiveness or even superiority.

The jokes that cast minorities and or their neighbours as stupid can be seen in this light, but I would argue that these kinds of jokes were once confined principally to the countries of Western Europe and North America. The English tell jokes about the Irish (and the Scots and Welsh), the French tell jokes about the Belgians, the Americans tell jokes about the Poles and so on. It is interesting to note that people who lived in the countries behind the so-called Iron Curtain told jokes about those who wielded authority on behalf of the state, particularly the police and the militia. Here is a typical anti-authoritarian stupid joke from Warsaw Pact-era Czechoslovakia,

Why do Czech Militia men go around in groups of three? One can read, one can write and the other is keeping an eye on the intellectuals.

(Anon)

This example tells us how jokes functioned as a mechanism of limited rebellion under an authoritarian regime; they were a tactic for coping with the symbolic violence exercised being exercised upon them by a police state. Arguably, Freud's relief theory comes into play here. He says that, "The joke then represents a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure" (Freud 1966: 105). Yet, at the same time, it begs the question of the lack of humour among the state's bureaucrats and their agents. The business of the state, like that of the church, is/was one that is far too serious to be interrupted by laughter: the physical betrayal of one's culpability-by-association.

Because of its association with the body, laughter was therefore regarded by officialdom as frivolous, but also subversive, dangerous and base (Lachmann et al, 1987: 118). The church had to find a way to sanction it and marshal its physical energy to serve the needs of officialdom. Bakhtin (1984: 74) states:

But this intolerant seriousness of the official church ideology made it necessary to legalize the gaiety, laughter, and jests which had been eliminated from the canonized ritual and etiquette. Thus forms of pure laughter were created parallel to the official forms.

Only forms of laughter that had official approval were deemed valid in the eyes of the authorities. This resonates with the 'trad' comedy of the pre-alternative years, which claimed to be apolitical and was concerned only with the business of light relief; its function was to neither educate nor inform but to divert attention away from the realities of audience's everyday lives and project the anxieties of the dominant group onto the subaltern classes. This applies equally to the tamed (sic) or official satire of the BBC, which takes great care not to raise political consciousness in its consumers but, instead, feeds them some gentle highbrow mockery of officialdom, bureaucracy and political chicanery, and thus resonates with Bakhtin's description of official feast days, which "sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it" (Bakhtin, 1984:33). Comedy within the official world can be said therefore to demand only

what Bourdieu (2003, 2017) calls the pure gaze; the disinterest of the art connoisseur, who decontextualizes artworks from their social and cultural conditions is easily transposed into the joke aficionado, who appreciates the function of the joke rather than its form and is blind to its socio-cultural associations and implications. I will later discuss the idea of the pure gaze in relation to publicity materials like posters and so on in Chapter 6.

Although the alternative space was not a lived space in the sense of Bakhtin's description of carnival, it functioned as a second world in which oppositional discourses could be expressed freely through subversive stand-up comedy, silliness or tomfoolery. Fools and clowns were an important feature of carnival and inhabited a sort of middle ground between life and art (Bakhtin, 1984). Like the fool, the jester was a special kind of fool that had license to mock even his master, the king, and keep him in touch with the country's problems (Martin, 2007:2). The jester acted as a mirror reflecting both the thoughts of the king and the fears of his subjects (Martin, 2007: 2). Jesters were chosen from the ranks of ordinary people, particularly those who possessed clowning skills (Martin, 2007: 4). However, the idea of a comic mocking the powerful - especially those who wielded considerable political and economic power - was an alien concept in comedy discourses of pre-war and post-war Britain. If, for example, Bob Hope was a sort of court jester to the Presidents of the United States (Wagg, 2004), then there was no equivalent here in Britain. The "jesters" who "play the democratic court" as Eric Midwinter (1979: 15) styles them, frequently mocked institutions like the Post Office, the police or the railways, while ignoring the social conditions that sustained the capitalist system of oppression and exploitation. Oppositional discourses could only be articulated outside the official sphere of entertainment and in order for this to happen, a new space needed to be constructed outside the bounds of the consecrated space of officially-sanctioned forms of culture. Within these spaces, *countercultural* discourses could be articulated and circulated away from the eyes of officialdom and the cultural cognoscenti. Moreover, this was also a space for the kind of political satire that was refused a space on television; an exclusive space policed by Oxbridge and public school-educated gatekeepers, who only admitted those satirists with the correct kind of social and cultural capital to practise their crafts. Oxbridge satire is therefore a form of 'official' or state-sanctioned satire, which takes swipes at established

parliamentary parties of the right and left, but whose compromise approach may give it the appearance of toothlessness. This kind of satire was rarely, if ever, performed live (The Establishment Club being one notable exception). The alternative space was as much constructed in opposition to the traditional entertainment forms as it was to the satire and comedic whimsy of the Oxbridge comics.

2.3.2 Alternative spaces and mainstream spaces

Alternative spaces are constructed as second worlds, which permit the articulation of cultural and political discourses that have been excluded from the official space because of their perceived illegitimacy. How then, are alternative spaces constructed and what methods are employed in their construction? In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau (1988) examines how social formations and individuals use 'tactics' to subvert regulations and alter the urban environment to suit their needs. De Certeau (1988: 61-64) acknowledges the contributions of Bourdieu and Michel Foucault but is critical of their use of language to refer to actions within the social space. He criticises Foucault's concept of discourse for being vague and finds Bourdieu's strategies too opaque. Instead De Certeau (1988: 51-55) uses the word "tactics" to refer to the practices of everyday life. He insists that tactics are not subordinate to strategies but oppose them. Thus, tactics can refer to the methods or practices used by people to adapt their surroundings, subvert rules, create cultural artefacts and/or challenge power (de Certeau, 1988: 34-58). "In short" de Certeau (1988: 37) argues, "a tactic is the art of the weak". Therefore, those without the social, economic, political or *cultural* power employ tactics that may include ruses, trickery and 'making do' (or bricolage) to create spaces to suit the needs of a social formation and/or humanise their environments (De Certeau, 1988). The creation of cabaret and New Variety clubs can thus be regarded as an exemplar of 'making do', because countercultural formations do not have the economic capital or the power to create purpose-built spaces but make do by adapting pub rooms or unorthodox spaces.

De Certeau (1988: 117) argues that “space is a practiced place”, which means that, spaces can be defined by the practices of those who occupy them. However, urban spaces are limited by their geography and urban planning. He argues that agents find ways to deal with these limits by using bricolage or DIY. This is a theme that is also taken up by the Situationist International through their use of psychogeography (Debord, 1956, 2003; Vaneigem, 1967) and while this is never actually described as such in *Society of the Spectacle*, it was a tactic that resonates with the practice of the flâneur, the urban stroller who wandered aimlessly through the urban space. In the chapter ‘Walking In The City’, de Certeau (1988: 102-118) recalls the flâneur, who ‘writes’ this urban space by leisurely joining together points of travel to create an internalised map of the city that is subjective, but which also humanises the urban space. The New Variety and alt cab circuits can be seen as an unofficial or *countercultural* writing of the urban space because each agent-promoter carved out their respective cultural zones (clubs and venues) within the city. This in turn humanised the urban environment by making popular entertainment accessible to the people and spoke to their concerns and catered to their subversive tastes. In the early years, the circuit could be thought of as a network of underground cultural spaces that, taken as a whole, formed a much larger unofficial cultural space. The official spaces for pleasure and enjoyment are highly regulated and subject to planning laws and laws regarding taste and decency. Spaces like theatres and concert halls are exclusive because they are out of the economic reach of those with limited resources. Pub function rooms, trade union centres and other unusual spaces, on the other hand, are available to those without the kind of economic capital to book official spaces – although they are still subject to the same planning and safety regulations that govern all public spaces.

The use of improvisation as a performance practice can also be seen through the lens of de Certeau’s (1988: 102-103) flâneurism or Debord’s (2005) *dérive*, because they allow language to free itself from the boundaries that are imposed on it by regulations or the script. For De Certeau (1988: 117) space “exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities and time variables”. De Certeau thus sees writing in a similar way to walking, and the textual journey undertaken by the improviser reveals a subversive mastery of the space. Until 1968, the act of improvising on stage was avoided lest it fall

foul of the Lord Chamberlain's Office, which censored play scripts. The Lord Chamberlain's Office was a sort of panopticon (Foucault, 1989; Wild, 2012) that surveilled theatre spaces for signs of subversion or breaches of 'taste and decency'. If we think of Peter Cook's Establishment Club, we can see that it was only allowed to operate because it was situated in a private members' club rather than a theatre and was therefore able to circumvent the **Licensing Act (1737)** by operating ostensibly outside the Lord Chamberlain's view. Even so, the Establishment Club's location meant that it was an exclusive space, which was patronised by those with the correct kinds of economic, social and cultural capital, but who also possessed a taste for risqué art forms. Alt cab stood in contrast to the Establishment Club because it was often located in pub rooms or similar spaces rather than a private members club.

Alt cab could not have happened within Britain's existing cultural architecture because there was no space allowed for it. It was also unlikely that the gatekeepers of the cultural industries would have tolerated these upstarts, because they had not served a recognised apprenticeship and were thus considered to be illegitimate. New entrants to the field had to subscribe to the principles of the field or they were excluded. Bourdieu argues:

Those in dominant positions operate essentially defensive strategies, designed to perpetuate the status quo by maintaining themselves and the principles on which their dominance is based.

(Bourdieu, 1993: 83)

Therefore, given the dominant class's resistance to alien ideas, alt com on its own could not hope to challenge the dominant hierarchical principle (Bourdieu, 1993) without a space in which to develop, and once the Comedy Store had opened it was only a matter of time before others had the idea to start cabaret clubs. The Store had been established as a commercial venture from the beginning; Rosengard and Ward's intention was to first oppose the established order on the dominant field of comedy production with the aim of supplanting it (Wilmot and Rosengard, 1989: 1-11). Its arrival in May 1979 indeed owed something to the space opened up by punk. Yet in order for this new kind of entertainment to develop, a second world needed to be constructed outside The Comedy Store as well as the official world.

Avant-garde practices were utilised within the alternative space but the term itself requires closer examination. 'Avant-garde' generally refers to art, literature and cinema that is innovative and experimental and is not normally associated with light entertainment or comedy (Poggioli, 1967; Wollen, 1975; D Andrews, 2010). Yet, the comedy that flourished in the alternative space was experimental and can therefore be considered avant-garde. Peter Wollen's essay "The Two Avant-Gardes" (1975) offers a dialectical approach to the avant-garde (Christie, 2008) by dividing it into two strands, one of which is experimental, while the other strips the form back to its basics and aims to build upwards. According to Wollen (1975), both avant-gardes coexist at any given point in time and although there are points of contact, there are contrasts between them in terms of "aesthetic assumptions, institutional framework, type of financial support, type of critical backing, historical and cultural origin" (Wollen, 1975). What unites them is their respective use of art-forms outside their main discipline.

D Andrews (2010) updates Wollen's (1975) work by emphasising the use of DIY in avant-garde and we can see this at work in punk, post-punk, alt cab and countercultural formations generally (Hebdige, 1993; McKay, 1996; Reynolds, 2005; qv. Breton, 2010). D Andrews (2010) claims that historic avant-garde movements were not necessarily attracted to political action and any attempt to tie them to left-wing politics is futile. On the other hand Poggioli (1967: 180-9) argues that each avant-garde movement had its political 'moment' and most – with the exception of Italian Futurism – gravitated towards Communism, socialism and anarchism (Marinetti actually described himself as an anarchist [Tisdall and Bozzola, 1977]), while the Russian Futurists were co-opted by the Bolsheviks (D Andrews, 2010). Italian Futurism, on the other hand, was unique for the fact that it was right-wing and closely allied to Mussolini's fascists (Tisdall and Bozzola, 1977; Bowler, 1991: 763-794). Within advanced capitalist economies, however, avant-garde art is eventually absorbed into the mainstream and commodified. Debord (2005) and Hebdige (1993) refer to this process as 'recuperation' in which the artefact in question is purged of its dangerous elements and rendered 'safe' for mass consumption. Avant-garde art that has been recuperated and transformed into mass produced artefacts will contain little trace of the ideologies or political parties to which it was once allied.

2.4 Popular cultural and youth cultural spaces

2.4.1 Meditations on popular culture

If 'culture' is a complex word (Williams, 1976), then the term 'popular culture' tends to be confused or conflated with mass culture or youth cultures, sometimes both. C Craig (2000) argues that live entertainment has been omitted from discussions of popular culture, which tend to concentrate on pop music and fashion and are arguably created from 'above' rather than from 'below'. This question of what constitutes the genuinely popular can be partly answered by interrogating the way in which popular culture has been studied. Shiach (1989) and Williams (1976) remind us that the definition of the word 'popular' has changed over the course of time and was initially associated with the law. However, the root of the word 'popular' is derived from 'populus' the ancient Greek word for people and this provides us with a clue as to the exact nature of popular culture. For John Fiske (2001: 20) the study of popular culture has traditionally taken two different directions: one that situates it within the discourse of power relations and the other that is "less productive" and does not situate it within "a model of power". He suggests that this line of enquiry posits that genuine popular culture was replaced by mass culture, which produces passivity in its audiences rather than full engagement (Fiske, 2001). Indeed, it is necessary to separate mass culture from popular culture, because the former uses the same techniques to produce culture as the industries that produce consumer commodities. It is this commoditised character of the mass produced cultural product that leads Debord (1957) to cynically describe official or mass culture as a "rigged game" that is responsible for the "imbecilization" of youth. It is only through the subversion of the artefact (*détournement*) or the public space (*dérive*), the Situationists argued, that we can reclaim our humanity (Debord, 1956, 1957; Vaneigem, 1967). This echoes the work of the Frankfurt School, particularly Theodor Adorno (2001; Adorno and Horkheimer, 1996), who regarded mass and even popular culture as soporifics that pacify rather than stimulate or excite their audiences. They coined the term 'culture industry' to refer to the mass produced cultural products and to distinguish them from artefacts that are produced on a small scale. Therefore, because of its scale of

its production, the mass-produced artefact bears the stamp of the dominant ideology (Adorno, 2001; Adorno and Horkheimer, 2003). Adorno in his pessimism, however, denies individual agency and misses the point of popular culture, which unlike mass culture, is created by people themselves and his snobbery towards such forms is perhaps the biggest drawback to his work. Fiske (2001: 23-48) identifies a second direction that has emerged, which acknowledges power relations but also seeks to reveal how tactics and strategies are used to challenge dominant power through the use of cultural forms⁹.

Herbert Gans (1999) does not accept the notion that popular culture is created from above and projected onto the consumers, nor does he accept that cultural consumption of specific artefacts, be they high or low forms of culture, are limited to one class or the other. Yet, popular culture as well as its relations: counterculture and subculture, is the site of middle-class anxieties because it is perceived to be intimately associated with the people (Shiach, 1989). The dominant class has traditionally viewed the masses as something that needed to be brought under control, and the advent of Music Hall and their reaction to it offers an insight into middle class socio-cultural anxieties (see Chapter 4). Since the late 1960s, however, Gans (1999:5) points out that the critics of popular culture had “dropped their attacks” because they had identified a new enemy of societal order in the form of youth culture, which was regarded as inherently dangerous for its associations with hedonism, mysticism and radicalism. Gans (1999: 7) argues that boundaries between high, low and middle culture have dissolved and proposes the use of the term “taste culture” instead. Labels like popular, mass and high cultures, obscure individual preferences that transcend social class, income or education and shore up the position of cultural cognoscenti, who decide what should be viewed or listened (Gans, 1999). Gans (1999: 71) identified “five publics and cultures”: high culture, upper-middle culture, lower-middle culture, low culture and quasi-folk low culture. He defines “publics” as taste constituencies and although it may seem as though these terms are connotatively defined by social class, Gans (1999: 81) allows for

⁹ This is territory that has been mapped out by Foucault (1977) and Bourdieu (1992) in their respective discussions on strategies and power. Bourdieu refers to the field of strategic possibilities, while Foucault is concerned with strategies of power.

some degree of latitude, noting that high culture is “serious” and those who objectify it will seek entertainment that is considered “low” as a form of light relief. Comedy, variety, cabaret and vaudeville may be considered low forms but they are consumed by people of all classes; their tastes having been shaped by a number of variables. Yet for all the attempts to explain it, the term ‘popular culture’ has continued to be associated with mass culture.

If the term ‘popular’ has been confused with ‘mass’ or traditionally associated with the law, then alternative cultural practitioners reclaimed it from the institutions of social, cultural and juridical power by constructing forms of entertainment that were not just in opposition to the dominant forms of culture, but celebrated working class life too. By taking their entertainment to working class communities that were effectively excluded because of their social status or, more accurately, their relationship to [economic] capital (Itzin, 1986; S Craig, 1980), they returned culture to the people. If we look at the example of alternative theatre, with its combination of political analysis with entertainment, it was consciously created to compete with existing forms of popular culture (Shiach, 1989; Kershaw, 1992; C Craig, 2000). We can consider these efforts by alternative theatre companies to be counter-hegemonic because they challenge the discourses and mode of production of the culture industries, thus contributing to a form of passive revolution by raising political consciousness in its audiences (Mascha, 1998; Gramsci, 2003). Popular cultural forms like rock ‘n’ roll and variety theatre played a crucial role in alternative theatre as the carrier of political messages to marginalised communities. As a popular form, rock music itself had been regarded with suspicion and anxiety by Britain’s cultural establishment to the extent that it was not marginalised but entirely excluded from the nation’s airwaves.

2.4.2 Rock ‘n’ roll and the British cultural establishment

Rock ‘n’ roll has fired the imaginations of Britain’s youth for the better part of 60 years, and its important role in shaping the dispositions of my participants is indicated in the data produced by this study. In the United States, the commercialised airwaves were ostensibly free and rock ‘n’ roll flowed freely into people’s homes (Frith, 1981). In the Britain of the late 50s and early 60s, rock and pop music was confined to offshore stations like Radio Luxembourg

and the Armed Forces Network (AFN)¹⁰, whose signals faded in and out, making listening difficult (Frith, 1981: 117-126). Rock 'n' roll's popularity with British youths in the 1950s and 1960s put it on a collision course with state's moral guardians in the cultural and political establishments who did all they could to limit the spread. The intention behind this, I would suggest, was to smother any attempt on the part of new forces to break through the ossified structures of cultural production that constantly recirculated stale ideas in the public domain. Rock music's close association with the body and its themes of adolescent heterosexual coupling, and its celebration of everyday life meant that it was seen as vulgar, decadent and above all illegitimate by the cultural cognoscenti. This antagonism can be summed up in the BBC's moralising and paternalistic attitude to rock 'n' roll, which it regarded as a passing fad and therefore not worthy of inclusion on the nation's airwaves and was indicative of its inability not only to relate to young people, but also its complacency (Cain, 1992; Street et al, 1992, 2004). Yet it was not alone in its animus: the *Melody Maker*, for example, defined "good" popular music as jazz (Street, 1992: 307, 2004), while the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) regarded it as indicative of capitalist commodity production, while its official organ, *The Weekly Worker*, denounced it as the decadent offspring of *authentic* popular music (Horn, 2007: 30-35). In the House of Commons, Lt. Colonel Marcus Lipton, the Labour MP for Brixton was so concerned about rock 'n' roll's apparent degeneracy that he demanded the Conservative Home Secretary ban all "indecent" records (Street, 1992: 304). A tireless critic of youth culture, Lipton would return 20 years later to decry the emergence of punk rock (Hebdige, 1993: 158n; 2001: 214). Yet for all its effect on British youth, the official entertainment world of the late 1950s and early 1960s was relatively untouched by rock 'n' roll and even the youthful satirists of the satire boom would ignore its potential.

It was not until it was faced with a threat from the emerging pirate radio movement that the BBC was forced to change and even then it required the help of Harold Wilson's Labour government to achieve this (Cain, 1992; Crisell, 2002). **The Marine & co. Broadcasting (Offences) Act** was passed in 1967 and outlawed the pirate radio stations, leaving the BBC as the sole land-based

¹⁰ Armed Forces Network is the broadcasting service for the United States military overseas.

provider of popular music (Cain, 1992; Street, 1992). The corporation duly restructured its radio operations to reflect this change (Cain, 1992). Radio 1 would become the dedicated pop music station, while Radio 2 assumed the Light Programme's responsibilities. Radios 3 and 4 took over the Third Programme and Home Service's duties respectively (Cain, 1992; Crisell, 2002). The reorganisation of the BBC meant very little because it continued to have a monopoly of the airwaves and even after the introduction of commercial radio in the early 1970s, it still dominated music radio. If rock 'n' roll posed a threat to the establishment, then what happened next would send paroxysms of anxiety through its body-politic.

2.4.3 Punk rock and post-punk

There is an assumption among some writers (Lidington, 1987; Wilmut, 1989; Double, 1991; C Craig, 2000; Cook, 2001) that alt com bears a close resemblance to punk rock. Lidington (1987), C Craig (2000) and Cook (2001) cite punk as a catalyst, if not, a major influence on alt com. Lidington (1987) specifically notes the association between punk rock and the ranting or 'protest' poetry of John Cooper Clarke and Attila the Stockbroker¹¹. Conversely, C Craig (2000) draws a link between punk and alt com, but cautions against making too close a connection between them. S Friedman (2011:18), however, hints that alt com may well have been a form of "post-punk political and intellectual comedy". This is perhaps the first time that alt com has been identified as a form of post-punk cultural milieu rather than punk. Punk itself was a postmodern subculture: its sartorial style broke the chain of signification through its utilisation of ordinary objects as adornments and accessories, and the music was stripped back to its basic elements. Hebdige (1993: 27) argues that "punk came from essentially antagonistic sources" that included avant-garde art and underground cinema and these sources were particularly evident in punk's art school wing, which included The Clash and The Damned. Griel Marcus (1989: 19) places punk on the avant-garde continuum and claims it was a continuation of Situationist International's cultural praxis inasmuch as it created a 'situation' that disrupted the spectacle (Debord, 2005). Punk was eventually recuperated and

¹¹ Attila the Stockbroker became a regular on the circuit.

transformed into new wave and this reminds us of the fate of avant-garde art or subcultural forms once their market potential has been identified. Post-punk, however, was somewhat more difficult to recuperate because it was often consciously non-commercial (Reynolds, 2005: xvii; Street et al, 2007; Cogan, 2012; Gracyk, 2011). The concept of commercialism seems slippery and is often utilised pejoratively to express contempt at bland cultural products, and is often used interchangeably with the word 'mainstream'. *Countercultural* and avant-garde producers tend to position themselves against mainstream cultural production, which they are attempting to overthrow. However, commercialism can be defined in terms of its scale of production and the amount of money it makes for large producers (Bourdieu, 1996: 67). For Bourdieu (2016: 223), the struggle on the field of art productions takes place between the producers of 'pure art' and 'bourgeois' or commercial art.

Someone who refuses to play the game of art as art, which defines itself against ordinary vision and against the mercantile and mercenary ends of those who put themselves into its service, wants to reduce the business of art to the business of money (according to the founding principle of the economic field, 'business is business').

(Bourdieu, 2016: 223-224)

Post-punk artists, like the punk artists before them, refused to play the commercial game by creating their own set of rules, as loosely defined as they were. Simon Reynolds (2005: xxii-xxiii) claims post-punk artists like Gang of Four and Scritti Politti "exposed and dramatized the mechanisms of power in everyday life: consumerism, sexual relationships, common sense notions of what's natural or 'obvious', the ways in which seemingly spontaneous, innermost feelings are scripted by larger forces". For post-punk artists, the personal was political and the principle that underpinned their work was to question everything (Reynolds, 2005: xxiii). This is arguably not the case in commercial art production, which seeks profit above all else. Post-punk music can be regarded as 'pure art' in Bourdieusian terms, because it breaks with the profit motive that drives commercial production. This is music for music's sake, produced by musicians that are not beholden to notions of virtuosity that so dominated the pre-punk rock era of rock music with its bloated budgets.

Art that is produced commercially, therefore, is intended to appeal to as wide an audience as possible and to maximise profits, and can therefore be seen as the opposite to avant-garde art, which is produced on a smaller scale (Bourdieu, 1996: 71). Commercially produced art adheres to the principles of dominant hierarchical principle and the industry that produces it occupies the sub-field of large-scale cultural production (Bourdieu, 2016: 124). Bourdieu (1996: 71) also refers to commercial art as “bourgeois” and “bland” and this gives us an insight into the rather safe and staid nature of mass cultural production, which recirculates stale ideas, often in new packaging.

According to Hesmondhalgh (2007: 209), post-punk was a cultural intervention that democratised the music industry and “activism took place actually on the field of commercial entertainment production itself”. Even here, Hesmondhalgh’s use of the word ‘commercial’ appears to, at once, contradict Bourdieu (2016) and the post-punk objective of challenging the bland mass-produced cultural product. Contracts between artist and label were rejected in favour of informal arrangements and record labels were run by amateurs rather than accountants and lawyers (Reynolds, 2005: xvii; Hesmondhalgh, 2007: 209-210). On the circuit, the so-called ‘gentleman’s agreement’ formed the contract between club promoter and performer(s), with the middle man – the agent – being eliminated from the process entirely. I know from experience that contracts were often only issued by promoters at the performers’ request and even then, it was for the purpose of obtaining the coveted Equity card. This practice continued well into the Nineties.

Post-punk music was comprised of disparate elements, some of which can be categorised as avant-garde. If painting influenced avant-garde cinema as Wollen (1975) claims, then rock ‘n’ roll influenced the overall tone of alt cab/alt com through the embodiment of its language and mannerisms. In the 1950s, the speech patterns and improvisations of American comedians like Lenny Bruce were directly influenced by jazz and this can be seen in the way Bruce produced improvised riffs on the layout of a room for example (Magnuson, 1965; Baker, 1971). For Alexei Sayle, the 2-Tone music scene provided both a template to create a new kind of stand-up comedy from scratch and a source of sartorial style. Double (1997) also acknowledges punk rock’s contribution to a particular kind of attitude among alt comedians like Sayle but

then it should be remembered that post-punk itself was influenced in part by the DIY ethic of punk.

If punk was seen as an indication of the nation's social and moral decline by Britain's commentators (Hebdige, 1993), then a major feature of this decline was the cultural industries' penchant for nostalgia, which seeped into the thoughts of some established rock stars, who pined for a Britain that only existed in an imagined past. Some stars (Rod Stewart, Roger Daltrey and Eric Clapton) believed the solution to the country's economic and political problems could be solved through a form of charismatic authoritarianism, while others – seduced by Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech - proposed to remove immigrants from the country, believing their presence had been responsible for Britain's economic and industrial decline (Doggett, 2007). No more vividly was this penchant for nostalgia expressed than in the words of David Bowie, whose arrival at London's Victoria Station in June 1976 caused controversy when he appeared to give a Nazi salute from a Mercedes convertible (T Stewart, 1976: 2). Bowie rejected the suggestion that he was giving a Nazi salute and claimed to have been caught in mid-wave (Gilmore, 2012: 3). Recent footage reveals that Bowie had indeed been misrepresented by the *New Musical Express* (*NME*) (YouTube, 2006). Yet in an earlier interview, Bowie claimed:

"Adolf Hitler was one of the first rock stars. Look at some of the films and see how he moved. I think he was quite as good as Jagger."

(Bowie quoted in Gilmore, 2012)

Bowie's Nazi fetish stood in contrast to the plain speech of Eric Clapton, Roger Daltrey and Rod Stewart, whose positions on 'race' and immigration seemed more in tune with the thuggishness of far-right street gangs (Doggett, 2007). Two months after the Bowie episode, a drunken Clapton told concert-goers in Birmingham "[I think] Enoch's right ... we should send them all back. Throw the wogs out! Keep Britain white!" (Widgery, 1986; Gilroy, 1989; Doggett, 2007; Bainbridge, 2007; Goodyer, 2009, 2010; E Smith, 2011). Clapton's drunken speech and Bowie's Nazi fetish coincided with a rise of the far-right National Front (NF) and the openly neo-Nazi British Movement (BM), both of which had seen a sharp increase in their respective numbers in the aftermath of

Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech in 1968 (Widgery, 1986; Gilroy, 1989; E Smith, 2011). While Clapton was viewed by punks as a representative of the 'boring old farts', Bowie was one of a few musicians that still commanded their respect, but his sudden attachment to Nazi iconography was a rather worrying development that could not be lightly dismissed. Moreover, the punk fetish with Nazi iconography combined with songs like 'Belsen Was A Gas' by The Sex Pistols was, for many on the Left, not only a cause for concern, but evidence that the punk movement was sliding towards the far-right or, at least, open to colonisation by them (Widgery, 1986; Gilroy, 1989; Renton, 2006; Roberts and Moore, 2009; Goodyer, 2010; E Smith, 2011). Indeed, as Reynolds (2005: 123) points out, possibly because of the flaunting of the swastika, the NF was openly trying to recruit punks in Leeds through its "Punk Front". He also notes that Leeds "was the birthplace of Rock Against Communism" which involved "local right-wing punk bands like The Dentists, whose songs included 'Kill the Reds', 'Master Race' and 'White Power'" (Reynolds, 2005: 123-124). But these were low profile in comparison to the pronouncements of Clapton, Daltrey and Stewart.

The Clapton incident spurred Red Saunders and Roger Huddle, formerly of CAST and Kartoon Klowns, into action and the former wrote an open letter that was published in music papers like the *New Musical Express* (NME)¹² (Widgery, 1986: 54; Gilroy, 1989; De Groot, 2002: 226-227; Renton, 2006; Roberts and Moore, 2009; Goodyer, 2009; E Smith, 2011). Saunders attacked Clapton's speech and urged readers to form a rank and file movement in response to the upsurge in far-right activities (*New Musical Express*, 11 September 1976; Widgery, 1986; Street et al, 2008; Renton, 2002, 2006). Within weeks, RAR was created to offer a cultural response to the NF by marshalling the youthful energy of the punks, dreads and their respective sounds, and fusing them with left-wing politics (Hebdige, 1986; Widgery, 1986; Gilroy, 1989; Allen, 2002: 73; Dawson, 2005; Renton, 2006; Goodyer, 2010; E Smith, 2011). RAR can be seen as the first left-wing cultural space that openly welcomed youth culture, rather than see it as a passing fad or vulgar as many

The National Party, a splinter group from the neo-fascist National Front (NF), had made electoral gains in towns like Blackburn where it had won two seats on the council and in the elections for the Greater London Council (GLC) its share of the vote had increased. Consequently, many immigrants and people of colour lived in fear of being attacked on the streets or in their homes.

on the orthodox Left¹³, who dismissed youth culture out of hand (Gilroy, 1989; E Smith, 2011). No longer could the Left afford to alienate left-leaning British youths as it had done in the 1950s and 1960s. To challenge the threat from the resurgent far-right, a new cultural space had to be constructed, which was separate to the official world and its apparent political neutrality. The official world chose not to engage in critiques of the far-right and the BBC, for example, were reluctant to challenge the NF leader, John Tyndall on his claim that his party was neither Nazi or extremist (BBC, 1980).

RAR was supported by the Anti-Nazi League (ANL), which was formed in April 1978 as RAR's "political wing" (De Groot, 2002: 228). The ANL was the creation of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) but it had support from individual members of the Labour Party as well as luminaries in theatre and music (Widgery, 1986; Gilroy, 1989; Street et al, 2007: 10). Also involved in RAR and the ANL was David Widgery, an East London GP, writer, essayist, political activist, and member of the SWP, who acted as chief propagandist, and a central figure in the movement (Light, 1992; Street et al, 2007: 10; Renton, 2002: 11-27; Renton, 2006: 47-50). In turn, Widgery had connections to CAST, who were performing feminist and anti-racist plays around this time with the support of the ANL (Muldoon interview; Widgery, 1986: 54, 55). Thus it is reasonable to argue that the social relations between all actors on the field of cultural production, at its autonomous pole, were influenced by the field of left-wing fringe politics, and this would help to shape the political-aesthetic disposition of the post-punk class habitus. Discourses that were produced by the relationship between the various groups in this new cultural-political space partly contributed to the production of new *countercultural* art forms in a way that had not been witnessed since the anti-war movement of the late 1960s. Moreover, many of these agents may have been left-wing artists, but they were opposed to the "capitalist Labour" government and the Conservative opposition as much as they were opposed to the neo-Nazis (Gilroy, 1989: 175; Street et al, 2008), and in this way they took a *countercultural* position by refusing the language of conventional politics and the hierarchical protocols of the dominant field of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993). However, it would be incorrect to

¹³ CPGB, Unity Theatre et al

claim that all the punk and post-punk bands that participated in RAR did so without reservations.

The extent to which RAR succeeded in challenging far-right politics is open to debate: the ANL and RAR were not the street equivalents of the NF or BM and the SWP officially forbade its members to engage in physical confrontations with fascists¹⁴. Therefore, at street level, the efficacy of the RAR and the ANL is rather marginal (Gilroy, 1989: 148-177). Politically, the NF, which had stood candidates in almost every constituency in the country, had been outflanked at the ballot box by the Conservatives (Gilroy, 1989). Indeed, by the 1979 General Election, Thatcher appropriated the anti-immigration rhetoric of the NF and injected it into mainstream political discourse to the extent that phrases like “swamped with immigrants” became normalised (Gilroy, 1989; Goodyer, 2009; Goodyer, 2010). Consequently, the NF became electorally marginalised as a political force (Gilroy, 1989: 114-152). RAR, on the other hand, was wound up in 1984 after nearly eight years of activity (Gilroy, 1989; Renton, 2006: 169-173; Goodyer, 2009). However, the success of RAR cannot be necessarily measured by its street effectiveness alone, but by its fusion of culture and left-wing politics, which informed and influenced the post-punk counterculture that grew up alongside it and helped to shape the aesthetic of the alternative space, which in turn would impact on the dominant spheres of cultural production and social discourse, and thus challenge the symbolic violence of the Thatcher government.

2.5 The Thatcher Project

The alternative space emerged against the backdrop of public sector cuts, industrial strife and a moralising and reactionary and authoritarian Conservative government headed by the personality of Margaret Thatcher. A popular memory of this period is of a stream of comedians like Ben Elton railing against the Thatcher government, and while there was a great deal of emphasis placed on experimentation, alt cab and New Variety also provided spaces for the articulation of oppositional political discourses that could not be expressed

¹⁴ This unofficial practice was referred to as ‘squaddism’, and the difference over tactics for defeating the fascists between the ‘squaddists’ and the SWP’s Central Committee led to the expulsion of the former and the subsequent formation of Red Action (Moore, 1983; Renton, 2006: 169-173).

in the fora set aside within the official world (Lidington, 1987; C Craig, 2000). Political discourse within the alternative space was not always directly anti-Thatcher, but ran counter to the government's notion of politics and culture.

Within parliament, the official opposition Labour Party failed to formulate an effective counter-narrative to the Thatcher government's narrative of freedom-through-the-power-of-the-marketplace. Labour under Neil Kinnock was seen by many on the Left as weak and ineffective and was accused of losing the political initiative to its opponents (Gamble, 1983: 7-13). Labour's political cowardice created an asymmetrical political landscape that was dominated by radical right-wing discourse, which was adopted uncritically by much of the press that, in turn, trivialised and mocked left-wing politics (Peacock, 2007). In spite of being urged by commentators in ostensibly left-wing organs like *Marxism Today* (Hall, 1979, 1980, 1982, 1984; Priscott, 1983; Laclau, 1987) to offer an alternative analysis to Thatcher's rise, the Labour Party led by Neil Kinnock moved the party to the right to appeal to a centre ground that had itself moved right (Peacock, 2007: 1-2). However, this move meant that the space for acceptable political discourse in the public sphere also shifted rightward, thereby leaving no space for left-wing views outside of official Labour Party discourse, which was itself being transformed by its internalisation of Thatcher's TINA (There is no alternative) narrative and the symbolic violence of being ridiculed by the Conservative-sympathising press (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2003; Peacock, 2007).

Coined by Hall (1979: 16-23), Thatcherism as a socio-economic doctrine was not a coherent set of principles, nor had it been formulated by Margaret Thatcher herself; rather it was the marriage between authoritarian tendencies within the Conservative Party with its more economically liberal wing (Hall, 1979, 1980; Saunders and Jackson, 2012). As a doctrine, Thatcherism was a loose set of ideological positions, which was closely bound up with the personality of the Prime Minister herself and was designed to socially engineer Britain by eradicating or undermining the institutions of the working class and the industries in which they worked. Thatcherism's roots lay in the so-called "Powellism" of 1968 – 69 and in the policies of the Heath government of 1970 – 74 (Hall, 1980; Clarke, 1999; G Stewart, 2013), and was formulated by Sir Keith Joseph and Sir Alfred Sherman in the Centre for Policy Studies, a think-tank that was formed in the wake of the Tories' defeat in the October 1974 election

(Hall, 1979; Evans, 1997, 2004). Thatcherism can be characterised somewhat contradictorily as 'libertarian-authoritarian' or as Hall (1979: 15) described it "authoritarian populism". Indeed, Hall (1980: 27) and Robert Saunders (2012) have noted Thatcherism's inherent contradictions and its construction of a "crisis frame of mind", which framed its justifications for public spending cuts and privatisations. Thatcherism can also be read as a rejection of Keynesian economics and the post-war consensus (Hall, 1980; Gamble, 1983; Hall and Jacques, 1988; Evans, 1997, 2004; Clarke, 1999). Economically, Thatcherism was predicated on the economic and social theories of Friedrich von Hayek (1976, 1983) and Milton Friedman (2004), which held that liberated markets and decentralisation would lead to greater freedoms (Hall, 1980; Saunders, 2012). Hayek's and Friedman's theories were applied first in Pinochet's Chile under the direction of the so-called 'Chicago Boys', who were former students of Friedman at the University of Chicago and were adopted enthusiastically by Thatcher and Reagan (Harvey, 2009: 21-44). To achieve the dream of a free market state, the Thatcher government attacked the institutions of the working class and the social infrastructure that supported them (Evans, 1997, 2004). The state (and the Labour Party and socialism by extension) was regarded as the obstacle to this *notion of freedom* and voters were told that their liberty depended on its shrinkage (Hall, 1980). To achieve this, council homes were sold off under the Right to Buy scheme that was announced early into the first Thatcher ministry and the nationalised industries were privatised because they were seen as 'inefficient' (Evans, 1997, 2004). Yet, the efficiency that was promised under the privatisation model failed to materialise and there was no evidence to support the claim that private was better than public in terms of cost effectiveness (Tulip, 1998; Lancaster and Brierley, 2001; Letza et al, 2004). Privatisations always led to redundancies (Tulip, 1998; Lancaster and Brierley, 2001; Letza et al, 2004) and the nationalised industries were effectively wound down and their assets stripped by the self-made men Thatcher had helped to unleash on the economy (Morris, 1983: 25-28). Thatcher's Conservatives resurrected the language and culture of the 19th century with its themes of deserving and undeserving poor, and of eugenics (Peacock, 2007: 2-4). Only a return to 'Victorian values', they asserted, could rescue the nation from a moral and social decline for which the Left and 'permissiveness' were held responsible (Kershaw, 1992; Clarke, 1999).

From the beginning, the Thatcher government signalled its intention eradicate the oppositional cultural political ideas formed within the countercultural formations of the 1960s and 1970s (Edgar, 1989; Kershaw, 1992; Peacock, 2007). Baz Kershaw (1991: 99) writes “The dominant social order attempted to accommodate and contain the expressive revolution of the counterculture, as indicated by the phrase which was most widely used to describe its response to the challenge: ‘the permissive society’”. The identification of so-called permissiveness as a primary ideological culprit in the erosion of ‘traditional values’ provided the source material for a continuing sub-narrative within the general narrative of crisis and framed in the most moralistic of terms (Hall, 1980). Along with the miners and socialists, the Thatcher government was determined to fix in the public mind the image of the ‘enemy within’ and its pernicious influence on culture (Tomlinson, 2013).

Thatcher’s cultural counter-revolution began with the restructuring of the ACGB and a change to the funding model (Kershaw, 1992; Peacock, 2007). William Rees-Mogg, High Tory and a former editor of *The Times*, was installed as chairman and Richard Hoggart’s term as vice chairman was not renewed (Kershaw, 1992: 171). Hoggart was seen as being “broadly sympathetic to the left” and thus unacceptable in the eyes of the government (Kershaw, 1992: 171). His place was taken by Luke Rittner, who came from a business background¹⁵ (Kershaw, 1992; Peacock, 2007), and was thus considered to be ideal in terms of his experience of efficiencies and saving. Cuts to subsidies were implemented across the board and the cut clients had no right of appeal (Kershaw, 1992). “Glory of the Garden”, a report produced by the ACGB, outlined the new vision for the arts (Peacock, 2007; Dorney and Merkin, 2010). The report proposed that the ACGB should be split into Regional Arts Associations, while a new funding regime would favour companies that adopted the Thatcherite entrepreneurial model (Peacock, 2007; Dorney and Merkin, 2010). This effectively eliminated the space for political theatre companies reduced the arts to commodities. Experimental theatre, which had hitherto relied on subsidies to continue professionally, also began to disappear (Peacock, 2007). According to David Edgar (1989: 18-21), the government’s cultural counter-revolution was accelerated by 1989; its intellectual underpinning being

¹⁵ Rittner had moved from the Association of Business Sponsorship, where he had been its first director, to take up the position at the ACGB (Peacock, 2007; Dorney and Merkin, 2010)

provided by the Conservative Philosophy Group, which was headed by the Tory philosopher, Roger Scruton, and began to focus its attacks on universities, the BBC and even the church. In essence, the government's cultural policy was to have no policy beyond its opposition to permissiveness and its insistence on efficiencies, which were used as a convenient cover for arts cuts (Edgar, 1989: 18-21). A manifestation of its cultural policy was thus its continued philistinism. However, Thatcher's attacks on the remaining *countercultural* institutions of production would bring with them unintended consequences, leading eventually to the transformation of British comedy and live entertainment generally.

3. Methodology

3.1 The landscape

This thesis examines the alternative space of the 1980s, which was comprised of alt cab and New Variety. Alt com, the name often given to this space and the movement that operated within it, was a post-punk avant-garde comedy genre that was common to both spaces.

3.2 Study design

This study adopts a mixed qualitative methodology that makes use of ethnography, autoethnography, textual study and case studies. A mixed qualitative methodology allowed me to approach this complicated subject from a variety of angles and to interrogate the epistemological claims made about the space by other authors (Reis and Judd, 2000; C Craig, 2000; Cook, 2001; Silverman, 2004; Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2010; Abbott and McKinney, 2013; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). My thesis is also underpinned by a critical theoretical paradigm that includes Bourdieu's (1993, 2003) concepts of habitus, capital and field; Bakhtin's (1984) carnivalesque and De Certeau's (1988) tactic of 'make do' or bricolage.

3.2.1 Interviews

My work in comedy and cabaret over a period of thirteen years gave me access to many performers who work, or who once worked, in the entertainment business. I conducted fifteen interviews with performers and promoters over the course of four years. Interviews are commonly used as a method of data collection in social and health sciences and are suited to experience-type research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2013: 80-81). My interviews are qualitative because I sought to gather data in the form of stories rather than numbers, and the questions are open ended and do not seek yes/no answers (Braun and Clarke, 2013: 80-81). The purpose of interviewing, as Seidman (2011) claims is not to get answers to questions, test hypotheses or evaluate but to get an idea of a participant's lived experiences, which are revealed through their use of language (De Certeau, 1988). I was interested in my participants' stories and how they saw their worlds rather than notions of

left-wing subversion with which alt com was particularly associated. Therefore, my interviews could be categorised as narrative interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

3.2.2 Selecting participants

I selected participants from each wave of alt cab (1979-82; 1983-86; 1987-91) and because I was interested in a cross-section of performance styles and operational objectives. I was not particularly interested in household names and I was more interested in performers' perceptions of the circuit as well as their attitudes to trad comedy. These attitudes cut across the range of performers, regardless of whether they are famous or not. Furthermore, there was always the question of availability with regards to successful performers, who tend to be touring or working abroad.

Many interviews were arranged via Facebook; an invaluable tool for ethnologists and social researchers because it utilises the social capital of digital and 'real life' communities, thereby helping to facilitate the use of snowball sampling. Snowball sampling or 'friend pyramiding' involves asking a participant if their friends would like to take part in a study (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Tracy, 2012). Alternatively, snowball sampling entails "picking some subjects who feature the necessary characteristics and, through their recommendations, finding other subjects with the same characteristics" (Seale et al, 2004). In my case I either knew friends of the participant but did not have contact information for them or the participant recommended their friends on the basis that they may have something interesting to contribute.

Selecting potential interviewees was generally not a difficult task but availability always needs to be taken in consideration when dealing with people who work in the entertainment industry. A majority of participants in my study are not household names and some have retired from the entertainment business or have moved into other fields. Household names, in particular, tend to be busy and it is often difficult arranging mutually convenient times to meet for an interview. Star performers generally do not have to play the circuit and although some acts will occasionally return to the circuit to test new material, their living is made principally in the mass media, thus they often become separated from the circuit that once spawned them.

My participants included Roland Muldoon of CAST; variety artist, Martin Soan; comedians, Stewart Lee, Ronnie Golden, Dreenagh Darrell, Steve Gribbin, Brian Mulligan, Julie Balloo, Noel James, Mark Kelly, Tony Allen and Bob Boyton (see Appendix for full list and mini biographies). I was interested in Roland Muldoon because along with his wife, Claire, CAST presents *New Variety* represented a sense of continuity between the *countercultural* world of the 1960s and its counterpart in the 1980s, and although *New Variety* was a separate but overlapping genre, it subscribed to the same *countercultural* values as the rest of the space. CAST assumed control of the Hackney Empire in 1985 and this was a significant moment in their history and in terms of the development of alt com because it was a rival space to the large scale commercial promoters like The Comedy Store and Jongleurs.

I also interviewed a small number of promoters that included Ivor Dembina of the Red Rose Club in Finsbury Park (who is also a comedian), Jenny Landreth, who along with David Bryan, set up Black Comedy, an early attempt to create a separate black comedy space in the late 1980s. Black Comedy interested me for two reasons: first, I had believed the alt cab circuit to be an egalitarian space that saw past skin colour, yet the establishment of a specific black comedy circuit appeared to indicate an unspoken problem with colour on the circuit that was assumed to be left-wing and non-racist. Second, the construction of this space seemed to be based on the assumption of shared cultural experiences between members of the African-Caribbean and African diaspora but it also posed a question: was it alternative?

Although Facebook was useful for contacting potential interviewees, some participants were not users of the social media site, while others had pages that were organised by their fans. Stewart Lee, for example, is not a Facebook user (though he has a fan page) and I obtained his contact details through his website. Mark Thomas and Mark Steel never seemed to be available for an interview and contacting Jongleurs and its co-owner, Maria Kempinska, was practically impossible. I sent several emails to Jongleurs and called at their offices in person (which were located near my home) only to discover that they had moved to a new, unidentified location. In the end, because of time constraints, I abandoned any further attempt to speak to them. I managed to arrange an interview with Stewart Lee but even then it took around a year to commit him to a time and a place. Eventually, I managed to

get a half hour interview with him before he went on stage at the Leicester Square Theatre. Felix Dexter was one of the few black comedians working on the circuit between 1985 and 1990 and I was keen to speak to him about his experiences, but he died in 2013 before I could get a chance to interview him or send a questionnaire. I gave the participant the option of choosing an interview location, because I felt this would make them feel comfortable and willing to open up if they were in a familiar or neutral, environment. Many interviews took place in the participants' homes, while others were conducted in public spaces like The National Theatre, where I had to be conscious of background noise and acoustics. The majority of my face-to-face interviews are over one hour in duration and the shortest is around thirty minutes in length.

I tried to find more variety artists for this study but many of them had either moved on or I had no contact details for them. It is all too easy to forget how popular these kinds of performers were on the circuit. Punk poetry was especially popular from 1981 to 1987 and many bills included at least one poet. At the questionnaire stage of the study, I managed to contact Mark Hurst (Miwurdz), Phil Herbert and Steve Rawlings, none of whom were stand-up comedians, but represented alt cab's ranting poet and street performer contingent respectively. I had heard through another participant that Steve Murray, who used to be billed as a 'teddy bear torturer', was working for the London Borough of Tower Hamlets as the head of arts and culture. I sent him an email but he did not reply. This was a shame, because Murray was one of the more eccentric performers on the circuit and would have been a useful counterweight to the numbers of stand-up comedians included in this study. William Wilding (Woody Bop Muddy) was an interesting participant because he was a performance artist turned novelty act, who ran a club with Chris Cresswell, a mime artist and clown. Their club, The Third Eye Level Grill Show specialised in the more unusual circuit performers and typifies the artistic side of alt cab, which militates against the popular totalising view of the circuit as series of stand-up comedy clubs.

3.2.3 Conversational interview technique

This study makes use of the conversational interview technique, which is a form of semi-structured interview in which the interview resembles a chat (Berry, 1999; Turner III, 2010: 754 -760). Braun and Clarke (2013: 78) prefer to

use the term “unstructured interview” instead and claim that the “researcher has, at most, a list of themes or topics to discuss with the participant”. The conversational interview technique is participant-led and allows the participant to speak at length about their thoughts and feelings (Braun and Clarke, 2013). I used this technique for three reasons: first, I was a peer of many of the participants; second, the participants would forget they were being interviewed and thus relax and open up more; third, it has greater flexibility than the structured or semi-structured interview (Turner III, 2010: 754 -760). Indeed, I could not ask the same questions of every participant because each one had different reasons for performing or, in the case of organisers, reasons for setting up their clubs. The main reason for this is because each performer was different in terms of their style and approach. Although these interviews were unstructured, I devised what Willig (2008) calls an interview agenda to help me keep sight of the original research question.

My interviews began with the same question: “Let’s start at the beginning”, this would often allow the participant to talk about their childhood, their education and their occupation before entering the field. From these replies I was able to gain an insight into the participant’s cultural and social capital and to what degree they played a part in the construction of the performances. I found that by commencing interview in this way also helped to introduce the participant to their own story. Each of us tells stories and they can be found in everyday speech (De Certeau, 1988). Starting at the beginning of a personal narrative can be likened to a commencement of a journey, but a silence or a gesture may cause the speaker to take tangents or deviate from the course (De Certeau, 1988). I was aware of these possibilities and often allowed to participant to meander or veer off course. Occasionally, the participant’s stories overlapped my stories and, in some cases, preceded my arrival to the alt cab scene. I tended to take an active part in these interviews as a conversant and would occasionally offer my own reflections and recollections in response to the points made by my interviewees. To maximise data collection, I took different positions in relation to my interview: sometimes I would play devil’s advocate and other times I would play ignorant to get the desired response. In only two cases, I was faced with less than conversational participation: Mark Kelly seemed to have been interviewed before and came prepared; he told his

story with few pauses, while Ivor Dembina seemed to prefer a more semi-structured interview. I discuss these aspects in more detail in Chapter 5.

3.2.4 Questionnaires

Before conducting face-to-face interviews, I devised an email questionnaire that was intended to obtain information on cultural capital and views of the term 'counterculture'. As a method, the questionnaire is useful but only in terms of gathering specific kinds of data (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 77-101). With this in mind, I decided to ask a rather broad, but specific question regarding countercultures to get a sense of what the word meant to my participants (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 77-101). I soon discovered that, like the word 'culture' the word 'counterculture' seemed to have a number of meanings according to how individual participants experienced or perceived it. In any case, the word itself seemed to indicate something that was more cultural than was necessarily connected to the Sixties experience or with the tropes that were associated with it. Alt cab was a fringe culture that shared some of the characteristics of a youth subculture and I adapted the term 'counterculture' to describe cultural activities that took place outside official culture (Bakhtin, 1984; McKay, 1996). I was also interested in determining what kind of cultural capital my participants possessed and how, if at all, this shaped their view of the world. This entailed posing a very general question about influences and inspirations. In many cases, rock music and historical comedians featured and in a few cases, other performers on the circuit were mentioned.

There are two modes of administration for questionnaires: self-completion and researcher-led (McColl et al, 2001). This thesis uses self-completion email questionnaires. The main drawback to using self-completion questionnaires for data collection is that they may be returned incomplete (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 77-101) or the participants may respond with a single sentence to each question. Indeed, out of 35 questionnaires, only 15 were returned and two of these were incomplete. A further two contained scant information, often as little as a single sentence. Even so, the questionnaires that were returned provided me with valuable data that gave me an insight into how my participants' cultural capital was directly related to performance preferences.

3.2.5 Case study

This study deals specifically with New Variety and alt cab as a live entertainment forms and because they existed concurrently with the alt com genre, it has not been possible to discuss these forms without bringing alt com into the discussion. Thus, while New Variety and alt cab are the foci of this study, it was important to present the former as case study to provide greater focus because of new information that came to light during the early stages of this study. Willig (2008: 74) advises that a case study is not a research method in itself and that it “constitutes an approach to the study of singular entities”. Furthermore, case studies may involve a number of data collection and analysis methods, and is characterised by its focus on a unit of study: the case (Willig, 2008: 74-80). I was eager to discover what lay behind the term ‘New Variety’ as it seemed to me to represent a continuation of alternative theatre rather than Music Hall and variety theatre.

The New Variety case study is based mainly on interviews with Roland Muldoon that were conducted between 2011 and 2012. I also conducted a textual and content analysis of Muldoon’s book, *Taking On The Empire* (2013), Bill McDonnell’s journal article “Jesters To The Revolution – A History Of Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre (Cast [sic]), 1965 – 85” in *Theatre Notebook*, and materials in the Hackney Empire’s archives that are currently housed in the East London Theatre Archive at the University of East London. In terms of moving image, there are few recordings of New Variety shows save for some grainy footage on YouTube of some comedy vignettes that were recorded at the Hackney Empire. CAST’s publicity materials – posters and handbills - have been useful in terms of providing a visual and textual element that acted as a means to identify the kinds of shows one could see at the New Variety or Hackney Empire, but also because they helped to triangulate my memories with the events that took place (Willig, 2008).

3.2.6 Self-reflexivity as a method

As a participant in the alt cab movement, my role as researcher intersects with my former career as a comedian and promoter on the alt cab circuit; therefore it was necessary to critically reflect on my own position as participant-researcher (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 1-24; Watt, 2007; Tracy,

2012: 1-20). I am aware that this methodological approach can lead to questions about objectivity and whether it is possible to take a truly objective position to any research; the general view is that pure objectivity it is not possible (Wall, 2008; Ellis et al, 2011). One may argue that such an approach is also too subjective and emotional to be taken seriously as a research methodology. Each of us possesses different cultural and ideological perceptions – our social and cultural baggage -and these can impact on the work of a researcher if they are not taken into consideration (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 1-24; Holt, 2003; Ellis et al, 2011). Thus, it is not wholly possible to assume a positivist position of neutral observer-researcher if one is close to the material (Carrington, 2008). Hence the reason why as qualitative researchers we must analyse the role of the self in any study.

3.3 Self as subject

Ethnography can be described as the systematic study of a particular cultural group or phenomenon (Donley, 2012; Riemer, 2012). The cultural group and phenomenon in this case are the inhabitants of the alternative space, a community that has passed into history. Therefore, rather than study a group in situ, I could record individual stories and triangulate their memories with those of my own. If ethnography is the study of a cultural group, then autoethnography is a critical and reflexive study of the self (Chang, n.d; Duncan, 2004; Ellis et al, 2011). Autoethnography has become an increasingly common methodological tool in the social sciences (Ellis et al, 2011; Witkin, 2014). Ellis and Bochner (2011) were the first to develop autoethnography as a research method; they write “autoethnography combines characteristics of *autobiography* and *ethnography*”. Autoethnography differs from an autobiography because it dispenses with the selective memorisation of past events and seeks to analyse life’s experiences (Spry, 2001; Duncan, 2004; Ellis et al, 2011). The intention behind the autoethnography, therefore, is to produce a thick description of personal experience that can be related to theory or serve as a means to construct theory (Geertz, 1973; Ellis, et al, 2011). Autoethnography makes use of autobiographical materials as primary source data, which are critically analysed rather than accepting self-generated data as *fait accompli* (Chang, n.d; Duncan, 2004; Ellis et al, 2011). Researchers that utilise autoethnography as a method seek to involve the reader and will use a variety of literary

conventions to explore the subject matter and communicate in a way that provides a reader with an idea of author's experience (Ellis et al, 2011; Witkin, 2014). Descriptions in autoethnographies tend to be multilayered and evocative (Witkin, 2014).

Tracy (2013) claims that autoethnography can be conceptually divided into the 'evocative' and 'analytical'. The latter was developed by Anderson (2006) as a means of negotiating the emotionality of the evocative autoethnography. In this study, I have taken the position of commentator with regards to my autoethnography (Wall, 2008). In this way, I converse with the data that I have collected (Wall, 2008). The data for my autoethnography is drawn from my comedy bookings diaries, notebooks, posters, flyers and research logs, which have been useful for crosschecking against my memories (Chang, n.d.; Crang and Cook, 2007; Carrington, 2008; Wall, 2008). In terms of my own experiences, I found Ben Carrington's (2008) autoethnographical account of sport, race and performativity useful for the fact that as a black academic, he was forced to confront his own views about blackness and how, experientially, they were challenged by geographical differences within the British Afro-Caribbean diaspora. For me, the difference lay in my parentage and growing up in a military family. I attended schools for the dependents of American service personnel, so my lived experiences differed vastly from British Afro-Caribbeans who had grown up in Britain. Where our experiences intersected was on the plain of racism. My father was an African-American airman from Brooklyn (he never referred to it as 'New York City'), New York and my mother came from a working class Scottish/Ulster-Scots/Romani Liverpool family. I am what many people would call 'mixed race', though I have no love for the term because I see race as socially constructed, but more importantly, it is performed (Fanon, 1986; Haritaworn, 2009). Yet, regardless of how I saw myself I was often categorised as 'black' by many promoters and agents, whose assumption of my 'race' was based on a handful of signifiers informed by an internalised classificatory system that has its origins in scientific racism (Haritaworn, 2009). However, my American-sounding accent was also cause for confusion: why was I not more like the African-Americans on television? On the circuit, some promoters not only read me as black, they expected me to perform not just as 'black', but as a 'Black American'. This expectation of racialised performativity prompted Frantz Fanon (1986: 34) to write, "Willy-nilly, the Negro

has to wear the livery that the white man has sewed for him”. For pre-alternative entertainers of colour like Kenny Lynch and Charlie Williams, the performance of their ‘race’ was the only means by which they could inhabit the official entertainment space (Mullen, 2012). In essence, Lynch and Williams had internalised the symbolic violence exercised upon them, which they ‘wore’ as their socio-comedy statuses (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 140-173).

I experienced some degree of anxiety over how to approach my autoethnography and like Sarah Wall (2008) I was not entirely sure how to represent myself. I was clearly a participant in the alt cab movement, yet I only entered the field towards the end of the 1980s. For those participants who had been involved in alt cab from the beginning, I felt like an interloper; an outsider and my knowledge of the scene in the early days was full of gaps. I realised that my idealism would also be challenged by those who had operated in the field from its early days, for I often saw alt cab as a scene that was dominated by its opposition to Thatcherism. One aspect that I found difficult to deal with was writing about my early years as a performer. So much of this period was marked by learning to perform as a stand-up comedian rather than playing an actor that was trying to be funny onstage. Like many of those who participated in this study, I was a bricoleur and constructed my comedy routine out of my cultural capital; a mixture of my performance training, voice talent, knowledge of American stand-ups like George Carlin and science-fiction horror films of the 1950s. I had no experience or training to become a comedian, because courses for comedians did not exist in Newcastle in 1986. Another aspect that I found difficult was dealing with the painful memories of rejection because of my skin colour and the reactions from club promoters who sought to pigeonhole me or offer me useless advice. Writing about this stirred up long-buried feelings of disappointment and frustration. Yet, I had to put these feelings to one side and detach myself from my emotions and experiences and treat myself dispassionately as a subject (Chang, n.d.).

In terms of my comedy, it was fortuitous for me that the cities from whence my parents came have rich comedy traditions. Liverpool and Brooklyn¹⁶ have produced two of my favourite comedians: Woody Allen and Alexei Sayle.

¹⁶It is interesting that the self-styled “King of the One-Liners”, Henny Youngman¹⁶, emigrated from Liverpool to Brooklyn with his family in the early part of the 20th century, which somehow reinforces an idea of a transatlantic bridge of humour between these two seafaring cities that is embodied in one person.

Both of my parents had wonderful senses of humour. My dad was especially adept at sarcastic one-liners and my mum enjoyed malapropisms, puns and spoonerisms and to a certain extent I have inherited my parents' cultural capital with regards to humour and wit (Bourdieu, 2003). I left comedy in 2000 after 13 years of working on the London and provincial circuits, because I was disillusioned and disappointed by what I regarded as the narrow-mindedness of the industry's gatekeepers who saw the comedy circuit as a source of cheap talent for television, but I also found the lack of political and philosophical engagement rather worrying. I also realised that there was a glass ceiling that barred me from making any real progress as a man of mixed parentage; it was very much a young white man's world. Fanon (1966) and Hall (1997), especially, helped me make sense of the way in which difference is problematised. Yet as a person of mixed parentage, I faced problems from both sides. For some white promoters, I was not white or English enough (I did not have this problem in Scotland) and for some black audiences, I was not black enough. Here, I found the work that Naomi Zack (2010) conducted around critical mixed race studies useful, while Jin Haritaworn's (2009) work on mixed race and scopophilic gazing is useful for its insight into how privilege is used to maintain a social order on the basis of typological signification, which in turn has its origins in scientific racism and is manifested in the 'gaze'.

3.4 Secondary data

I used *Time Out (TO)* rather than *City Limits*, because the former magazine covered the entire alt cab period and was published in the years preceding alt cab and offers a researcher the means to track the changes within fringe theatre that may have led to alt cab. I found a complete collection of *TO* at University College London (UCL) Library's Special Collection. However, the task of extracting data from *TO* was daunting, given the span of the near thirteen years that this project covers. Rather than read each copy, I initially chose to read every other copy as well as each copy from the two months that preceded the opening of The Comedy Store. However when I analysed the first batch of data, I noticed that events of which I had been aware were missing from the timeline. I returned to UCL several times to read those copies that I had missed during the first viewing to fill in the gaps.

In addition to print media, I viewed a range of television programmes from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s in order to re-familiarise myself with the object of alt cab's opposition. These included *The Comedians* (Granada 1971 – 74), *The Wheeltappers and Shunters Social Club* (Granada 1974 – 79), *The Good Old Days* (BBC 1953 – 83) and situation comedies like *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC 1972 -74), *Curry and Chips* (Thames, 1969), *Mind Your Language* (London Weekend Television 1977 – 86) and *Love Thy Neighbour* (Thames Television 1972 – 76). I spent some time in the British Library Sound Archive listening to recordings from the radio like *The Cabaret Upstairs* (BBC Radio 4, 1986 - 88) and those made in the clubs like Leeds Alternative Cabaret (1988), as well as video recordings of shows that were produced by the first wave of alt comedians like *The Young Ones*, *The Comic Strip Presents...* and *Boom, Boom...Out Go the Lights*. The latter programme was television's first attempt to recuperate alt cab and tries in vain to simulate the atmosphere of a cabaret club. Only two of these programmes were ever recorded. BBC4 also screened documentaries that I found useful. These included *The Story of Variety* (2011, 2012) and *American: The Bill Hicks Story* (Harlock and Thomas, 2009). Other recorded materials (visual and audio) came primarily from private collections, the British Film Institute and The British Library Sound Archive. I found YouTube useful for clips of early performances of people like Alexei Sayle, John Hegley and The Comic Strip, but the selection on the site was somewhat limited and the quality was often poor. The British Library Sound Archive also included video and DVD recordings of *Ladies and Gentlemen, Lenny Bruce! The Godfather of Modern Stand-up* (Best Medicine Comedy, 2006) and BBC2's arts and culture programme, *The Late Show* (1990), which features a segment about the early Black Comedy scene that also includes my first television performance.

Alt com has generally been closely identified with political satire (Wilmot and Rosengard, 1989; Cook, 2001) and while this is only partly true, I found it useful to view ground-breaking programmes like *That Was The Week That Was* (BBC, 1963) and *The Frost Report* (BBC, 1965) to get a sense of how political satire was produced in the Sixties but to also try and understand how and why such programmes were rare sight on television. Indeed, as ground-breaking as they were, they did not herald the dawn of a new trend in late night satire (Ritchie, 1997; Wagg, 2004). However, their role in keeping alive a tradition of

British satire is important to this discussion because of its apparent subversion and its ancestral relationship to alt com. Yet such programmes can only arguably exist as forms of carnivalesque, produced as they are by scions of Britain's classically educated middle-class, whose social position grants them license to mock their own kind and make esoteric political references that can only be decoded by members of their class (Ritchie, 1997; Wagg, 1997; S Friedman, 2009). Moreover, the social backgrounds of those who produced and wrote these television programmes interested me, because they provided vital clues as to which social formation controls production of satire within the dominant fields of media and satirical production, and why this power was resisted by the early alternative comedians, who constructed their own satirical discourses from political activism and everyday life. Moreover, it demonstrates a form of symbolic violence that those without the same kinds of cultural capital internalise as a natural order; one in which the subaltern classes appear as lacking in the necessary qualifications to produce their own political satire.

3.5 Approaches to analysis

3.5.1 Transcription

All interviews were recorded on a digital audio recorder and transcribed using a personal computer. I played the recordings through Windows Media Player and used the buttons on my media keyboard to play and pause them.

3.5.2 Inductive Thematic Analysis

I used inductive thematic analysis (ITA) to analyse the interviews and questionnaires and to identify themes and patterns of meanings across data sets (Gray, 2004; Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2013). As an analytical tool ITA has the advantage of possessing a great degree of flexibility (Gray, 2004; Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2013). ITA is not shaped by theory but aims to "generate analysis from the bottom up" (Braun and Clarke, 2013: 175). Importantly, I was not seeking to use theory to guide me, rather, it was my intention to map changes on the alt cab circuit and apply theory to my findings. Once the interviews had been analysed, I identified the following key themes: alt cab was more countercultural in the first two waves and autodidacticism was more

commonplace. ITA thus helped me to construct my concept of *countercultural* capital.

Variety has been an often overlooked factor in discussions about the history of the period¹⁷ and punk was hardly mentioned by my participants. If anything, these findings confirmed my initial hypothesis that the alt cab movement bore a closer resemblance to post-punk than it did to punk. At this point I was able to design questionnaires to obtain specific forms of data around questions of cultural capital, individual approaches to work and their lives prior to alt cab (Denscombe, 2012). The questions were open ended and designed to ascertain the influence of punk on the participants and to identify any counter-cultural or political positioning.

3.5.3 Interpretative phenomenological analysis

In addition to ITA, I used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to analyse how my participants made sense of their world. IPA is an analytical technique that is used primarily in psychology to analyse a participant's lived experiences and how they perceive the world (Willig, 2008; Braun and Clarke, 2013). This form of analysis is drawn from Edmund Husserl's transcendental phenomenology (Larkin et al, 2006). IPA is often thought of as a 'descriptive' form of analysis because of its flexibility and accessibility (Larkin et al, 2006; Willig, 2008). The aim behind IPA is to capture the quality and texture of individual experience (Willig, 2008). The participant's stories serve as first hand testimony to events that happened decades ago. However, on its own IPA may not be adequate enough, hence the reason why I have chosen to use three different kinds of analytical techniques (Larkin et al, 2006). IPA works well with semi-structured interviews and the questions posed to the interviewees are non-directive and open-ended (Willig, 2008: 57). I have included extracts from the interview transcripts and questionnaires in the alt cab voices section of the Findings chapter (New Spaces I). Here, I engage with the material and discuss the participants' way of seeing the world. I tie this to events that occurred at the time and add my own, often related, views to the analysis.

¹⁷ Many of my participants were pleased that I was concentrating on alt cab rather than alt com, because they believed that too much had been written about comedy to the detriment of cabaret.

3.6 Ethics

I applied for and received ethical clearance from the Research Degrees Committee at the University of East London. All interviews were conducted with adult humans in accordance with UEL's regulations. Each interviewee was provided with a description of the project and asked to sign a consent form. Participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the project at any time. There were no ethical concerns and participants were more than willing to tell me their personal stories. As many of my participants were work colleagues and acquaintances, it was necessary to take these pre-existing relationships into consideration. No one was pressurised to participate, or disclose any information about themselves that they were not willing to discuss of their own volition. In this thesis, therefore, I have named my participants and quoted their words, and although I understand the need for anonymity in cases that demand it, namely those instances in which the participants are vulnerable and open to potential exploitation or where sensitive information is concerned, I felt it was unnecessary. However, it was imperative to seek clarification and I raised the issue with my director of studies and, after a discussion, we agreed that because the participants in this study were professional people, who are in the public eye and not vulnerable adults, they could be named.

There was only one instance in which I was asked to omit sensitive information from an interview transcript at the request of the participant, and I spoke to my director of studies about this and we came to an agreement to redact the transcript (the information remains on the recording). Only two participants asked how their stories would be used, and I assured them that whatever they said to me would be confidential and utilised for academic purposes only. In the event of this study being published, I am aware that it may be necessary to seek permission first. However, given the fact that most, if not all, performers want greater exposure, this may not be necessary, though there is always a risk that one may be accused of taking a participant's words out of context, or misinterpreting them. In any case, I have taken great care to use participants' words sensitively and appropriately. Most of the interviewees' quotes are in the Appendices and few appear in the main body of the text.

3.7 Limitations

The main limitation to this study was gaining access to a wider range of performers. Many of the eccentric performers and variety performers had either moved to other fields or had retired from performing, or were difficult to contact. For the most part, I contacted people whom I knew through my work on the circuit, so I had some personal connection with them. Another limitation was the availability of star performers and problems with communication. The numbers of women that I interviewed for this study were small and I had concerns about this. This is partly due to the fact that I had limited access to female participants and partly because I knew more males on the circuit than females. Those that I interviewed had promised to send me the contact details of other women performers, but these failed to materialise or occurred too late to be included in this thesis.

3.8 The road from here

The structure of this thesis is laid out in the following way: Chapter 4 is titled 'Previous Spaces' and deals with the popular entertainment forms that preceded alt cab and New Variety and asks if these can be considered as suitable models. This is followed by Chapter 5, which presents and discusses my findings and includes an examination of three geographically dispersed clubs with different aims and objectives. I also discuss variety artist and street performer, Martin Soan and his application of autodidacticism in devising performances. Alexei Sayle's 'Albanian on a building site' joke is used to illustrate the deconstructionist and avant-garde influence on alt com. I also discuss and analyse my early performances and the material that I devised. In Chapter 6 I present my case study of New Variety. The first part of this chapter discusses CAST's early years and the second part discusses New Variety as a genre. This includes a discussion on the Hackney Empire and content analysis of publicity materials. I conclude this study in Chapter 7 by recapping on my work and discussing its implications and indicating the possible avenues for future research.

4. Previous spaces

In this chapter I intend to do two things: the first is to situate alt cab and New Variety within a general history of British entertainment and secondly to ask if any of the forms that follow can be considered as suitable models. Previous writers (Lidington, 1987; Wilmut, 1989; Double, 1991; C Craig, 2000) have drawn comparisons between alt cab and the following entertainment forms, for at first glance it may be reasonable to assume that alt cab and especially New Variety can be compared to Victorian Music Hall. Similarly, Appignanesi (1984) claimed that alt cab can be viewed against the historical backdrop of continental cabarets but how true is this?

4.1 Music Hall and Variety Theatre

Victorian Music Hall was, as Kift (1996: 12) explains, “a socially disputed institution that was built from below”, and with this in mind, it is worth recalling the events that led to Music Hall’s genesis: the **Inclosure Acts** closed down seasonal fairs on common land. Performers, like the jugglers, fools and stuntmen, who had been displaced by the closure of the fairs that were held on common land, moved indoors to the pubs and inns to continue to ply their crafts. Music Hall was also the product of a confluence of extant entertainment forms: penny gaffs, ‘free and easies’, song and supper clubs (Hudd, 1976; Double, 1991; Kift, 1996), and was effectively the creation of a space for working class popular entertainment (from below) in opposition to the official cultural space (from above). This kind of entertainment was neither regulated nor licensed and its working class appeal put it on a collision course with the ruling class from the outset (Kift, 1996).

Music Hall can be read as a form of carnivalesque because it was a second world that had been established outside of the official world by the people. However, “carnival” as Andy Medhurst (2007: 68) points out, “was a time of excess, inversion, disrespect, the grotesque and the overflowing”, and although some of these features were present in the Music Halls, it is perhaps where any real similarities end. Medhurst (2007: 70) claims that music hall and carnival “come from very different places” and any attempt to conflate them is futile. However, for all that, ruling class anxieties over the carnivalesque behaviours of the subaltern classes were nothing new: these fears existed in

the pre-industrial era and the popular seasonal fairs were closed down on the basis that the peasantry would either riot or use these outdoor gatherings to foment insurrection (Kift, 1996; Vorspan, 2000). Any leisure activities outside those authorised by the authorities, like Saint Monday – the practice of taking Mondays off – were abolished, therefore the music halls functioned as a safety valve by allowing a space for the carnivalesque excesses of the people (qv. Thompson, 1967; Kift, 1996; Vorspan, 2000). Music Halls were tolerated because they could be easily monitored by the authorities. Though some halls, like Hoxton Hall, came under frequent attacks from watch committees and the police whose use of legal weaponry forced them to close, which thereby limited the space for ‘deviant’ social discourses.

Music Hall acquired its ‘seal of respectability’ in 1912 and 1919 with the Royal Command [Variety] Performances (Double, 1991; Kift, 1996). Bourdieu (1993: 50-51) claims that there are two principles of legitimacy: the first is the recognition granted by producers upon other producers, and the second principle corresponds to middle class tastes. The second form of legitimacy is bestowed by the dominant fractions of the dominant class and their consecratory institutions (Bourdieu, 1993: 51). Royal patronage, thus, can be associated with the second principle and can be likened to the ‘By Royal Appointment’ seals found on consumer goods. This allowed the hall’s proprietors to claim they possessed a superior product that appealed, not to the working class tastes but the *respectable* middle class tastes of their new audiences. Music Hall’s consecration also brought it within the juridical scope of the Lord Chamberlain’s Office, meaning that scripts had to be submitted for inspection before being performed onstage (Double, 1991). As it became increasingly legitimate, Music Hall lost its working class appeal. Its consecration as a legitimate form of entertainment meant that it was now a full part of the official entertainment world that was dominated by middle class tastes and values. Variety theatre’s impact on Music Hall forced many working class performers from of the space with many of them being displaced to the WMCs (Double, 1991, 2013). Although variety theatre seemed like a new entertainment form, it had actually been in existence since the 1880s and had operated in parallel to music hall and was decidedly middle class in its social orientation (Double, 1991, 2013).

Stylistically, there was little difference between Music Hall and variety theatre in terms of the compositions of their bills. Variety theatre's contribution to entertainment was the introduction of the comedy sketch and the revue (Double, 1991). The comic songs yielded to joke-telling which, in time, would develop into the stand-up comedy that we are familiar with today and produced household names like Max Miller, George Formby and Frank Randle (qv. Double, 1991, 1997, 2013). The variety theatres would continue until television began to drain their audiences and although television is generally regarded as the main culprit in the decline of the variety theatres, it was also used by them for its publicity value (Double, 2013: 78). Conversely, many performers believed the Entertainment Tax was primarily responsible for the decline, but this was not a new tax, it had been introduced in 1916 but was abolished in 1957 (Double, 2013: 79). However, blame for the decline of the variety theatre can be laid at the door of the managers who failed to stop the rot (Double, 2013: 79). They relied on the same tired formulae and the same routines; there were no new or refreshing ideas and this was indicative of a complacency that gripped the producers of live entertainment in the immediate post-war years. By the Sixties, the last remaining variety theatres would close thus ending an entertainment era that had lasted more than 100 years (Double, 2013).

4.2 Working men's clubs

Despite their name, WMCs were not created by working class men but were created from above through middle class benevolence (Woodroffe, 1975; Double, 1991; Cherrington, 2009). The WMC movement formally began in 1862 with Henry Solly's formation of the Clubs and Institutes Union (CIU) (Woodroffe, 1975; Double, 1991; Cherrington, 2009). Solly was a Unitarian minister whose aim for the clubs was the improvement of the working-class men by providing them with alternatives to alcoholic beverages in order to "put them on good terms with their employers" and to head off demands for higher wages and shorter working hours (Double, 1991: 127). Most, if not all, WMCs were affiliated to the CIU and were run autonomously (Double, 1991; Cherrington, 2009). The CIU provided practical management advice but, importantly, it also meant that clubs gained some measure of respectability. Indeed, the CIU and the WMCs assumed the role of guardians of "respectable working class culture" (Cherrington, 2009: 193). This reveals to us the central role played by the WMC

in terms of determining cultural policy for working class people and goes some way to explaining the clubs' aesthetic and social conservatism. Furthermore, it could be argued, that the notion of respectable working class culture was viewed through the lens of middle-class paternalism, and this is particularly noticeable in the CIU's early attitude to alcoholic drinks¹⁸.

The CIU's ban on alcoholic drink was unpopular with patrons and many early WMCs struggled to attract customers and were forced to close (Double, 1991; Cherrington, 2009). Double (1991) claims that as some of clubs failed, many others fell into the hands of working class men, who began to link them to radical politics. In clubs like these, socialist speakers like William Morris and George Bernard Shaw were invited to give lectures, and were at the forefront of social and political agitation at the end of the 19th century (Double, 1991) However, by the end of the 1890s the WMCs' political and educational activities went into decline as entertainment, which had always been popular, took a more prominent role (Double, 1991: 127). Many WMCs turned increasingly to the breweries for funding and the remaining radical clubs found it difficult to operate because they could not attract money from the drinks industry (Double, 1991: 127-128). The WMCs were also becoming professionalised with the clubs' day-to-day management being conducted by paid officers (Double, 1991: 127-129).

As WMCs became more social and increasingly professionalised, their numbers grew, and the clubs became more focused on entertainment. There was some overlap between the WMCs and the music halls with performers like Marie Lloyd and Albert Chevalier playing charity concerts (Double, 1991: 129). As the variety theatres went into decline, the WMCs gradually supplanted them and as they inevitably became more professionalised, they began to attract big names (Double, 1991: 129). The high-water mark for the WMC came in the early 1970s with the popularity of Granada's *The Comedians*, which featured many of the WMCs top comics and made household names of comics like Bernard Manning and Frank Carson. After a peak in the middle of the 1970s, the WMCs went into decline and by the 1980s, the closure/destruction of

¹⁸ The Frank Owen character in *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (Tressell, 2012) observes how the Conservative Party regards alcoholism as the root cause of poverty. The book was published posthumously in 1914.

Britain's heavy industries: coal, steel and shipbuilding had forced the closure of many more (Double, 1991: 130).

4.3 Commercial cabaret and Publand variety

Within the historic ruins of British entertainment and occupying a space between the dying variety theatres and the WMCs were the commercial cabarets and Publand variety shows. Although cabaret had existed in Britain prior to the advent of the commercial cabaret or theatre clubs, it bore no resemblance to the art cabarets of continental Europe and was often associated with nightclubs (Russell, 2013). Commercial cabarets originated in the North of England and were partly the product of the relaxation of drinking and gambling laws under Macmillan's Conservative government of the late 1950s (Russell, 2013). These establishments offered a 'touch of glamour' that was absent in the WMCs by providing high quality entertainment and, crucially, table service. Many of these clubs also had casinos attached to them, which added to the atmosphere of continental-style sophistication (Russell, 2013). Dave Russell's article 'Glimpsing La Dolce Vita; Cultural Change and Modernity in the 1960s English Cabaret Club'(2013) is the only source available that offers more than a glimpse of this neglected, yet popular, entertainment form but it only covers the 1960s. Double (1991: 47-124) refers to these venues as "variety clubs", but whatever they were called, their objective was to provide quality live entertainment for largely working class and petite bourgeois audiences (Russell, 2013: 301). Commercial cabaret clubs continued into the 1970s and the early 1980s, and during that time they changed very little (Russell, 2013: 301). Additionally, a website titled "Publand variety" includes some material from programmes for shows at the Wheatley Taverns, a large chain of pub-based variety clubs in southeast England that included Chas and Dave's pub, The New Pegasus, in Stoke Newington. Russell (2013: 301) claims that cabaret in Britain had always "been a sickly creature" and this is because of the word's association with the seediness of Soho nightclubs (Appignanesi, 1983: 2). By contrast, commercial cabarets were clean, respectable but rather middle-of-the-road (Russell, 2013: 301). These were not the kinds of spaces in which the boundaries of form and content were being challenged. Audiences came to these spaces with a fixed idea of entertainment. As a social group, the

audiences embodied a sense of practicality and utility with regards to the function of entertainment as Bourdieu (2003) observes in the case of the working class and petite bourgeois aesthetic dispositions towards works of art. Entertainment was ostensibly produced free of politics or could be seen as an escape from politics itself, since it (politics) was considered external to the club's inner space and its *ersatz* carnivalesque.

Many commercial cabaret clubs were established in former cinemas, former dancehalls or similar buildings rather than old music halls or variety theatres, which were considered too large for the purpose (Russell, 2013: 302). Even so, many of these establishments had built themselves on "the dying variety industry" (Russell, 2013: 301), which connected them to the cultural heritage of Music Hall and variety theatre. The closure of the variety theatres displaced many performers, which meant there was a ready supply of talent for the clubs (Russell, 2013). Headline acts like Shirley Bassey and Bob Monkhouse were paid four-figure sums and were expected to perform for 40 minutes, which was twice the amount of time for the same act in a working men's club (Russell, 2013). However, for all their sophistication, Russell notes that "Many venues were run by voluntary organisations, with the single largest grouping provided by the 3,800 WMCs that were affiliated to the national Club and Institute Union (CIU) by 1968" (Russell, 2013: 299). Through the CIU, the clubs and WMCs combined formed local and regional circuits, so a club like Batley Variety Club could have a headline act one night, who would then play the WMCs in the local area for a smaller fee (Double, 1991: 47-123; Russell, 2013: 305). Variety comics like Les Dawson and Frankie Howerd, for example, played WMCs and the commercial cabarets before being scouted by television executives (Double, 1991).

According to Russell (2013: 299) commercial cabarets are hard to pin down, because the clubs were "never rigidly defined" and were a "contemporary perception of size, atmosphere and the balance of facilities on offer that ultimately distinguished it from adjacent genres such as the nightclub, country club and casino". However, given the cost of entertainment, the prices were beyond the means of the poorer members of society, but "not so high as to become exclusive" and most clubs had an annual membership fee and a dress code (Russell, 2013: 303). WMCs were, by contrast, a cheaper option for those

who were unemployed or not in regular work. Moreover, there was no dress code.

If commercial cabarets had been built on the dying variety industry, then Publand variety tried to keep the variety industry alive – albeit in a much-reduced form – by contemporising it in order to appeal to younger patrons. This excerpt from the Publand Show website informs us that:

In London now there are literally hundreds of pubs which present live entertainment. Sometimes it reflects the taste of the landlord, sometimes the demands of the customers. There are pubs which feature Old Time Music Hall, trad jazz, modern jazz and beat music. Some put on two or three artists an evening, others just have a pianist at weekends. There are those which stage regular talent contests; there are those which only engage seasoned professionals. And there are those where the customers entertain each other.

(Peter Hepple, “The Best of Publand” programme quoted on the Publand Show website [7 June 1966]).

Here, the author outlines the entertainment forms that appeared beneath the rubric of Publand variety, which suggests that the term itself is nomenclatural rather bound by specifics. In this sense it appears to be a precursor to alt cab and New Variety. The use of the term “beat music” is instructive, because it was used to refer to Sixties pop bands, and demonstrates how variety theatre had sought to incorporate contemporary forms of entertainment in an effort to attract younger audiences. The same principle therefore was continued in the Publand entertainment space, thereby establishing a sense of continuity with the past. The mention of “talent competitions” reminds us that ‘new’ acts were aware of, and had to comply with, the field’s doxa if they wanted to work in the official entertainment world. Hepple (1966) continues this article by explaining how rooms attached to pubs had become a sort of reconstituted Music Hall circuit and lists a number of locations that were situated entirely in London and the Southeast. Therefore, stylistically and geographically, Publand variety existed in sharp contrast to commercial cabaret, because it was based mainly in public houses rather than in adapted

cinemas and dance halls, and also reflected the idiosyncrasies of regionalised tastes.

A prominent operator of these Publand venues was Wheatley Taverns, named after its proprietor-promoter Bob Wheatley, a former publican (Watford et al, 2005). Wheatley's chain of venues included Caesar's Palace in Dunstable, which was unusual for the fact that it was similar to the northern cabarets like Batley Variety Club rather than Publand variety (Russell, 2013: 302). Performers from the Publand shows would be invited to appear in an annual showcase of talent that was simply called 'Publand Variety', which was organised and promoted by Publand impresario, Ray Donn (Publand Variety website, 2016). These shows would take place at large venues associated with variety theatre like the London Palladium and would feature performers like comedian Michael Barrymore, impressionist Bobby Davro and music duo, Peters and Lee (Publand Variety website, 2016). I would argue that although Publand variety predated alt cab and New Variety and appears to have embodied the same variety ethic, the two were unrelated stylistically. I will discuss this in more detail in the following chapters.

4.4 Cabaret-artistique

Prima facie, alt cab seems to have more in common with the French cabaret-artistique than it does with indigenous forms of entertainment like Music Hall, variety theatre or, indeed, the seedy cabarets of Soho (Appignanesi, 1984). Cabaret-artistique appeared in Paris in the 1880s, a time of great social and political upheaval, and grew from the popular but rather sentimental café-concert (Appignanesi, 1984: 2; Houchin, 1984: 6). Cabaret-artistique was highly satirical and the performers used a mix of song, poetry, dance and characterisations and often poked fun at political figures of the day (Appignanesi, 1984: 3; Houchin, 1984: 7). In essence, the cabaret-artistique is countercultural/avant-garde because it opposed the dominant order by carving out its own physical space and because its performers used bricolage and rejected the forms that went before them. The first cabaret-artistique was Le Chat Noir in Paris, which was opened in 1881 by Left Bank artist Rodolphe Salis (Appignanesi, 1984: 2-3; Houchin, 1984: 6). Salis chose Montmartre as the location for the cabaret, not because the *quartier* was down-at-heels (which

it was) but because the rents in the Latin Quartier (Left Bank) had become too expensive in aftermath of Baron Haussmann's brutal renovation of Paris during the 1850s to the early 1870s (Fulton, 1983; Zeldin, 1973). This social cleansing of the urban space had not only forced the working classes to the fringes of the city where the rents were cheaper, but also created wide boulevards that could not be barricaded in the event of a popular insurrection (Fulton, 1983; Zeldin, 1973; Appignanesi, 1984; Houchin, 1984). Haussmann's renovation and the crushing of the Paris Commune were fresh in the memories of the cabarettists, who were sympathetic to socialism and anarchism (Case, 1948; Appignanesi, 1984). Therefore, the cabarettists were politically conscious from the very start and never shied away from making political statements or sending up political figures like royalist and nationalist, General Ernest Boulanger, who was referred to as 'Général Révanche' (Winnacker, 1938; Hutton, 1976).

Other art-cabarets followed Le Chat Noir; Le Chat Noir's *conferencier*¹⁹, Aristide Bruant, who can be seen wearing his trademark red scarf in Toulouse-Lautrec's cabaret posters, opened Le Mirliton (The Straw Pipe) in 1885 (Appignanesi, 1984; Houchin, 1984). Bruant, wanted his cabaret to be the "epitome of low life" revealing the true underbelly of not only Paris, but of France as well (Appignanesi, 1984:28). By using the term "low-life", Bruant's intention was to show life as it was lived by ordinary working people who had been exiled from their own city and consigned to its margins. Bruant made use of provocation and audience insult and he often referred to his audience as 'les cochons (the pigs)', and his songs were the basis of what would become *la chanson française*, a style of French popular music that was popularised by singers like Jacques Brel (a Belgian), Maurice Chevalier and Edith Piaf. *Chansons* celebrated the lives of those at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder; the forgotten legions of workers, living on the fringe of Paris, now cast in the role of outsiders looking in.

Cabaret-artistique inspired cabarets throughout the continent, particularly the Italian Futurist and Dada cabarets of early 20th century Europe, the cabaret of Weimar Republic Germany and the Berliner *kabaretten* (Appignanesi, 1984; Segel, 1977; Lareau, 1991; Jelavich, 1993). Futurism, Dada and Surrealism were political-aesthetic movements in the sense that these avant-garde artists

¹⁹ The English equivalent of the *conferencier* is the compère or master of ceremonies (MC).

saw their art serving a political function. These movements and those that followed them, produced manifestos that included political as well as aesthetic demands (Poggioli, 1967:180-187). Phillippo Tomaso Marinetti's Futurist cabarets effectively duplicated the German cabarets but went beyond them in their use of tension and audience abuse to create specific kinds of atmospheres (Appignanesi, 1984: 76-77). Marinetti wanted to induce surprise and encourage his audiences to participate in the cabarets. According to Appignanesi (1984:77) this could involve "spreading a powerful glue on the seats" and "selling the same ticket to 10 people", provoking riots among the audience. The Futurists' fetishisation of war and violence would ultimately prove to be their undoing (Marinetti, 1909; Tisdall and Bozzola, 1977). Many Futurists were killed or maimed in the First World War and those that survived, including Marinetti, formed The Futurist Party, which was absorbed into Mussolini's Fascist Party by the early 1920s (Rye, 1972; Tisdall and Bozzola, 1977).

Dadaists, on the other hand, wanted to create a form of art that was 'anti-art' and anti-war (Appignanesi, 1984). In this respect, the Dadaists were the opposite of the Futurists, who relished and celebrated conflict (Rye, 1972; Tisdall and Bozzola, 1977). Dada artist Hugo Ball, one of the actors behind Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, attired himself in a blue cardboard outfit and a conical cardboard hat and read out the movement's manifesto at the first Dada "soiree" in 1916 (Appignanesi, 1984: 2). Cabaret Voltaire's programme was as varied as the national origins of its performers and writers (Segel, 1977; Appignanesi, 1984). Dada cabarets made use of poetry, Bruant's chansons and balalaika orchestras (Appignanesi, 1984: 86-87). Cabaret Voltaire was forced to close in 1916 after protests from the citizens of Zurich and suspicions from the police that the cabaret was home to a nest of international spies (Appignanesi, 1984). Dada continued in Switzerland until 1919 and from there it spread to Paris and Berlin, where it had an influence on the cabarets of Weimar Germany (Lareau, 1991). Unlike Futurism, Dada aligned itself with revolutionary causes and provided the foundations for Erwin Piscator's 'epic' theatre. Piscator himself had joined the Dadaists in 1919 and created the first "living photomontage" (Appignanesi, 1984: 87), which was to foreground his future work and would eventually influence Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre and have a lasting impact on agit-prop theatre (Stourac and McCreery, 1986: 36). Piscator's photomontages

would also influence the graphic style of John Heartfield's agit-prop posters and these in turn influenced the house graphic style of my club, CAGG.

4.5 Political cabaret, agit-prop theatre and alternative theatre

Political cabaret and agit-prop theatre are seen as the precursors of alt cab and New Variety because it was through political/agit-prop theatre that many of the early alt cab artists began their careers (Wilmot, 1989; C Craig, 2000; Cook, 2001; McDonnell, 2010; Muldoon, 2013). The first political cabarets were organised in the early Soviet Union by Bolshevik groups like the Blue Blouse, which had been formed in 1923 by a revolutionary paper of the same name (Stourac and McCreery, 1986: 3-5; Mally 2003: 324-342). The aim of the Blue Blouse was didactic: their plays were designed to inform people of events or policies and possibly spur them to action (Stourac and McCreery, 1986: 3-5; Mally, 2003: 324-342). The Blue Blouse developed a format called the 'living newspaper' with the main news of the day being acted out by the performers. Mally (2003: 324-342) explains this was not an entirely new format, because British music halls and American vaudeville had used the same idea but in a less politically engaged way. What became known as the 'Blue Blouse format' was emulated throughout Europe, especially in Germany, where there was a strong left-wing (Stourac and McCreery, 1986: 130). Germany's two prominent agit-prop theatre companies that adopted the living newspaper format were "The Berlin Red Rockets" and "The Hamburg Riveters". The latter company (as the name suggests) were a group of Hamburg dockers and shipyard workers. The Riveters claimed that satire was more effective as an agit-prop weapon than straight theatre, because they believed that the workers would be worn out from a hard day's work and would be more receptive to something that was entertaining (Stourac and McCreery, 1986: 130). According to Stourac and McCreery (1986:130) the Riveters "likened their work to the workers press, which reported the most urgent current events in short, clear, crass and unequivocal references". Operating in parallel to the German left-wing cabarets were the Berliner cabarets, which combined literature, art and politics for a mainly middle-class, if progressive, audience (Segel, 1977: 41-57; Mally, 2003: 324-342). These cabarets, some literary and others highly political, attracted many Poles, Russians, Ukrainian Jews and Viennese to Berlin in the aftermath

of the war (Mally, 2003: 324-342). It was here that Piscator, Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill began their careers as theatre practitioners (Stourac and McCreery, 1986). Piscator, in particular, made effective use of the revue form and his work analysed the contemporary situation and advocated a socialist future (Appignanesi, 1984: 149; Stourac and McCreery, 1986: 130-1). He wanted his revues to be political and to engage with the proletariat, and he insisted that all theatrical elements be utilised: music, dance, song, acrobatics, statistics and film to put his message across. Yet this form of theatre practice would only find its way to Britain in the late 1960s with the work of Red Ladder Theatre Company.

British political theatre developed differently to the continental tradition and had come from a tradition of radical theatre that was first established in 1833 with the production of a Luddite melodrama called *The Factory Lad* (Stourac and McCreery, 1986: 192). Throughout the 19th century, other workers plays would be staged, often as part of an effort to raise funds for a particular cause. Southey's *Wat Tyler*, for example, was staged to raise funds for The Society for the Protection of Booksellers, a working class organisation (Stourac and McCreery, 1986: 192). Stourac and McCreery (1986) do not indicate if these play scripts were submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's Office for inspection. It is a certainty that such plays would not have been staged in patent (or legitimate) theatres, where oppositional political discourses were effectively suppressed by the **Licensing Act (1737)**.

A schism took place between "legitimate" and "variety" theatre in the early nineteenth century (Saville, 1990). Legitimate or "serious" theatre tends focus narrowly on naturalistic acting styles, emotion and hierarchies (lead, support, chorus), and is aimed at a bourgeois audience (Brecht, 1964; Suvin, 1972; S Craig, 1984). The working classes were effectively excluded from legitimate theatre because of its social conventions and their lack of a particular kind of cultural and social capital, which had been produced in the middle-class educational institutions (Bourdieu, 2003). The idea behind political theatre, therefore, was to not only disseminate political messages but create theatre for non-theatre going audiences.

Although Britain seemed insulated from continental cultural forms, it had its own Blue Blouse type agitprop troupes: the Deptford Red Blouse and the Red Front in Streatham, for example, which proved very popular with workers

(Stourac and McCreery, 1986: 194). Theatre groups like these were part of the first Workers Theatre Movement (WTM), which was allied to the CPGB (S Craig, 1980; Saville, 1990). The WTM was effectively born out of the class conflict of the mid-1920s and the General Strike in particular and had its origins in the Socialist Sunday School, Labour college and proletarian school movements, and was formed, not as a cultural organisation, but as a political wing of the CPGB (S Craig, 1980; Itzin, 1986; Stourac and McCreery, 1986; Saville, 1990). By the 1930s, the WTM had thirty affiliated workers' theatre groups (Saville, 1990; Stourac and McCreery, 1986). From its foundation, member groups of the WTM had attacked the right-wing leadership of the Labour Party as well as the bosses, but by the mid-1930s, it shifted its position and changed its cultural policy to the so-called "Popular Front strategy" (S Craig, 1980: 31). This meant that, as an organisation, it had to avoid criticising and alienating potential allies like left-wing Labour Party politicians. By the end of the 1930s, however, the WTM had been wound up and was replaced by Unity Theatre and Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop, which played a crucial role in the shaping of left and progressive theatre into the 1960s (Itzin, 1986). However, Unity Theatre continued to pursue the same course it had done in the years after the war and thus failed to appeal to younger left-leaning audiences (McDonnell, 2010; Muldoon, 2013). This situation would change with the emergence of CAST (see Chapter 6), whose formation in 1965 catalysed a new theatre movement that was politically conscious *and* willing to embrace contemporary popular culture.

Itzin (1986: iii) indicates that the **Education Act 1944** encouraged greater numbers of working class people to attend university and it was within these institutions that many alternative theatre practitioners were exposed to Marxian class analysis for the first time and began to question the condition of their class. Itzin (1986: x) argues "Everything is political. All theatre is political. But the significant British theatre of 1968 – 1978 was primarily the theatre of political change". While legitimate theatre was a site of politically disinterested spectacle, political fringe or *alternative* theatre sought to raise people's consciousness and make them aware of ongoing social issues (S Craig, 1980; Itzin, 1986; Peacock, 2007). They did this through a combination of Brechtian (1966) epic theatre and variety performance styles and rock music, and by performing in unorthodox venues like pubs, trade union clubs and St John's

Ambulance halls (S Craig, 1980; Itzin, 1986; Peacock, 2007; CAST archives, 1977-1979). The rationale for doing this was to take theatre to audiences that did not visit the theatre. Commercial theatre contains the gene of dominant social relations and tends to avoid socio-political critiques, preferring, instead, to uphold hierarchies as 'natural' or 'obvious', and manipulate the emotions of their audiences (Suvin, 1972). Above all, it seeks to make a profit. By contrast, alternative theatre companies survived on what little money they made from box office takings and performers had to take day jobs to make ends meet (CAST Archives 1977 - 1979). The repeal of the **Licensing Act (1737)** in 1968 abolished the Lord Chamberlain Office's role as theatre censor that thereby created a space for socialist discourses within subsidised theatre. The Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) responded by creating the New Activities Committee, which investigated the alternative theatre sector and within year, it was providing subsidy to small-scale theatre companies (S Craig, 1980; Kershaw, 1992; Peacock, 2007; Muldoon, 2013; Morrison, 2014). This move was opposed by the Conservative Party, which regarded it as a waste of taxpayers' money but this economic concern masked a more sinister intention, and like sport, entertainment was considered to be above politics and could serve no other purpose than to provide highly profitable diversions, and with the election of the Thatcher government in 1979, funding for socialist and other alternative theatre companies was under threat and in 1983, it had stopped altogether (Dorney and Merkin, 2010; Morrison, 2014: 183). Only those theatre companies that could show they were profitable were deemed worthy of support and even then, the nature of the funding regime was precarious, and subsidies could be withdrawn in the next round of funding. Many alternative theatre companies were forced to close and the ones that survived like Red Ladder and 7:84 moved out of London and established themselves as regional touring companies. CAST continued to produce plays until 1984, while operating New Variety in parallel (see Chapter 6). The left-wing entertainment space was destroyed through government cuts and out of the ruins, it would be reincarnated as the alternative space. The symbolic and embodied *countercultural* capital of those performers would be carried into the new space. In the next chapter I will discuss how this space was constructed and was eventually colonised by the official world.

5. New Spaces I: alternative cabaret

*"Your denial is beneath you,
and thanks to the use of hallucinogenic drugs,
I see through you."
~Bill Hicks*

5.1 Overview of the findings

Cultural change is brought about through the positioning of new agents on the field, who bring their dispositions and symbolic capital from other fields and adopt the positions that are available. This is what Bourdieu (1996: 234-5) refers to as the “space of possibles”. Robbins (2000: 22) reminds us that position-taking is relational rather than intentional and the positioning of the cabaret artists was taken in opposition to the traditional positions on the field, which was in turn influenced by the kind and amount of cultural, *countercultural* and social capital they possessed. The alt cab space was comprised of many different venues and performance styles that were usually related to the clubs themselves. How this space was constructed was contingent on the use of *countercultural* capital, which produced individual political-aesthetic dispositions and shaped the contours of the space itself. In this chapter, I make use of the performers’ stories, personal recollections and industry texts like *The British Alternative Theatre Directory* (1989, 1990) to complete the picture. To map the changes on the circuit, I have relied on *TO* because it provides a near unbroken record of the events that shaped the space and its transition from cabaret to the comedy industry that we know today

This is a restricted sub-field of cultural production and this is demonstrated my analysis of *TO*, which revealed the following: in the early years from 1979 to 1981, the space is small and without a clear identity, but it produces art that is known to only a handful of people. Alternative Cabaret (as distinct from the movement of the same name) is a dominant force outside of the Comedy Store, but it is a collective and a loosely arranged circuit of venues and by the end of 1981, it had ceased to exist, and the nascent circuit faced a total collapse. CAST presents New Variety arrived in January 1982 and filled

the vacuum, and laid down a marker for the rest of the space to follow (see Chapter 6). This can be seen in the adoption of the variety format in the clubs that opened afterwards. To emphasise this, many of the participants talked about the variety of the space and mentioned names like The Ice Man or Martin Soan as exemplars of the new kind of variety performer. Indeed, the numbers of stand-up comedians, as a distinct performance cohort, which were working within the space between 1982 and 1985, was very small. Around 85% of the performers were punk poets, street performers or musicians. Almost any performance style within the space is considered cabaret and this includes stand-up comedy, improvisation, sketches (a rarity), acapella groups, big bands, street performers, poets, performance artists and chansonniers. The Comedy Store and Newsrevue were also referred to as 'cabaret clubs'. By 1986, there is a noticeable increase in the number of comedians entering the space with the numbers of poets remaining static. More clubs begin to open in and around London, and suburban venues like Cabaret At The Square in Harlow are included in the listings. The transformation of the space was completed by late 1991 when *TO* changed the name of its Cabaret section to 'Comedy'.

Each participant I questioned regarding their influences and inspirations cited anything from rock musicians and American comedians to philosophers and critical theorists, and these are signifiers of the kind of cultural capital that produced their aesthetic dispositions. Such influences are arguably absent from the habituses of trad performers, who shunned displays of erudition and learning, all of which is evidenced by their choice of performance style and range of material. Alexei Sayle's embodied cultural capital, for example, reveals itself symbolically through the name-dropping of artists and philosophers. His habitus was shaped his family's membership of the Communist Party and its emphasis on working class self-improvement through education. For others, their *countercultural* capital is deployed symbolically through attitude, an air of authenticity or 'coolness' that comes with participation in political activism, youth subcultures and various countercultures (Revell, P Ward questionnaires). Unlike novice performers in the official world, alt performers refused to pay their respects to the old guard and, like the avant-gardist punks, mocked them instead.

Many participants describe the early space was as small and this intimacy was sometimes expressed in familial or global terms. Phil Herbert

(questionnaire) who performed as Randolph the Remarkable told me “we had a family of comics with genuine support and care for each other”, while Ivor Dembina (interview) described it as a “very small world” that was characterised by the social relations between acts, journalists and promoters. The supportive nature of the space was also highlighted by those who attended the cabaret courses to learn the art of alternative performance (Balloo interview; Appendix A1.4). Many performers described the clubs themselves as small and some like The Earth Exchange in Highgate were tiny (Dembina, Darrell, Kelly interviews; Herbert, Rawlings, Saville, Thompson questionnaires). The size of the early alternative space (1979 – 1985) also meant that it was easy to pick up gigs, because the population within it was similarly small, which in turn meant there was a shortage of acts (Boyton, Kelly interview; Smart questionnaire). During this period, performers knew that it was not possible to make a living by performing, because of the lack of gigs and worked part time, and this was a contributing factor to the space’s amateurism. Once the space became larger and more commercialised (by subscribing to the logic and demands of television), it became less close-knit and less countercultural. By 1990, many of acts began to abandon their day jobs and worked full time, but these performers had some degree of seniority over the newer entrants. Others, myself included, made use of the government’s Enterprise Allowance Scheme to support themselves and launch their careers, some more successfully than others (Gribbin interview).

In the following sections I outline the main themes within the data and present case studies of three performers. The final section includes an autoethnography of my career as a performer from 1986 to 1991.

5.1.1 Performers’ habituses

The aesthetic disposition of an individual or social group can be attributed to the amount and kind of cultural capital they possess (Bourdieu, 2003). For alt cab performers and promoters, their dispositions came from their knowledge of counter*cultural* practices, participation in political activities, artistic (or performance) training and their tastes, which can be identified by who influenced them. Participants’ tastes were shaped by their education and their

acquisition of objectified forms of cultural and *countercultural* capital. Some participants named rock musicians as influences (Saville, Wilding, Thompson questionnaires); while others cited non-comedy figures like Sigmund Freud, Bertolt Brecht, Francois Rabelais and Karl Marx (Kelly interview, 2012; Revell, Saville, Thompson, Ward questionnaires, 2013), which signifies the kind of education identified by S Friedman (2009, 2011). Bob Boyton (Facebook conversation) claimed that he was not influenced by rock and was more interested in jazz, folk and Irish music, which he says, “were a big part of left culture”, though he also admits to liking Bruce Springsteen and Tom Waits. Martin Soan (telephone conversation), on the other hand, offered Buddy Holly and Duane Eddy as influences alongside his Uncle Vic. Dave Thompson (questionnaire) offered the most eclectic range of influences:

Body functions, drugs, and artistes such as George Orwell, Jack Kerouac, Aldous Huxley, Samuel Beckett, Allen Ginsburg, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, David Bowie, Iggy Pop, and Lou Reed. And The Sex Pistols.

As if to reinforce this, Dave also admits “Most of my role models were rock stars, actors, and writers with reputations for being rebels”. Thus, Dave’s view of himself is arguably that of a rebel. His inclusion of names like Kerouac and Ginsburg suggests a particular knowledge of the beat generation and the Sixties countercultures into which they converged. His knowledge of recreational drugs and key historical countercultural figures reveals a kind of aesthetic disposition that is geared towards unusual tastes for avant-garde art and its production. The Sex Pistols, themselves avant-gardists, are offered at the last moment, almost as an afterthought and this ‘bookends’ a countercultural period that begins in the 1950s and ostensibly terminates for Dave in the late 1970s. Punk has been cited by some writers (Double, 1991; Lidington, 1987; C Craig, 2000; Cook, 2001) as having an influence on alt com/alt cab but this was disputed by some of the performers, who enjoyed the energy of punk but whose performances were not influenced by it (Darrell, W Lee, Rawlings questionnaires; Soan telephone conversation). Only Ivor Dembina (interview), Stewart Lee (interview) and Anvil Springstien (questionnaire) directly mentioned post-punk, although the former was also

dismissive of any suggestion that punk influenced alt cab. This seemed to confirm my hypothesis that alt cab was post-punk because although it contained elements of punk in its use of DIY and use of shock, it drew from a disparate palette, which included Brechtian (1966) epic theatre to the chansons of the cabaret-artistique. Much of its language comes from the rock world from which many of its loan words like 'gig' originate.

American comedians like Richard Pryor, Lenny Bruce and Bill Hicks were popular and influential with many comedians (Allen, Muldoon interviews; Clayton, Revell, Smart, Thompson questionnaires). Traditional American comedians like Bob Hope and The Marx Brothers were also mentioned by a small number (Revell, Smart, Thompson questionnaires) and this would suggest a taste for verbal and visual or 'sight' gags. Traditional American joke-tellers like Hope differed from their English counterparts in the sense that they avoided racist humour and in this sense, they were modern - even if they were considered passé or déclassé in the United States. Hope was a wisecracker; a court jester who had the ear of several Presidents and represented the show business establishment and was rather conservative (Wagg, 2004). The Marx Brothers' subversiveness came from two locations: their collective silliness and the rapier wit of Groucho, which intellectually undermined authority's serious image of itself. For those who were not comedians, their performance styles were reflected in other kinds of performers. John Cooper Clarke was cited as an influence on the early performers, particularly the poets, like Mark Hurst (questionnaire), who was also influenced by Jake Thackray and contemporary ranting poets like Attila the Stockbroker and Little Brother, while Mark Kelly (interview) was influenced by the Merseyside poets and GRIMMS. Juggler Steve Rawlings (questionnaire), on the other hand, was influenced by fellow performers Mr Adams and Mr Dandridge and American vaudevillian, George Carl. In each case we can see how performers' habituses were matched to performance styles.

Performers were divided over trad British comics and some participants like Andy Smart, Phil Herbert (questionnaires) and Ronnie Golden (interview) dismissed them as old-fashioned, while the trad comedians cited as being influential were the more unusual or 'wordy' comics like Tommy Cooper and Les Dawson (Clayton, Hurst, W Lee, Ward, Thompson, Revell, Toczek

questionnaires; Soan telephone conversation). Bob Boyton (Facebook conversation), on the other hand, said:

I was much influenced by radio comedy eg Round The Horne and Hancock on BBC TV. I'd probably also have to own up to being influenced by traditional comics, ie the guys in dinner jackets, not for their content but their form, I've always liked jokes although they were looked down upon a bit during the 80's.

(Bob Boyton, Facebook conversation, 2016)

Hancock's Half Hour (BBC) and other forms of demob comedy occupied a sort of middle ground between trad comedy and Oxbridge humour and its comedy comes from the use of language and ridiculous situations rather than joke-telling *per se*. During the 1980s alt comedians regarded jokes as old fashioned and refrained from telling them in their accepted form, and this is one way in which the space can be defined as avant-garde. However, like many comedians, Bob possessed a secret admiration for the joke-form and in his case, he appreciated the technique in their crafting. Generally, alt comedians preferred British comedians that had something to say for themselves, rather than the gag merchants of the WMCs. Irish comedian, Dave Allen was an American-style comedian in the sense that he avoided pre-packed jokes and was mentioned by comedians as an influence (Hurst, W Lee, Ward, Thompson, Revell, Toczek questionnaires). I would suggest that Allen represented a bridge between the so-called satire boom of the early Sixties and alt com in 1979. His eponymously titled show on BBC1, mocked religion and political hypocrisy, however with regards to the rest of television's comedy output, Allen was atypical, and his show was a rarity on television. Oxbridge humour, although rejected by the early alt comedians (Triesman, 1983), was represented in the form of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, Derek and Clive and the solo Peter Cook (W Lee, Revell, Thompson, Wilding questionnaires), and these tastes indicate a preference for subversive forms of humour, which in turn contributes to an individual's habitus and thus their approach to artistic production and performance style.

5.1.2 The social relations of the spaces

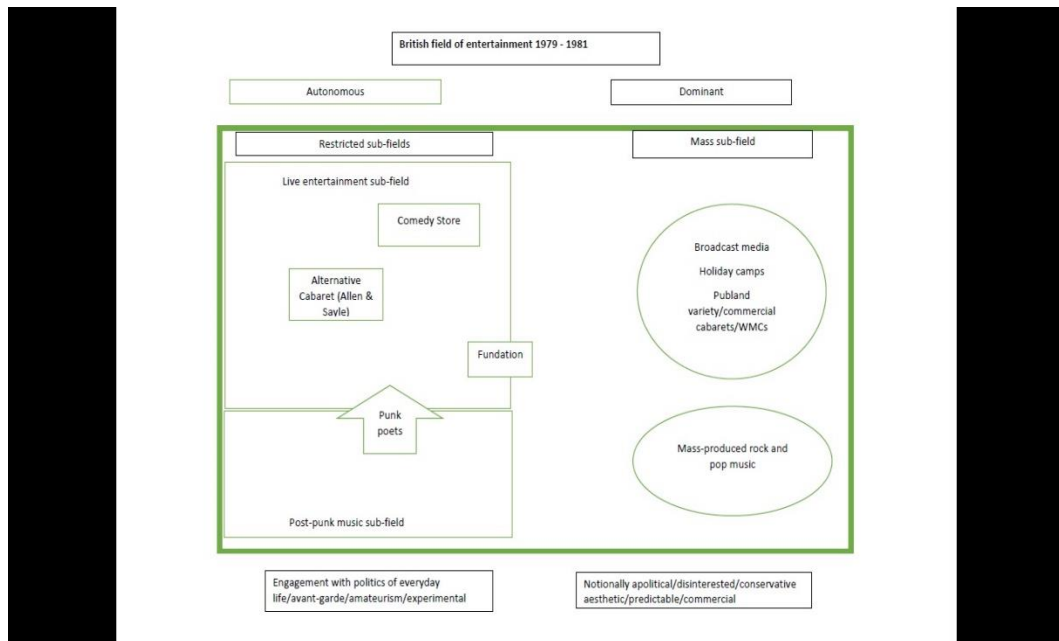


Figure 1: Entertainment fields 1979-1981

The live entertainment sub-field of restricted production (Figure 1) is small between 1979 and 1981, and the post-punk music sub-field is indicated as a neighbouring sub-field. Punk poets began their careers in the post-punk music field but by 1981, many of them had begun to move between the two spaces. Alternative and post-punk positions are taken in opposition to the corresponding positions in the official world, indicated here as the sub-field of mass production. Foundation at the Tramshed in Woolwich, which ran until around 1986 is part of the restricted sub-field but retains the conservative aesthetic of the mass sub-field, because it lacks the countercultural positioning and avant-garde tendencies of the alternative space but is ostensibly underground, and was known principally among residents of South-east London.

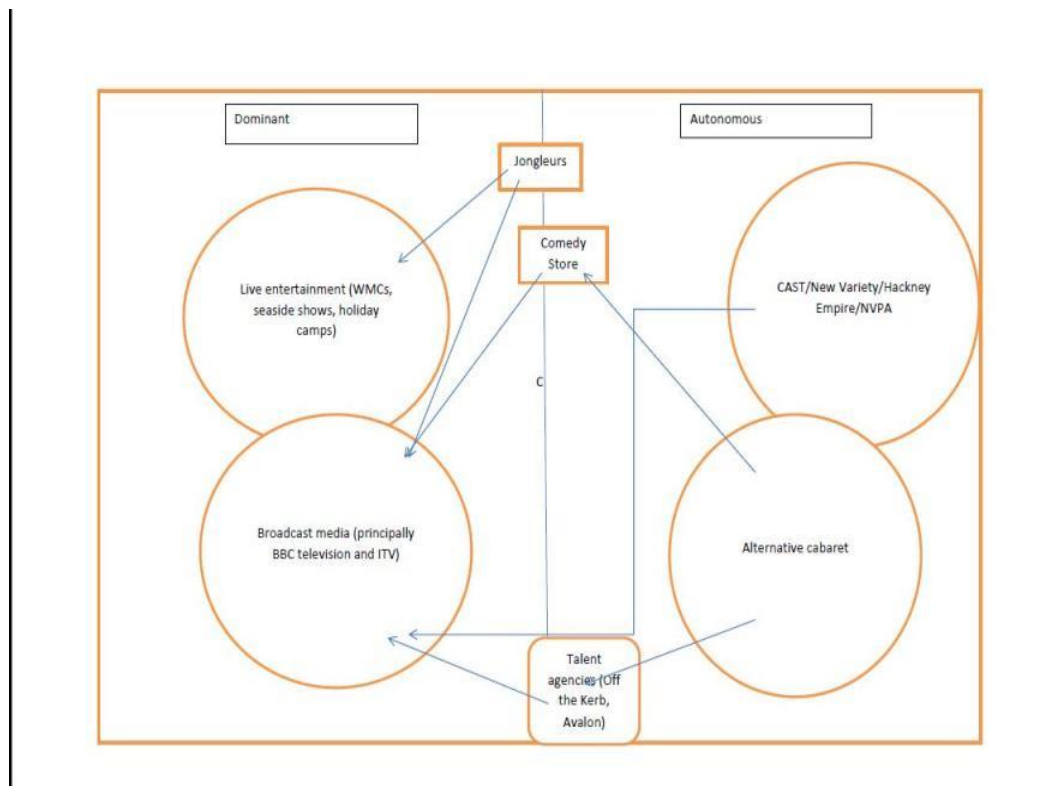


Figure 2: spatial relations of production: 1985-1991

By 1985, the social dynamics of the entertainment sub-fields or spaces illustrated in Figure 2 begin to grow and develop. The smaller spaces within them are spheres of production and the relationships with other producers are indicated by the lines and arrows. CAST is a self-contained sphere of production that incorporates New Variety, the Hackney Empire and the New Variety Performers Agency (NVPA), and has its own direct relationship with the broadcast media space in the dominant field to which it supplied a few acts. This is because NVPA was a unit within the autonomous organisation of CAST, which supplied performers directly to television, and operated according to the autonomous principles of the field. CAST and New Variety were the epitome of autonomous production, whereas the alt cab space, which contained cabaret clubs and workshops, was fragmented and relied on intermediaries to negotiate with the productive spaces of the dominant field. Moreover, perhaps, the CAST/New Variety space operated according to roughly the same rules that dominated alternative theatre: their small-scale operations were transformed

overnight into something larger, but which still held onto the same principles that guided them from beginning. The two spaces overlap because many performers perform in both spaces; though getting a gig in the CAST/New Variety space was often dependent upon possessing the correct kind of *countercultural* capital. CAST/New Variety and the Hackney Empire are discussed in more detail in the case study in Chapter 6.

Jongleurs and the Comedy Store straddle the autonomous and dominant sub- fields, and this is because these venues were specifically created as commercial ventures, which took acts from the alt space but also offered slots to mainstream performers that were slightly dangerous, and had sought from the beginning to, not just establish themselves as large-scale operations, but operated according to the logic of the dominant field of production. They are ostensibly alternative, but this is only a sign and little more, because they operate according to the rules of the dominant hierarchy. Neither venue had any space for the avant-garde (consecrated or otherwise) and in The Store's case, this was especially true after 1983 when it became purely a stand-up comedy club. It did, however, have separate nights for improvisation and topical comedy. Unlike the two alt spaces, Jongleurs and the Store only offered newcomers paid work once they had been through an unspecified number of open spots; the proviso here is that the performer needed to avoid dying onstage, which is difficult given the raucous late-night audiences that could savage even the most experienced acts. Therefore, to be accepted as a regular in either of these clubs, performers were required to adhere to the dominant hierarchical principles, which meant 'selling out' or playing the commercial game in order to become legitimate performers in the eyes of the field's consecrating authorities: the commissioning editors, large-scale promoters and so on. In other words, for as performer to succeed at either venue, they had to abandon complicated ideas and experimentalism and replace them with so-called 'dick' jokes or easy crowd-pleasing material to get recognition, or even consecration by Jongleurs' and The Store's proprietors. Indeed, this is price one must pay to achieve, not just fame, but the kind of income that goes with it. As an artist, I found it difficult to compromise my principles and consequently failed to get recognition from either establishment. In the case of The Store, performing impressions is/was seen as 'cheating' and many stand-up comedians hold this view (Gribbin interview), because one is not using clever or

witty words but their talents instead. The Store and Jongleurs, like CAST/New Variety, also operate their own talent agencies, which supply performers directly to television, the hospitality industry (holiday camps and cruise liners) and corporate events. Performers that are booked to appear at holiday camps are chosen for their mass appeal and therefore tend to be commercial rather than avant-garde. Jongleurs, especially, adheres to the principles of the dominant field while straddling the divide between the restricted sub-field and the mass sub-field. I discuss them in more detail in the next section.

Finally, the emerging talent agencies, Off The Kerb and Avalon operated as intermediaries between the alternative space and the dominant space/official world. They operated according to the rules of the dominant space, and played the game of the broadcasters. Each agency eventually established their own television and radio production arms, which now have a major presence in the related light entertainment sub-field. Avalon was and still is Oxbridge-orientated and many, if not most, of its performers are drawn from this cohort, and it was these performers, drawn from the middle class, which perhaps had the greatest influence of the space's transformation towards its end²⁰. This can be seen in what was Avalon's greatest achievement of this period: their successful promotion of the first 'arena' comedy show at the Wembley Arena in 1993 – a little over a year after the official demise of alt cab. I would argue that this event marked the true beginning of large-scale comedy operations. After this, the pace of commercialism on the circuit accelerated and created the comedy circuit that we know today.

In the next section, I chart the development and decline of the cabaret circuit using material drawn from *TO* and other periodicals together with witness testimony.

²⁰ In *The Rules of Art*, Bourdieu (2016: 17) reminds us of the close relationship between the bourgeois art producers and commercial interests, which appeal to the widest possible audience. The well-educated Oxbridge graduates who were almost invisible and/or few in number in the early alternative space, which had originally positioned itself in opposition to the Oxbridge wits, represented by *Monty Python's Flying Circus* et al, were replaced by a younger generation, who were very visible and vocal, thanks in large part to the promotional efforts of talent agency, Avalon, who secured them prime-time slots on radio and television. Thus, at best, we can regard the *Mary Whitehouse Experience* (Baddiel, Newman, Punt and Dennis) as the consecrated avant-garde, since their comedy broke with both trad comedy and the unarticulated tenets alt com: its artistic inclinations and its apparent left-wing political posturing – overstated as it was. Commercial objectives tend to be short-term and production is geared towards "pre-existing demand and in pre-existing forms" (Bourdieu, 2016: 142). In the case of the *Mary Whitehouse Experience*, its format could be milked several times to produce the same products for the same audience. Moreover, social capital; the relational networks formed at Oxford and Cambridge, such as those between Avalon, the performers and the BBC, were utilised profitably.

5.2 Spaces in transition: from alt cab to comedy industry.

Writers (Wilmot, 1989; Double, 1991; C Craig, 2000; Cook, 2001) generally agree that alt com began with the opening of The Comedy Store in May 1979, but this was a commercial venue that provided a space for new comedy ideas to flourish and if anything, it acted as a catalyst for what was to follow. Although The Store had pitched itself to television from the beginning, they provoked little more than indifference and mild amusement from the mainstream media. Alternatively, the journalists who attended the early days treated it like a freak show (Wilmot and Rosengard, 1989). Peter Rosengard (1989: 11) explains:

I had hoped that agents, TV producers and journalists would regularly come to discover new people. This didn't happen. The showbiz establishment regarded us as a threat. They didn't see any wider audience for a bunch of foul-mouthed amateurs. TV was out of the question.

Rosengard's description of the novice performers recalls punks' swearing, snarling and spitting. Here, we see how the dominant agents on the sub-field of television adopted a position of dismissiveness toward the newcomers. The raw energy of punk that had caught the music industry by surprise was not going to be replicated on television, at least, not for the moment. Television would only take an interest in alt-cab when it was deemed to have marketable value.

Before The Store found the new comedians that it was looking for, Tony Allen, who had been part of a street theatre group called Rough Theatre, found himself "sandwiched between very slick traditional club comedians or at least audience spots aspiring to be like them" (Allen, 2002: 98). Allen had met Alexei Sayle and the pair decided between them that The Store needed "a large input of radical acts" (Allen, 2002: 98). However, before The Comedy Store opened, it was preceded by the variety nights at Band on the Wall in Manchester in 1976, which featured 20th Century Coyote (Peters, 2013), CAST's one-off variety gala in April 1979 (*TO*, 476) and Tony Allen's solo stand-up show at Oval House in Kennington (Allen, 2002: 73). There was also the Foundation (later renamed The Foundation), a comedy sketch/revue show at the Tramshed in Woolwich that

had also been running since 1976. I argue that the alternative space began with Allen and Sayle's Alternative Cabaret, a performance collective that operated a loose circuit that was subordinated to alternative theatre. It appeared for the first time as Alternative Kabaret (sic) in *TO*, (Issue 490, September 1979: 29) at the Pindar of Wakefield pub on Gray's Inn Road (now called The Water Rats), which was also the venue of the long-running Aba Daba Music Hall. The use of the letter 'K' to spell the word 'cabaret' informs us that there is some knowledge of continental art cabarets on the part of the organisers, and is a possible reference to the Berlin *kabarets* of Weimar Germany (Appignanesi, 1984; Lareau, 1991). As a collective, Alternative Cabaret included *inter alia*, Pauline Melville, Jim Barclay, Andy de la Tour, and Combo Passé (a jazz band). This listing from Issue 491 reads:

Featuring Rat Krisis Kabaret and Comedy Store stars Tony Allen, Alexi (sic) Sayle, Helen Glavin, Paul Stevens and many others.

It is revealing how Allen and Sayle are referred to as "Comedy Store stars" this early into the circuit's history and this description can be read as a form of *countercultural* legitimization that has been bestowed upon the new performers by the consecrating authority of *TO*. This is the first ever listing of an alt cab show and from this point on, "Alternative Cabaret" would become the widely-used means of classifying this new entertainment genre and the movement it spawned. This listing also appears in *TO*'s Fringe Theatre section, which is an indication of the journalists' dilemma in classifying emergent cultural forms. A similar thing occurred with the appearance of the New Romantics, which coincided with the opening of the Comedy Store. The New Romantics went through a series of names before one was chosen by journalists, and the same would happen with alt cab. A month later, in *TO* (495, 1979: 31) and "Kabaret" has been Anglicised to "cabaret", perhaps in an effort to fully situate this new form of entertainment within a British cultural milieu.

In November 1979 (*TO* 498) there is a short feature about The Comedy Store titled "Quip Joint" on page 25. Stan Hey (1979: 25), the article's author, writes, "On my second visit, I join compère Alexei Sayle 'back stage'" adding, "Like many of the comedians he has a background in fringe theatre". At this juncture, the new comedy form has no name. Yet, although it is patently neither

theatre nor traditional stand-up comedy and journalists are unable to classify it, and so place it within the fringe theatre section instead. The style of the comedians themselves was assembled from the bricolage of their cultural capital: Lenny Bruce's stand-up style, jazz phraseology, street argot, physicality, politics and fragments from everyday life were held together by the personalities of the performers. By contrast, we knew nothing of the trad comedians' inner worlds: they told a stream of pre-packaged jokes that offered little insight into their personalities. Thus alt-cab is post-punk in its use of bricolage and political theory and at this stage, it can be favourably compared to the work of Gang of Four, for example, who used Situationist and Marxist theory in their songs, and whose sonic style was formed from funk, punk and dub reggae. Sayle admits:

It's given a lot of us who are committed to fringe theatre a chance to get together and work on new styles of comedy. We've formed a sort of loose collective called 'Alternative Cabaret' – lousy name I know – but we've started going around pubs trying to do something different from the old racist shit and such. I don't think any of us are under the illusion that we'll make the big time.

(Sayle quoted in Hey, 1979: 25)

In the last sentence, Sayle clearly recognised that what he and his fellow performers were involved in was an underground scene, because none of them expected to make a living by performing. On the field of entertainment, Sayle and his fellow performers consciously take a relational position against the “racist shit” of the light entertainment industry.

The Store suffered an early blow in October 1980 when many of its leading names (20th Century Coyote, The Outer Limits, French and Saunders, Arnold Brown and Alexei Sayle) defected for The Comic Strip (Ritchie, 1997; Cook, 2001). Around this time, the relationship between Ward and Rosengard had reached breaking point and it looked for a time as though The Store would close after only a year in business. According to Cook (2001: 75) Rosengard's relationship with the performers was also strained and this was part of the reason for the formation of the Comic Strip. Another reason cited for this exodus was the hostile atmosphere at The Store which Sayle likened to “a circus” (Cook, 2001: 76). The Store's artistic director, Kim Kinnie admitted, “They felt

they were being exploited. We were using them as fodder, which is why the rest of them moved away, because they wanted to progress with their comedy, to be allowed to develop” (Cook, 2001: 76). Ward eventually bought Rosengard out of the business and the latter established his own short-lived club called The Last Laugh on Baker Street before returning to his former occupation as a life insurance salesman (Wilmot, 1989).

The Comic Strip was located at the Boulevard Theatre, which like The Store, was in an upstairs room of a popular strip club, The Raymond Revue Bar. *TO* (548) described The Comic Strip as:

A new cabaret featuring a selection from Alexei Sayle, Pamela Stephenson, The Outer Limits, Twentieth Century Coyote, John Dowie, Furious Pig, Arnold Brown and others too.

(Time Out [548], October 1980: 30)

This listing belies the popular notion that The Comic Strip only featured a small group of people that gathered around Peter Richardson and Pete Richens, who were clearly The Comic Strip's nucleus. It is also interesting to see John Dowie, who by now was considered a comedy veteran, included on the bill. Another interesting inclusion is the acapella post-punk band, Furious Pig, which highlights a subcultural bond between alt-cab and the post-punk music scene. On the same page, there is a caption review of the show with a black and white photograph of Alexei Sayle in mid-skank. His porkpie hat is pulled over his eyes and he is wearing dark sta-prest trousers that do not match his tight-fitting two-tone jacket. Unusually, rather than wearing Dr Marten's boots, he is wearing a pair of tasselled loafers, a favourite with skins, two-tone kids and 'soul boys'. Nicholls (*Time Out* 548, 1980: 30) advises us to “catch his Bertolt Brecht and Two-Tone poet acts”.

Two issues of *TO* (550) later and The Comic Strip is being billed as “London's newest anarchic cabaret” (1980: 28). The word “cabaret” is used rather than “comedy club”. Indeed, the phrase ‘alternative comedy’ is absent from the pages of *TO*. The following week in issue 551, The Comic Strip is described as “As fine a breeding ground for thinking person's comedy as anything since the Establishment Club” (Nicholls, *Time Out* [551] 1980:27). Here we find the press not only selling The Comic Strip as a direct descendant

of The Establishment Club, but also seeking to connect it to a rather middle-class audience, whose habituses possess the required level of cultural capital to decode any references contained within the comedy. The Comic Strip's stay at The Boulevard would be a relatively short one, after which they transferred to the new television station, Channel 4 in October 1982 – two years after they formed. *The Comic Strip Presents...* (Channel 4, 1982) was the channel's debut programme and ushered in a new era of minority interest broadcasting. In the same month *The Young Ones*, starring Mayall, Edmondson, Planer and Sayle would begin airing on BBC 2. The Comic Strip adopted a position on the alternative sub-field that made it attractive to agents of the television comedy sub-field. The Comic Strip was more of a revue than a comedy club and it placed more emphasis on tight scripting and in this sense it was 'readymade' for television. However, The Comic Strip was the exception rather than the rule. One noticeable effect of the Comic Strip's television success is the vacuum it left behind, which meant that the embryonic circuit was in danger of collapsing only two years after it had begun. Some participants (Boyton, Dembina, Gribbin, Kelly interviews) indicated that there was a shortage of acts as a result of the Comic Strip's departure and this made it easier for newcomers to get work. This near cataclysmic event led to the creation of informal cabaret workshops to produce new performers (see Appendix A1.4).

By April 1982, (*Time Out*, 606, 1982) a recognisable alternative space is beginning to develop. The cabaret clubs that I have teased out of the Fringe Theatre section are as follows:

The Crown and Castle, Dalston: The Flying Pickets, Silly Boy Lemon Jazz

Earth Exchange Cabaret, Highgate: Randolph the Remarkable, Peter Weir, Headless Wonder Theatre

Gate Theatre, Notting Hill Gate: The Wow Show with Lee Cornes, Steve Frost, Mark Arden and Mark Elliot

Karno's Kabaret, Black Horse pub, Catford: Flying Pickets, John Holt, DIY Cabaret, MC Nick Edmett

CAST presents New Variety at the Old White Horse, Brixton: Roland Muldoon + Mr Clean, The Flying Pickets, Chip Shop Show, Felix and the Cats, Little Brother.

Last Laugh at the Barracuda Club, Baker Street: The Three Courgettes, Brian Bailey, Helen Lederer.

(*Time Out*, 606, 1982: 69)

Only a small number of the acts listed here are stand-up comedians. Helen Lederer and Peter Weir (sometimes spelled 'Wear') are the only stand-ups on these bills and it is not clear if the "John Holt" listed here is a comic or the popular lover's rock²¹ singer of the same name. Roland Muldoon, who performed stand-up comedy, is a compère, actor and impresario. Lee Cornes is normally a compère, while Steve Frost and Mark Arden were collectively known as "The Oblivion Boys", and were an improvising double act. The rest of the acts are comprised of acapella groups, poets, musicians and speciality acts. What is also noticeable is the number of acts on these bills who were actors or performers with left-wing theatre companies. The Flying Pickets, for example, were formed by former members of 7:84 Theatre Company (Wilmot, 1989). The Three Courgettes were a cabaret vocal group formed by Barb Jungr, Michael Parker and Jerry Kreeger. Jungr and Parker would later form their eponymous musical partnership and played the cabaret circuit as a double act. Felix and the Cats is a swing band and acts like these usually closed CAST/New Variety shows. Karno's Kabaret made a conscious association with the past by taking its name from music hall comedian and theatre impresario, Fred Karno (real name Fred Westcott), who invented the 'custard-pie-in-the-face' routine. Karno also lent his name to the song *We are Fred Karno's Army* which was sung (to the tune of *The Church's One Foundation*) by British soldiers during World War One (Littlewood, 2000). Again, the word 'cabaret' is spelt with a 'K' and is redolent of Weimar *kabaretten*. What these bills also tell us is that the audiences who attended these shows did not go expecting an evening of stand-up comedy; these were variety shows – perhaps a new form of music hall, which was rooted in avant-garde art and fringe theatre. Other clubs would open at various points during the year, one of which was The Figment at the Finborough in Earl's Court, which opened towards the end of 1982 (Wilmot, 1989: 79). This is the home of the Finborough Theatre Club, which has an

²¹ Lovers rock was a popular form of reggae that had its origins in a form of reggae called 'rocksteady' that represented a break with the more politically conscious forms of reggae from artistes like Bob Marley and the Wailers, Peter Tosh and Steel Pulse as well as the dub reggae of DJs like U Roy and Mikey Dread. As its name suggests, lovers rock was romantic in its lyrical content and sonically smooth. Popular lovers rock singers included Carroll Thompson, Janet Kay, Sugar Minott and Freddie McGregor.

upstairs room in the pub of the same name (McGillivray, 1991: 151). Like the Earth Exchange it is a modestly-sized venue, seating an audience of 60, though the facilities were rather more professional. Each of these clubs, along with CAST's New Variety circuit would last well into the next wave and beyond.

In December 1982, The Comedy Store closed when the lease expired at the Gargoyle Club (Wilmot, 1989; Cook, 2001). This marks the end of the first wave of alt-com/alt-cab. The first wave was a period of experimentation with the entertainment format as much as it was with the comedy itself. Everything, including stand-up comedy, is referred to as 'cabaret'. Even the Comedy Store, which self-consciously markets itself as a comedy club, is drawn into the orbit of this new kind of variety entertainment, for The Store at this stage also featured performers who were variety performers. This is because the kinds of comedians Rosengard fetishised did not exist and the comedians had to construct themselves from the bricolage of their social, cultural and political experiences. The Store's listing in a previous issue of *TO* (617) is revealing and tells us that it is an "Alternative cabaret with eight comedians each night" (1982: 76). The policy of having variety performers on The Store's stage would also be brought to an end, because when it reopened the following year, it would begin to phase out the unusual and eccentric acts.

Taking advantage of the Comedy Store's forced closure, talent agent, Maria Kempinska and businessman, John Davy, opened Jongleurs at the Cornet in February 1983 in a former roller-skating rink above the Cornet pub adjacent to Lavender Hill in Battersea, South London. Jongleurs would become the Store's first serious rival, competing on the circuit for the status of flagship club. The choice of the name 'Jongleurs' is significant because it is French for 'jugglers' and implies a circus or perhaps carnival atmosphere and is thus in keeping with the rest of the circuit but only at the level of the sign.

By 1984, the *TO* Cabaret section barely covers a half a page and lists little more than a dozen regular shows, most of which are part of CAST's New Variety circuit. There is an intriguing advertisement in issue 729 for "Time Out presents The Comedy Tapes recorded at Jongleurs, which features, Jenny Eclair (who is a poet at this stage), Fiasco Job Job (Arthur Smith and Phil Nice), John Sparks, Rory Bremner, Calypso Beat (later renamed Calypso Twins) and Dusty and Dick (Harry Enfield and Bryan Elsley)" (1984: 37). The same issue carries a listing for the "Off the Kerb Roadshow with John Hegley, Roy

Hutchins, Podomovsky, Eric the Roadie + Brian Bailey” (1984: 37) Although it looks as though five acts are appearing on this bill, Podomovsky and Eric the Roadie are played by Andrew Bailey, a former street performer and popular comic, who was also a member of The Dialtones with Ronnie Golden and Mac McDonald (Wilmot, 1989). At this juncture, Off the Kerb²² is an emerging artistes’ management agency that was founded by Addison Cresswell²³ in 1981. Cresswell first represented John Hegley when he was working as an events officer at Brighton Polytechnic and gradually signed other acts like Bailey, Skint Video, Mark Steel and Jeremy Hardy. Off the Kerb’s biggest acts are currently Jonathan Ross and Michael McIntyre (BBC website, 2015).

Saturday Live started its first run on Channel Four in January 1985, with Lenny Henry as host. The launch of *Saturday Live* would prompt repositionings on the circuit, which Cook (2001) suggests led to the politically-orientated comedy of Ben Elton *et al* being semi-legitimated by television light entertainment. Political stand-up comedy was thus objectified and became the new mainstream, and on television it was reduced to little more than a spectacle. Here, contained in the television studios, alt com could do little more than to conform and occasionally shake its collective fist at the bullying government. However, it would be unfair to suggest that *Saturday Live* was solely involved in the commercialisation and eventual commodification of alt com as a standalone genre. Tensions from within and outside the space also contributed to its eventual commodification. The Comedy Store and Jongleurs had a pull effect, while Vic Reeves’ Big Night Out in New Cross produced a highly commercial product that positioned itself as an eventual replacement for alt com. Moreover, Reeves eschewed politics or any mention of everyday life and was readymade for television.

In February 1985 (755), the Cabaret section now covers two half pages spread over two pages and includes a half page of advertisements. More clubs are starting to open in outer London, one of which is Simon Palmer’s Rub A Dub Club at the Greyhound pub in Sydenham. The bill for this show is small and only features two acts: Attila the Stockbroker and Jim Barclay. Elsewhere there is a Miners’ Benefit concert listed at Stoke Newington Town Hall, which

²² OTK is best known for its massive comedy tours and comedy game shows.

²³ Addison Cresswell died in January 2014.

includes Bronski Beat and Benjamin Zephaniah. The Foundation continues to play at the Tramshed in Woolwich and this time lists folk singer and comic, Richard Dignance and Hale and Pace on the bill (1985: 31). The Earth Exchange Cabaret celebrates its fifth anniversary with a special line-up of acts that includes Skint Video, who appear in the caption review. Of this club, cabaret reviewer Peter Nichols writes:

Of all the stages to strut and fret an hour upon, none is smaller than *The Earth Exchange*. The auditorium is a living room, centre stage the hearth.
(Nichols, *Time Out*, 1985: 31)

Perhaps more than others, The Earth Exchange represented the bricolage character of the space, because it was not a traditional venue nor was it a room above a pub; it was a tiny vegetarian cafe that attracted a rather sensitive audience (Gribbin, Darrell interviews). February also sees a few shows in support of the Greater London Council (GLC), which was being threatened with abolition in the government's Local Government Bill. The shows are called "GLC Giro Shows", presumably on account of the cheap entry price of £, and tour each of London's 32 boroughs, which take place at local town halls. Issue 756 (February 1985: 32) lists two of these benefits and what is interesting about these shows is the range of entertainment on offer. The show at Hornsey Town Hall on 15 February has a bill that comprises Northern soul superstar, Geno Washington as the headline act, with Dave Kelly, Lioness Chant, Port Stanley Amateur Dramatic Society and "rasta comic", Kevin Seisay making up the rest of the bill. The show for the following evening at Crayford Town Hall offers poets, Benjamin Zephaniah and Anne Ziety (not to be confused with Annie Anxiety) with comic, Kevin Seisay (sic) and 'indie' bands, Eyeless in Gaza and Microdisney (1985: 32). The inclusion of indie bands reinforces the connection between music, poetry and comedy, and underlines the youth-cultural nature of the space.

By March (759), there is evidence of marked growth in the number of clubs on the circuit. There are 21 shows on Friday night and 16 on Saturday. The bills list very few performers who can be described as stand-up comedians and the roster of acts tends to consist of poets, bands and speciality acts. The

Jongleurs listing in the same issue makes a point of mentioning the fact that comedy double act, Punt and Dennis, are “ex-Footlights” (1985: 32), they are supported by another double act, The Flaming Hamsters (Sara Crowe and Ann Bryson) who later appeared as the faces of the Philadelphia Cheese advertisements in the 1990s. This reinforces Mark Kelly’s (interview) view that Jongleurs appeals to a Radio 4 listening middle-class audience. The club’s location is also significant: during the 1980s, Battersea was undergoing rapid gentrification with its working-class residents in the north of the borough being displaced by a combination of homes being sold cheaply to private developers, Right to Buy and Wandsworth Council’s alleged gerrymandering – the so-called ‘homes for votes’ scandal (Hadfield and Dixon, 1994). Wilmot (1989: 119) notes that Jongleurs tended to market itself to a “relatively well-off audience”. Cook (2001: 84) goes further by adding, “To many comics, this Battersea club soon became synonymous with those twenty-something Thatcherites called Yuppies”. Jongleurs deliberately positioned itself as a commercial player and thus represented a shift away from the anarchic cabarets of the early years. Jongleurs established itself as something slicker, professional and, more importantly, legitimate in relation to the amateurism of the rest of the circuit and in this sense, one can see that Jongleurs, like The Store, stands apart from the rest of the circuit because of its relational positioning on the field.

Issue 761 lists another “GLC Giro Show” at Brent Town Hall on 23 March with a bill that comprises George Melly and John Chilton’s Feetwarmers, jazz ‘hooper’ Will Gaines and poets, Little Brother, Pat Condell and Don Carroll (1985: 31). This listing reveals a noticeable absence of stand-up comedians, yet it continues to remind us of the popularity of punk poets and how predominant they were from 1982 to 1987. Indeed, television had yet to make a successful attempt to capture the essence of a night at a cabaret club. This would happen in the following year as *Saturday Live*’s popularity grew. Once that happened, the stand-up comedians on the circuit would be commodified; a process that would lead to the space’s eventual transformation into a stand-up comedy circuit and the decline of alt cab as a live entertainment movement.

In April 1985, *TO*’s Cabaret section expands to cover two full pages (issue 762) and the numbers of stand-up comedians remains small. The largest performance cohort continues to be made up of poets and street performers. The Foundation has also expanded to two nights (1985: 36). Also listed is Open

Heart Cabaret at the George IV in Chiswick (now the home to Headliners).

Open Heart is one of the more unusual gigs because it features mainly performance artists and some of the circuit's eccentrics. The bill for this evening is not entirely eccentric and features Johnny Immaterial, Gideon Vein (Tony Green), Owen Brennan, Port Stanley Amateur Dramatic Society and the intriguingly named Jockeys of Norfolk (762, 1985: 36). The Bon Marche in Brixton, a former department store that was part of the John Lewis chain, is also listed but tends to feature street and new circus performers and does not seem to have a name. Up the road on Brixton Hill was Room 16 at the George IV pub, run by Stompy and Flat Hat (Wilding, 2013). These latter two clubs remind us of the popularity of the New Circus field, which often overlapped with the street entertainers field and formed a sizeable performance contingent. However, many of these performers, especially those who required high ceilings, could only perform in spaces where there was enough room. Smaller clubs could not, for example, accommodate high wire acts or jugglers. Steve Rawlings (questionnaire) enjoyed playing clubs like Jongleurs and Banana Cabaret because both clubs had enough space and, moreover, high ceilings.

TO issue 797 carries a feature on the launch of Red Wedge (November 1985: 7) a cultural venture organised by members and sympathisers of the Labour Party and led by Billy Bragg, which aimed to encourage young people to vote for the party in the forthcoming 1987 General Election. At this stage it only includes musicians and bands like Paul Weller and Bragg himself, as well as other musicians. Comedians and *poets* would be added towards the final stages of the campaign. Its name comes from a poster (Figure 2) by Russian constructivist artist El Lissitzky.



Figure 3: 'Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge'

Despite its name, Red Wedge was neither communist nor officially part of the Labour Party. Its aim was to attract young voters to support the Kinnock-led Labour Party in the 1987 General Election, therefore it cannot be considered necessarily *countercultural*. Those who participated in Red Wedge were happy to do so in the hope that their efforts would bring about a Labour government. After Thatcher's third victory, it became clear that even efforts like Red Wedge were not going to succeed on their own and Labour, for its part, did not make further use of culture after their General Election defeat, and this underlines both the party's opportunism and its lack of proper engagement with culture.

In 1986, the popular comedy programme, *Saturday Live* was airing for its second year, and began to shine a light into the alternative space. Consequently, its success led to an exponential increase in the numbers of stand-up comedians arriving on the circuit. More clubs opened, and the alt cab circuit became less of a place of innovation and experimentation and began to resemble a commercial comedy circuit – but only in London and parts of the Midlands. Northern England, however, remained the last bastion of alt cab until the early 1990s. In spite of its success, *Saturday Live* was cancelled in April 1987, only to reappear a year later as the short-lived *Friday Night Live*. The programme's cancellation would create a vacuum that would be filled by shows like *Cabaret at the Jongleurs* (1988) on BBC2 and *Paramount City* on BBC1 (1990 to 1992). *Saturday Live*, this time hosted by Lee Hurst, was briefly revived by ITV in 1996 but only lasted for six episodes before being cancelled.

Moving forward to 1988, *TO's* Cabaret listings reveal an exponential increase in the number of stand-up comedians. Street performers, poets and

eccentrics continue to operate in the space but their numbers are shrinking. At this juncture, *TO*'s Cabaret section covers most of two pages but it is evident that there has been a huge growth in the number of clubs. If we take Friday 15 January (*TO* 908, 1988, 41-42) as a snapshot, we can see 19 venues are listed, two of which are New Variety shows, one is an improv show at the Tricycle Theatre in Kilburn, and another is the topical weekly Newsrevue at the Canal Cafe. Also listed is a benefit show for the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom that features the "Spare Tyre Theatre Group, acapella (sic) performer Edwina Samson and guitarist Kate Portal" (1988: 41), while feminist comedy troupe Sensible Footwear perform their own show at Jackson's Lane Arts Centre in Highgate. Circuit veterans are beginning to perform extended sets of 30 to 40 minutes and in some cases, package tours are being organised with two or three comedians. This listing from Black Cat Cabaret is typical:

Bob Boyton and Dreenagh Darrell who join forces in 'Acts of Gross Indecency' and 'lively' comedian Simon Bligh. Piers (Gledhill) compères.
('Cabaret' listings, *Time Out*, 1988: 41)

Yet in spite of the continuing shift from variety to stand-up comedy, the word 'cabaret' continued to be used not just at the Black Cat but also at The George and Dragon Cabaret near Angel tube station (1988: 41). Some clubs, like Ealing Comedy consciously described themselves as comedy clubs and feature only stand-up comedians or comedy double acts.

The creeping commercialisation of the space (in London at least) brought with it audiences and performers that had no recollection of the struggles of the previous decades. In issue 908 (January 1988) Jerry (spelled in *TO* as 'Gerry') Sadowitz appears on the front cover strangling a *Spitting Image* puppet of Robin Day. Sadowitz also has his own regular column on page 25 in which he attacks Lenny Henry and Ruby Wax but he reserves much of his bile for TV presenter, Muriel Gray. Sadowitz, an accomplished magician as well as a comedian, has had a remarkably rapid rise to fame/infamy. According to Wilmut (1989) he first performed at The Store in 1984. On pages 18 to 23, there is a massive feature on the circuit's burgeoning stand-up cohort, while on page 19, Tony Allen rails against the alternative label:

I hate that posy word – alternative – a load of rancid oral bolshevik (sic) wank to define the difference between Bernard Manning and the bunch of right-on middle class tossers drivelling about their peculiar sex habits, unpleasant bodily functions, their latest trip to the supermarket and other thrilling bullshit like that.

(Tony Allen, quoted in *Time Out*, 1989:19)

Allen identifies how the circuit has become dominated by male stand-ups whose range of topics is limited to banal observations and their perversions. Yet for his complaints, he helped introduced the word ‘alternative’ into common parlance. On the same page, Bob Boyton notes the difficulty of doing challenging material, especially regarding homophobia. “You meet with some increasingly threatening attitudes”, he observes (*Time Out*, 1988: 19). The backlash against ‘political correctness’ was, at this point, well underway and the Conservative-supporting press was publishing a stream of apocryphal stories about ‘political correctness gone mad’ on a near-daily basis.

Hay (1988:19) also comments on the increase in the number of women comics and observes:

There are those like the loud-mouthed Dreenagh Darrell [...] who act like they have more balls than Alexei himself. There are others (Hattie Hayridge, *The Sea Monster* (Jo Brand)) who base their acts on self-deprecation and playing the role of the victim.

(Malcolm Hay, *Time Out*, 1988: 19)

Even the apparently enlightened Hay viewed women comedians through the lens of patriarchy, though there is a serious point here: many of the circuit’s female performers either resorted to self-deprecation or played to expectations (often with a twist), but if a woman resisted gender performativity it was seen as deviant. To adapt Fanon (1966) a woman must be a woman but only *in relation* to a man and if she militates against this, she will be seen not only as deviant but as a sexual aberration. If the circuit was a tough place for women, it was even tougher for and, indeed, harder to find any black performers on the circuit, let alone black or Asian audience members. Maria Kempinska of *Jongleurs* claimed:

We rarely get blacks in the audience – there are some but most of them don't go to any venue. I've asked why, and they're just not interested; they're out doing their own thing – nor do they want whites to go to their things either... they've got their own brand of humour anyway.

(Maria Kempinska, quoted in Wilmut, 1989: 274)

'They're not like us' is the implication, but there is also the suggestion that blacks are a homogeneous cultural group with a monolithic sense of humour. Yet many black people watched the same comedy programmes as whites and although there were few blacks on television, those that were visible in the medium tended to play to white expectations of how blacks should behave. This is an evident projection of a constructed form of blackness onto blacks, who are already marginalised by the dominant culture and who were also being marginalised in the clubs. Hay (1988: 20) notes that Felix (Dexter)²⁴ is "Currently the only black male stand-up performing the London circuit". Tellingly, Felix remarks:

Even 'alternative' audiences can be racist and heterosexist. One recent heckle went "Did you come over here on an oil slick"? Alternative comedy is very much a white middle class world.

(Felix Dexter, quoted in *Time Out*, 1988)

Yet any mention of these kinds of attitudes towards black performers could be waved away by some white promoters, who viewed the circuit through rose-tinted spectacles of their social liberalism. It could be argued that, for some punters and promoters, the idea of a black man performing stand-up that did not conform to post-colonial expectations could be seen in a similar light to women that refused to the performativity strait-jacket. There are features on other comedians too: Nick Revell, Kevin Day, Norman Lovett, Mark Miwurdz, Ronnie Golden, Claire Dowie and Mark Thomas are included.

In *TO*, 974 (April 1989), there is an increase in the numbers of solo (or one-man) shows to the delight of Malcolm Hay. Mark Thomas performs at the new Meccano Club, which has moved up the road from The Camden Head to The Market Tavern, Islington. Bob Boyton appears solo at Bunjie's Wine Bar, home to Mousetrap Cabaret. Hay reacts enthusiastically to the latter show by

²⁴ Felix died as I was drafting this chapter.

remarking, “Boyton’s full-length show is a welcome event – when cries of blandness are filling the air” (1989: 63). The small-scale production that had dominated the alternative space for so many years, was gradually being colonised by commercial forces. By contrast, the Northern circuit was still like the London circuits in the early years, which was dominated by small-scale operations, and there was still a great deal of experimentation in the North, meaning that it continued to occupy the avant-garde/bohemian end of the sub-field of cultural production (Bourdieu, 2016: 124). In the same issue, The Mean Fiddler presents “The Last Laugh” with Suggs of ska band, Madness, as MC. This can be read as a blatant attempt on the part of The Mean Fiddler to cash in on what is fast becoming called as a ‘comedy boom’ by the media. The Mean Fiddler, owned by Vince Power, began as a live music venue of the same name in Harlesden in 1982 and was part of a growing live music empire that later included the Reading and Leeds Festivals. Power’s empire would become embroiled in a bitter ‘poster wars’ with CAST/New Variety/The Hackney Empire (Muldoon, 2013). I discuss this in more detail in the next chapter.

Jerry Sadowitz appears again in *TO* (974, 1989) and has many people talking about his solo shows. Sadowitz militated against what was generally perceived as ‘political correctness’ and thus divides audiences; some even walk out of his show. There is a small half-page advert on page 66 for his forthcoming show at the Bloomsbury Theatre. Ivor Dembina (interview) remarks on the moment when Sadowitz emerged onto the circuit, which was now beginning to look very different from its countercultural past.

[...] it got to the point where there was a kind of a thought police around.... no one knew who they were but watch what you say [...]and it did actually hold comedy back - thinking about it now. And this got completely blown to smithereens by Jerry (sic) Sadowitz.

(Ivor Dembina, interview)

This view is supported by Mark Hurst (questionnaire), “the over-policing of language eventually became a piss off for some young comics coming onto the scene. Then Gerry Sadowitz arrived and broke all the rules”. Rather than watch committees being responsible for censorship, it was the audiences, the promoters and the acts themselves that would police the circuit for ideologically

unsound language and reactionary ideas (Hurst questionnaire; James interview). It would seem that there was no middle ground and no room for all styles of stand-up and instead of making accommodations, the circuit swung violently from one extreme to the other. The joke for which Sadowitz became known attacked the iconography of Nelson Mandela as well as the pious hostage, Terry Waite, who had been held captive in Lebanon, while ostensibly on a peace mission on behalf of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Nelson Mandela – what a cunt! Terry Waite – fucking bastard! I don't know, you lend some people a fiver, you never see them again. I'm the sort of person, if you lent me a fiver and never saw me again, it would be worth it.

(Jerry Sadowitz, quoted in Wilmut, 1989: 232)

Sadowitz's arrival seemingly allowed the comedy cohort within the space to breathe a sort of collective sigh of relief. The word 'cunt' could now theoretically be used onstage without any risk of censure but it was not that simple, because it was still seen by many audiences and performers as taboo, and comics continued to avoid its use. What was being referred to as 'political correctness' in the mainstream press was now being held responsible for the limitation of free speech within the space. A postmodern rejection to what were seen as the metanarratives of the 1980s (Lyotard, 1979; Fukuyama, 1989, 1992; Jameson, 1991) was creeping in and the principles that once held the space together were now coming under sustained assault from a small group of younger comedians who refused tolerance of minorities, ostensibly on the grounds of free speech, and began to smuggle reactionary material into the space as 'irony'. Mark Hurst (questionnaire) observed, "Then Baddiel & Newman did the 'new lad' thing and that started the backlash against what some saw as the 'right on' brigade". Here, Mark (questionnaire) reminds us of the role played by *The Mary Whitehouse Experience* in shaping the new comedy style, which was now becoming more male-orientated and less concerned with the politics of everyday life (Lefebvre, 1991; De Certeau, 1988; Ritchie, 1997). Its appearance harked back to the pre-alternative days when male chauvinism held sway, only this time it concealed itself beneath a respectable veneer of non-racism and non-sexism and called itself 'laddism'. The full effect of these changes would not be felt until the massive *Mary*

Whitehouse Experience Wembley Arena show, which ushered in the stadium comedy era where comedy shows would compete with rock giants like U2 in terms of spectacle and scale. I shall return to the theme of the anti-‘right-on’ backlash later in this section.

Concerns over the circuit’s transformation were being articulated in *Comedy Pages*, a short-lived magazine, which described itself as “A monthly guide to the London comedy circuit”. The term ‘alternative cabaret’ continues to be used but it tends to be employed interchangeably with “alternative comedy” depending upon the article’s author. In “Swell of the crowd”, Skint Video reflect on the state of circuit and observe the growth of homophobia and the “discreet” sexism that is creeping onto the circuit, which is being “allowed to pass without comment, but also applauded” (Skint Video, 1989: 16). Moreover, they notice an increasing trend towards audience participation, which is being used to cover for a performer’s lack of material. Mark Kelly (1989: 5), on the other hand, bemoans the lack of political engagement on the circuit. He writes “Much of the current comedy is transparently formulaic, existing only in its own self-reflecting vacuum” (Kelly, 1989: 5). The formulism that Mark observes is a characteristic of the professional comedy course, which like the art schools, teach technique in systematic fashion. Mark claims the left-wing politics for which the circuit had become known has been in decline for five or six years and claims “Political performers are occasionally overtly banned or excluded from venues” (Kelly, 1989: 5). His sentiments chime with Tony Allen’s excoriation of the ‘alternative’ label in *TO* a year earlier and my experience of the circuit during the 1990s. These views are not shared by relative newcomer, David Baddiel (1989), who dismisses these concerns by claiming the circuit’s lack of innovation and political engagement is part of an evolutionary process but also asserts that the circuit’s politically-inclined performers are mythologizing alt cab. Baddiel’s article illuminates the tension between the old and the new agents on the field, and he brings with him bourgeois aesthetic dispositions from his social background and his time with Cambridge Footlights (Poole, 2006). Thus, he and his fellow Footlights alumni take opposing positions to those already operating within the space. Baddiel (1989: 17) writes “The cabaret circuit should thrive on newness; alternative, after all, means different from the established discourse”. However, the established discourse on the circuit is non-racism and non-sexism and these two principles were being systematically undermined by reactionary

performers seeking to subvert them for the sake of 'free speech'. Here, we are reminded of the satire boom's chief protagonists and their 'subversiveness'. Stephen Wagg (who appears in *Comedy Pages* as "Steve Wagg" [1989: 14]) reminds readers that the boom's architects were neither radical nor subversive. However, he also observes that the number of left-wing political comics on the circuit is negligible. Political satire in Britain has always had a troubled life and has often been neutered by the state, which feared that the mocking of political figures may lead to revolution and while Britain is not Mussolini's Italy, the control that is exercised over political satire in the mass media is hegemonic, oppressive and in the hands of a small number of producers, who are drawn from an iconoclastic fraction of the middle class. The field of satirical production is therefore an exclusive space that restricts entry to only those who have the correct kind of cultural and social capital. The recuperation of the stand-up comedy elements of the space is well underway and those who come from different performance tendencies are gradually being squeezed out.

Comedy Pages also contains an article written by *TO*'s Cabaret editor, Malcolm Hay, and this illuminates the close relationship between space's promoters, performers and the press. Hay's contribution to this fanzine is to reveal the work of a comedy reviewer. For his part, Hay (1989: 2) claims that he has "blind spots" when it comes to certain performers (Ben Elton and Craig Ferguson/Bing Hitler). Yet this also reveals to us the power of the reviewer in relation to a performer's career. However, for all his resistance, Elton, Ferguson and Frank Skinner (another of Hay's blind spots) went on to have successful careers. Like other contributors, Hay uses the word "cabaret" in preference to "comedy" to describe the circuit and yet within a couple of years, the word would be quietly erased as the space moved towards a commercial and professional future.

5.2.1 The death of alternative cabaret (1991 – 1992)

The first issue of *TO* 1063 (January 1991) in the final year of alt cab carries a box advertisement for the Comedy Cafe on page 59 that reads "Tuesdays 'Variety open spot' and Wednesdays 'Open spot'". Superficially, there appears to be little difference in the two kinds of open spot but this was an

attempt on the part of the Comedy Cafe to find new variety acts, of which there are still a few remaining on the circuit. Ultimately this was a fruitless search because the vast majority of the new acts entering the space are stand-up comedians with the remainder working as character comics. Following on from this, *TO* 1064 (January 1991) carries a Cabaret Preview on page 26 in which Malcolm Hay interviews a number of oddball acts, who are fast becoming a dying breed on the circuit. Of Andrew Bailey, Hay (1991: 26) writes:

Bailey is a clown who deals in the dark side of things. Characters include Podomovsky (i), Eric the incompetent roadie and Frederick Benson, an imposing figure, reminiscent of Herman Munster.

(Hay, *Time Out*, 1991: 26)

Randolph the Remarkable, on the other hand:

[...] adopts a less disturbing and frankly sillier approach. His act involves feats of skill and daring involving fire and a blue bowl of lukewarm water.

(Hay, *Time Out*, 1991: 26)

Randolph also appeared on Julian Clary's television show *Sticky Moments* as the character "Hugh Jelly". Marcel Steiner of "The World's Smallest Theatre" is also mentioned in this article. A proto-alternative act and an associate of Malcolm Hardee, Steiner's theatre was a motorcycle sidecar that had a seating capacity of two. While Steve Rawlings is:

... a juggler, who sets fire to his head. "When it went wrong" he says "it used to put the fear of God in me. You could hear the hair crackling. There's a very distinctive smell too.

(Hay, *Time Out*, 1991: 26)

The point of this review is to try and promote what remains of the true alternative showmen on the circuit, but this is futile because within the next three years, all of the oddball acts would disappear from the circuit completely. As for the jugglers and the other new circus acts, a combination of factors conspired to eliminate them from the bills. Steve Rawlings (questionnaire) identifies "economics" as the main driver, the other being the size of many of

clubs. Such clubs, as I indicated earlier could not employ jugglers because they lacked the ceiling height or the space. Yet, as Steve (questionnaire) told me, there were other less attractive features to working in the newly-transformed space.

On the minus side before I left the circuit there were so many clubs that they were almost giving tickets away and taking block bookings from stag and hen parties to the point that they were your entire audience.

Sadly the type of comedy they want to hear is dick jokes, followed by more dick jokes and I think this is breeding a whole generation of comics whose acts won't work anywhere else.

(Steve Rawlings, questionnaire)

Hen and stag parties are notoriously difficult to play because the punters are usually drunk and unable to deal with complicated subject matter, thus cheap gags – like the dick jokes that Steve mentions – would be used as a means of reaching them and getting laughs. Gags had always been resisted in the space because they were seen as belonging to a bygone era. This was brought into sharp relief at the time of the First Gulf War in 1991. Malcolm Hay's 'Cabaret Preview' in 1064 (1991: 29) comments on "Gulf Humour", which notices a lack of political and philosophical engagement with the conflict. He further notes the numbers of performers who have dropped out of the "No to the War in the Gulf Benefit". I am one of a handful (though unmentioned in this article) performing anti-Gulf War material; Mark Steel is another and was quoted as saying:

I was at a show the night Thatcher resigned and the first comedian on stage didn't mention it. He talked about toothpaste tubes instead. If a bomb exploded in a club, there are some comics who'd stick to their prepared set about rubber plants

(Steel quoted in Hay, *Time Out*, 1991: 26)

This was one of the more worrying developments on the circuit, caused mainly by the lack of comedians coming from *countercultural* formations. The dearth of philosophical and political engagement with the world among comics

would eventually lead to a situation in which comedians rarely, if ever, mentioned politics of any kind onstage. The *countercultural* spirit that once defined the circuit had faded and had been replaced with something altogether more commercial and ready-made for television. This seemed indicative of a general mood of defeat caused by Thatcher's election victory in 1987 but also the collapse of the Berlin Wall; the ongoing press attacks on 'political correctness', and the rise of celebrity culture. History, left-wing political ideologies, anti-racism, anti-sexism would be dismissed as 'politically correct' and 'outmoded' by those on the political right as well as people that claimed to be 'apolitical'. All of this appeared to coincide with the rise of so-called the 'new lad' and 'ladettes', which were constructed in opposition to the so-called 'new man' and second wave feminism (Edwards, 2006: 39–42). Within a year of this article's publication, Steel would abandon the circuit for radio and solo shows. The arrival of new agents on the field transformed it from a small-scale sub-field into a large-scale field of production, which meant the circuit no longer had room for anything that militated against standardisation and, by extension, the dominant ideology.

The same issue (1064) carries another article by Hay, this time in the 'Cabaret' section on page 59, in which he decries the lack of opportunities for new performers. He writes: "a healthy circuit can only be maintained through a continual supply of new acts. It's here that the fundamental problem lies. The number of clubs that offer new and untried performers 'open spots' (short slots, generally unpaid) on their weekly bills has shrunk considerably in the past two or three years" (1991: 59). Hay then notes the Hackney Empire New Act of the Year, The Guilty Pea and The Comedy Pit as exceptions, observing "The catch is that, in this prevailing climate, it can take a very long time for new acts to gain the experience that will enable them to get better (1991: 59). This problem would become more acute as the professionalisation of the industry continued throughout the 1990s, eventually leading to the formation of a separate open spot circuit from which few performers would escape. It also had the effect of restricting the field to only those people who had learned their performance skills through a recognised comedy course. Moreover, only those with private incomes could afford to play the circuit for nothing until they were recognised by the dominant producers of entertainment. The influence of television on the cabaret field, conferred by the success of *Saturday Live* and similar

programmes, could be discerned by the circuit's apparent repositioning as a proving ground for future television hosts. As if to reinforce this new trend, Every Other Thursday, a club for established performers to try new material, opened in the previous week and its second show is listed in *TO* 1068, 1991. This reveals to us that there is less room on the circuit for experimentation and that comics felt the need to create a space for themselves in which they would be free to develop and test new comedy material. This is reflected in an article titled "Waving Magic Wand Awards", which asks a few of the circuit's leading figures what changes they would like to see on the circuit (*Time Out* 1069, 1991: 56). Magician John Lenahan makes an interesting point about clubs having to rely on the goodwill of pub landlords and notes that The Chuckle Club was a recent victim when it was forced out of The Stag on Bressenden Place in Victoria. Pete Harris echoes Hay's concerns and complains that audiences are "too demanding, which discourages experimentation". Harris's erstwhile partner, Eddie Izzard, facetiously demands "more dressing rooms" and John Gordillo, of the Crisis Twins and London Theatresports observes the industrial nature of the new circuit

There's often the feeling that shows are like conveyor belts – the audience knows what to expect and many skilled comedians provide them with just that – and only that. No one is doing anything very special.

(John Gordillo, quoted in *Time Out* 1069, 1991: 56)

Within two years, the entire circuit would produce similar, standardised products, which were the mostly disinterested comics who took no position on anything other than to comment on the mundane and the banal. Around this time, I was party to dressing room discussions with other comics regarding the state of the space. We were concerned that the circuit was heading for the same fate as its American counterpart, which had witnessed a creeping conservatism and banalisation brought about by greater television exposure. As if to reinforce this, in March 1991 American comedy chain, Coconuts, opened a branch in Larry's Baa beneath a hotel in Covent Garden. In issue 1072, there is an advertisement but no listing (1991: 57). I was given the role of resident MC (on account of my American accent) but what the performers, all of whom were American, tell me is rather disturbing: they were flown over by the company but

are paid as little as £30 for each appearance. The Comedy Store, Jongleurs and Banana Cabaret, for example, pay considerably more and at the Banana it was easy for a headline act to earn over £200 on a good night when both rooms are open. There is a small write-up on Coconuts in issue 1073:

Coconuts runs some 20 venues in Florida, Georgia, Alabama and The Caribbean.

(*Time Out* 1073, 1991: 57)

No British performers appeared as paid acts at Coconuts and the club failed to attract large audiences and folded within four months. On the same page, Up the Creek has its “Anniversary Show” listed. It is only a year old. The page opposite carries an advertisement for Roy ‘Chubby’ Brown, who is described as:

Britain’s Naughtiest Comedian. If easily offended please stay away.

(*Time Out*, box advertisement 1979: 56).

Though the circuit is still ostensibly *alternative*, the presence of this advertisement appears to indicate a collapse of the boundary between ‘alternative’ and mainstream. Indeed, it was now actually possible to argue that the old school circuit had become the *new* alternative because the ever-decreasing numbers of CIU clubs were mainly hidden from the public glare of television.

Another aspect to the transitional period was the increase in the numbers of corporate gigs and comedy tours organised by drinks and tobacco companies. First, Holsten Pils organised a tour in 1991 and this was followed by the Marlboro Lights comedy tour. The purpose of these tours was ostensibly to showcase upcoming comedy talent, but the real purpose, arguably, was to promote products, and while the performers on these tours were paid well, there was a price to be paid in terms of censorship. Noel James, (interview) who acted as the compère for the Marlboro Lights ‘Lighten Up’ tour, was warned by the company not to criticise or mention smoking in his routine, but they also offered him some unwanted advice.

I went on and did 10 minutes and it didn't go very well... and I could see the guy in the leather jacket... the Marlboro rep at the back of the room saying to his mate "He's not doing it right... he's not doing it right"... and then, after that, they... they didn't tell me themselves, they sent this woman, their go between, to tell me "Next time you go on, can you just introduce the acts and not do any material"?

(Noel James, interview)

The job of compère is specialised and many comedians are not necessarily good at the role because it requires a great deal of audience engagement as well as a degree of self-effacement. Compères will tell jokes to warm up the audience for without a decent warm-up a performer, regardless of how good they are, may struggle to make an impact in the first 30 seconds. This can lead to a bad gig for the performers. The straitjacket of 'political correctness' had been supplanted by the straitjacket of corporate sponsorship. Comedians, rather than other cabaret performers were now a highly sought-after marketing tool to help sell products.

Alt cab officially comes to an end in the pages of *TO* in late November 1991 (issue 1110). The Cabaret section, which has been in existence for a little less than ten years, is renamed "Comedy", but subtitled "Stand-up and Variety" - though the variety element would soon fade away as more stand-up comedians joined the ever-swelling ranks of circuit comedians. The change of title is not announced in the previous week's issue (1109) nor is it mentioned by Malcolm Hay in issue 1110.

City Limits, which had split from *TO* over ten years earlier and threatened the very existence of *TO*, folded over a year later in 1993 after going through a period during which ownership of the magazine changed hands several times (Brown, 1993). By this stage *City Limits* had lost any of the influence it once had and in 1990 as if to signify this decline, its back pages began to carry advertisements for sex shops and 'personal services'. A combination of falling advertising revenue and a shrinking readership ultimately conspired in its demise. Now *TO*, alone, had a monopoly on London's listings and its role in legitimating and consecrating the field's new comedians would continue until the end of the 1990s, when it would come under attack from the new medium of the Internet and be forced to reduce its activity on the field.

5.3 Alternative performers and countercultural practices

Glimpses of early alt com's debt to the historical avant-garde (especially art and theatre) can be seen in BBC2's short-lived programme *Boom, Boom... Out Go The Lights* (BBC, 1981) in which Alexei Sayle, Tony Allen, Keith Allen (no relation) and 20th Century Coyote appear. Keith Allen gives a Dada-inspired performance that can be read as a form of 'anti-comedy', while 20th Century Coyote combine Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty with Tex Avery-style cartoon slapstick. However, it was Sayle, a former student at Chelsea School of Art that revealed a knowledge of contemporary avant-garde practices in his performances. What follows are three examples of different forms of countercultural practice within the alternative space, which were informed by different kinds of cultural and *countercultural* capital.

5.3.1 Alexei Sayle: post-punk comedy

Of all the alt comedians from the early period, Alexei Sayle's stage routine can be easily read as a comedy counterpart of post-punk music, principally because of his use of art theory and Marxist theory. Wilmot (1989: 24) suggests that Sayle was primarily a physical comedian and his use of politics were embellishments giving the impression that his routine was overtly political. Yet he was confident enough in his knowledge of these theories that he was able to drop the names of obscure artistic practitioners and philosophers with ease, while sprinkling his set with scraps of Marxist theory. This intimate knowledge of Marxist theory is a form of embodied cultural capital that was provided by his family background, which is converted into *countercultural* capital, and symbolically utilised as a statement of authenticity (Sayle, 2010). The audiences, assuming they possessed the necessary *countercultural* and cultural capital to appreciate the casual references to Marxism and the mocking of the middle class Left, would be 'in on the joke'. The name-dropping of philosophers and traces of art theory in Sayle's humour reveal the often-elided concept of working class improvement through education, thus his converted cultural capital functions simultaneously in its original state and in its symbolic *countercultural* form, and places him intellectually on a par with the Monty Python team, for example, whose popular 'Philosophers Song' references

famous continental philosophers. At the same time, this distances him from the supposedly 'working class' comedians of the WMCs, who avoided displays of erudition. Sayle's symbolic deployment of his embodied cultural capital in the alternative space thus operates in opposition to the Python's symbolic use because it was neither produced within the august institutions of Oxbridge nor anchored in the educational and social entitlements of its graduates.

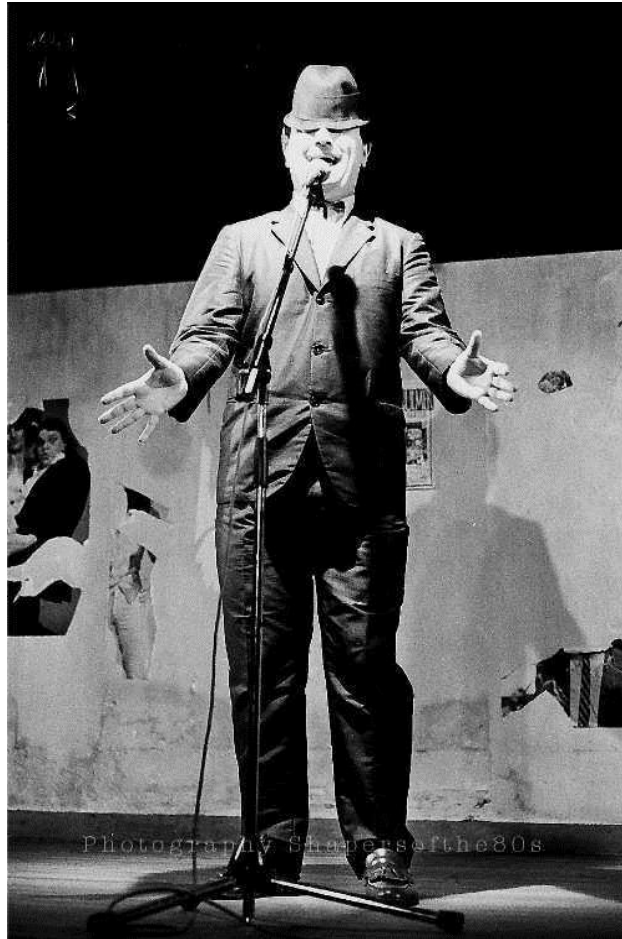


Figure 4

Sayle's sartorial style (Figure 3) was subculturally immediate and was appropriated from skinhead and 2-Tone; it complemented his performance style. His combination of these sartorial styles can be read as a magical updating of the white working class hard mod (or skinhead) and West Indian rude boy styles of the 1960s (Hebdige, 1993). To offset this appearance of streetwise aggressiveness, his two-tone suit was often two sizes too small, recalling the truncated stage wear of Norman Wisdom (another physical comedian). Sayle would wear a white shirt, pencil tie and a pair of Dr. Martens boots - the preferred footwear of the skins. He completed this ensemble with a

porkpie hat (or leather trilby), a fetish object of the rude boys and 2-Tone kids, which was often pulled down over his eyes. He explained his choice of style to Roger Wilmut:

If I'm about anything at the core I'm about vaunting working class culture. The reason I adopted the guise of the skinhead because it's the one working class tribal form that posh people will never rip off, because it's too ugly.

(Sayle quoted in Wilmut, 1989: 51)

Sayle sees the skinhead style as "ugly" but this ugliness is an allusion to the 'lumpenness' of the skin, whose sartorial style represented a magical return to a mythical working-class heritage (Hebdige, 1993: 55). The skinhead was aggressive; a caricature of the model worker (Hebdige, 1993: 55); their extreme proletarian sartorialism and associations with casual violence ensured their style would not be adopted by the middle-class as a signifier of rebellion. Through his appropriation of the skinhead style, Sayle made a conscious statement of his working-class origins. Dressed conservatively in comparably expensive suits and ties, the trad comics placed themselves at a slight sartorial distance from their audiences and were effectively subculturally neutral; their sartorial styles tended to be as conservative as their jokes. By contrast, Sayle was the only comedian to consciously adopt a subcultural style, and most performers wore a 'street ensemble' on-stage as a means of relating to habituses of their audiences.



Figure 5

Sayle was given a residency on the short-lived late-night show, *OTT* (Central Television, 1981). In the show's first episode, he opens his set by telling viewers:

"I'm the trendy correspondent on this show. I've actually been travelling around the country trying to find out what's trendy for you. I've been up to Liverpool... I don't know if you know it but there's been a big Sixties revival going on up in Liverpool... (pause)... whole families trying to live on eight quid a week (sucks the air through his teeth in disgust)! There's a thirties thing going on... (in a character voice) you're no one unless you've got rickets" (strikes a pose).

(Alexei Sayle, *OTT*, 1982)

When Sayle performed this piece, the numbers of unemployed people in Liverpool and the rest of Merseyside were higher than the rest of the country (T Lane, 1978). The recession of the Seventies had hit the city hard and many of the traditional industries like shipbuilding were in terminal decline (T Lane, 1986). Unemployment benefit was the only lifeline that many people had, and it was and always has been paid at a very basic rate. Through this introduction, Sayle also acknowledges that he is appearing on a television programme that is

aimed at eighteen to twenty-five year olds; an ostensibly 'trendy' audience. "I'm the trendy correspondent", he says. His line of "Eight quid a week" recognises the fact that some things, like poverty and social deprivation, never change. Poverty will never be fashionable, but it can be reified and commodified as, for example, a sartorial style.

In the following piece, Sayle détourns the joke form,

There's obviously no Albanians in tonight. Good!

This Albanian goes for a job on a building site – right?

(Exaggeratedly) Excuse me, I'd like a job as a racial stereotype, please!

(Alexei Sayle, *OTT*, 1982)

Here is the critical function of alt com, which in the words of S Friedman (2009: 19) "turns the laughter onto the bigotry itself". This kind of joke violates the essence of the racist joke form and transforms it into something unusual or unexpected by using the Albanian as a substitute for the 'thick' Irishman (Kravitz, 1977). The setting of the building site is one of three locations that typically appear in Irish jokes along with religion and the IRA (Kravitz, 1977: 279). The set-up of "There's obviously no Albanians in tonight. Good!" takes the oft-used racist comedian's framing device as the introduction. The purpose of this is to signal to the audience the joke's butt. However, in 1981 few people in Britain outside diplomatic circles (or the CPGB) knew what an Albanian looked or sounded like, yet the Albanian is not the butt of the joke. Instead the racist joke *itself* becomes the butt of the joke. Critchley (2002: 73) observes there is often a historical dimension to the 'stupid' or racial joke that illuminates the power relationships between nations and cultural groups. If we consider the example of the notorious Irish jokes that were being told by trad comedians, we can see that such jokes are deeply rooted in the historical power relationship between England and Ireland. In reducing the Irish to a negative stereotype, trad joke-tellers were effectively able to 'laugh off' the subjugation of the Irish people, while at the same time tapping into the prejudices of their audiences. Anti-Irish humour was therefore predicated not simply on the dynamic of power relations between the two countries, but also on the mythologies that stemmed from the pseudo-science of social Darwinism, which posited that the Irish were

the European equivalent of the 'ape-like/child-like' Negro, and was thus primitive and needed the guiding hand of English paternalism (Fanon, 1966). This was also illustrated by the fact that the Irish were mainly employed to carry out backbreaking physical labour. Like the black man, the Irishman was seen as little more than a beast of burden (or alternatively as a wild-eyed Fenian bomb-thrower) by ruling classes of the 19th and 20th centuries (Hall, 1997). The Albanian is thus spared similar abuse because they are unfamiliar to British eyes and ears.

5.3.2 Martin Soan, Malcolm Hardee and The Greatest Show on Legs



Figure 6: Greatest Show on Legs

Martin Soan (interview) was one of two participants that began performing at a young age; the others were Ian Saville (questionnaire) and Mark Kelly (interview). Martin's route to performing was through the creation of a highly-mobile Punch and Judy Show. This was the first incarnation of The Greatest Show on Legs, and was so called because Martin carried his entire set on his back (Soan interview). Malcolm Hardee later joined him as his 'pot man'²⁵ in 1976 and the pair performed at seaside towns in Southern England and on the street and in pubs around South London (Hardee and Fleming, 1996). The early incarnation of the Greatest Show on Legs could be compared favourably to punk rock because of their 'no frills' approach to performing. Martin's interest in this kind of work stemmed from being "a bit artistic" and having a particular

²⁵ The pot man is responsible for collecting money and is so called because the money is put into a pot or hat that is passed around.

interest in puppetry. The story of how he became interested in the subject is worth quoting in full.

I'd looked at some old engravings, eh, and at Pepys and the first Italian coming over and its history through the continent; Mr Punch... I mean, Punch was a descendant of various, uh, you know...uh, anti-heroes... Carigoy, Le Grand Guignol... they're all French, Turkish... and then I discovered that there was almost a link back and this where theory separates: one was to China and one was basically to India and I found it fascinating the various research books I got out the libraries in those days... they had pictures of how to make his head and I found, like, the diagrams fascinating and, uh, just the idea of getting a plasticine model of your head and then papier mache-ing (sic) it on top. In the diagrams it looked fantastic. In reality, it was a load of old misshapen sodden shit, but it got me on the road and within I suppose about 2 years, um, I'd made three sets of puppets and ended up with a , you know, really efficient knockabout set of puppets that I really, really loved and I've still got one or two upstairs... em, basically made out of foam... and that's why Punch and Judy... it was just... it was lucky that I just got fascinated with its history... I wasn't academic in any way whatsoever, so this was my first piece of research. I hadn't read that much to be perfectly honest – fiction or non-fiction...

(Martin Soan, interview)

Martin tells us that he “wasn't academic” but here we have evidence of a specialised form of autodidacticism that manifests itself in a particular interest and reminds us of Bourdieu's (2003) description of the kind of specialised but unguided knowledge acquired by jazz and film buffs. Martin's use of bricolage to create his first puppet tells us that in order to create something new from scratch, one must make use of what is to hand. In the variety and music hall eras, cultural capital in the form of the knowledge of specialised performance crafts was passed from generation to generation. However, with the disappearance of variety theatres and the concert parties this knowledge had been lost, thus Martin had to go back to the fundamentals and start from

scratch. This tactic corresponds to Wollen's (1975) first kind of avant-garde for its use of DIY to create something new (D Andrews, 2010).

By the early 1980s, The Legs morphed into the naked balloon dance for which Martin and Malcolm were best known²⁶. Malcolm says the balloon dance was inspired by Howard Brenton's (1980) play *The Romans in Britain* in which men "were prancing around nude on stage" (Hardee and Fleming, 1996: 107-8). Brenton's play, which explored issues of imperialism and class power, was considered by its critics to be grossly indecent, because it featured nudity and a male rape scene and this led the taste and decency campaigner, Mary Whitehouse, to object to the play (Brenton, 2006). That was reason enough for Hardee and Soan to create the balloon dance.

About a week later, I read that Mary Whitehouse *did* like cha-cha music. I thought I know what to do. We'll do a sketch and be naked in it but we'll have cha-cha music and then everybody will be happy. So we ended up with The Balloon Dance.

(Hardee and Fleming, 1996: 107-8)

The balloon dance involved three members, with a third member of the group recruited on an *ad hoc* basis. The performance consisted of "dancing the cha-cha while holding two balloons each and swapping them round on the fourth beat to cover [their] genitalia" (Hardee and Fleming, 1996: 107-8). The Legs' use of naked male flesh was daring since it was often commonplace for females to perform nude or semi-nude in strip clubs, thus this absurd spectacle unwittingly challenged assumptions about nudity by using nude males in a comedy routine. The Legs were, for all intents and purposes, a male reimagining of *tableaux vivants* of the post-war Windmill Theatre, which served as an incubator for the demob comedy of the 1950s. The balloon dance proved very popular on the fledgling circuit and they were eventually invited by Chris Tarrant to perform on *OTT* (Hardee and Fleming, 1996). The Legs continued to perform at events around the country and when Malcolm opened The Tunnel Palladium in 1984, the team worked together infrequently, performing only at large scale events. Due to their infrequent performances, Martin decided to form

²⁶ The Greatest Show on Legs also appeared on *OTT* (Central Television, 1981) (Hardee and Fleming, 1996).

another dance act called 'Two Fingers Cabaret' that included someone he only referred to as "Tony", who was a professional dancer (Soan interview). The use of dance as a form of comedy entertainment is rather unusual because the form is usually confined to specialised dance venues rather than upstairs pub rooms. However, it is worth remembering that dance also featured in Music Hall and variety theatre, as well as the commercial cabarets of Paris like the Moulin Rouge. Eventually, Tony left to take up a job as an "entertainments manager" and Martin continued as a solo act, while retaining the name "Two Fingers" (Soan interview). When I saw Martin perform his solo routine for the first time, it was at the Meccano Club at the Camden Head in 1986 and on that occasion, he performed an escapology routine. I asked him about this:

RC You were solo, yeah, cos I remember you doing the escape act...

MS Oh, escapology...

RC Yeah!

MS And that was escapology...what, the joint?

RC Yeah

MS And then...

RC I remember you going out the window and coming back in... [laughs]
[crosstalk]

MS Oh, the other one was to announce the escapology and go on a joint and go "I'm really out of it".

(Martin Soan, interview)

Martin was not the first to smoke a joint onstage; CAST also lit them up and passed them around (Muldoon interview). This, I would argue, is another *countercultural* aspect to alternative performance and while it may seem rather passé today, we must remember that the possession of cannabis - a controlled substance - was and still is an arrestable offence. The street performers were especially responsible for some of the most interesting innovations and we can think of Martin and others like him as "organic intellectuals" (Gramsci, 2003) that have been produced within the field of street performance. Furthermore, his use of specialised knowledge allowed him to carve out a distinctive niche for himself that made him stand out from the rest. As Martin (interview) himself says "If you want to get on, get a gimmick. If you want to be noticed, be different".

5.3.3 Buddy Hell, art and politics

There are three stages to my main comedy career: the early period (1987 – 1990) the middle period (1991 – 95) and the late period (1996 – 2000). Each stage represents a stage in my development as a performer, and is marked by changes of direction often brought about by new influences and insights. This autoethnography covers my early period and part of the middle period. I performed under the name of ‘Buddy Hell’; a name that was chosen to reflect my post-punk *countercultural* disposition, but I had arrived at this name after going through several others like ‘Johnny Boiler’ and the more obviously left-wing ‘Red Marks’, which was inspired by a defective sign for the employment agency Alfred Marks (now called Adecco). ‘Buddy Hell’ came from combining the first name of bluesman Buddy Guy and the last name of Richard Hell of New York punk outfit, the Voidoids. It seemed like a good fit for a subversive artist. What follows is a critical account of my career and how my cultural capital informed my choices as a performer.

My inner space

My cultural experiences differ greatly to those of the participants: I am half-American and attended schools for the children of American military personnel and was exposed to a great deal of popular culture that was unavailable to many in Britain. The dominant culture for me, however, was represented by the United States Air Force and its rules and regulations, to which all - dependents included - were subject. Subversiveness within such a social environment was never particularly difficult, because even the slightest deviation from what was expected of dependents could be considered ‘dangerous’. My relationship with the military authorities had never been difficult as a young child but as I grew into adolescence I began to question the nature of the military and war itself. This uneasy relationship would culminate in my removal from RAF Chicksands, the base on which my father had been stationed by no less a figure than the base commander himself. The crime for which I was expelled was the possession of a small amount of cannabis resin. In the 1970s, this was a serious offence and in rural Bedfordshire, the possession of dope was seen as a ‘gateway’ to eventual heroin addiction. The American airmen with whom I had been arrested while on our way to the 1976 Knebworth

Festival, had already lost their security clearances and had been assigned to low-level jobs until their eventual return to the United States. This would only add another offence to their dishonourable discharges, yet for me it was a badge of honour and part of an already long history of subversion.

My first act of resistance took place in kindergarten when the teacher told us to 'salute the flag' and recite the Pledge of Allegiance. This nationalistic ritual took place before class every morning during my school years, but I refused to recite it until the day I left school. Teachers never gave us a reason for saluting the flag; it was considered axiomatic that young children would obey their request without question. We were just children, so why would we not do as we were told? My tactic for avoiding The Pledge involved what De Certeau (1988) calls a "ruse": I would mime the words to it, and whichever national hymn the teacher had chosen. Each member of the class was required to take turns to 'lead the class' in The Pledge. When it was my turn, I would perform a variation of the ruse by saying the first three words "I pledge allegiance" ... and mouthed the rest. Avoiding The Pledge was instinctual and I would suggest that the impulse to resist it came from within my counterculturally-inclined habitus. The shape of one's habitus is determined by early socialisation as well as a range of independent variables: genetics, environment, gender and so on (Bourdieu, 2003: 101-102). In my case, it is possible to suggest that having parents from Brooklyn and Liverpool contributed to my rebelliousness. My mother, especially, was deeply critical of the Royal Family and frequently mocked Americanisms; she also had little time for fools. This must have affected me on a conscious and unconscious level.

Another early event that helped to shape my habitus occurred at the age of five when my mother explained to me the concept of 'race'. I sat horrified as she explained to me that she and my father had different skin colours. Yet before being told this, I had never noticed my parents' skin pigmentation; these were my parents and not people of different 'races' who had a 'mixed race' child. Race is a serious and difficult concept to relate to the five-year-old child and I suspect her rationale for so doing was to prepare me for our eventual stay in Liverpool when my father went to Vietnam. I resolved to resist any attempt to be caged within my brown skin. I would ignore this melanism because even at such a young age one could immediately see not only the injustice but also the absurdity of 'race'. At the age of five, my habitus was given two early objectives

to which I would direct my oppositional political energies: racism and nationalism. Regarding the latter, I despised the sentimentality that came with flag worship and the unquestioning obeisance that accompanied it. I also seemed to have understood that racism was intimately bound up with American nationalism, and institutionalised at every level of society and reflected in film and television. Where were the black Americans in the national stories that were being imparted to me in school? Were all of them slaves? Why were the Indians depicted as savages in B-Movie Hollywood Westerns, while white men seemed to shoot them for sport? Questions like these drove me to keep a wary eye on authority and resist or subvert it wherever possible and I often did this through humour by changing the words to the national hymns or mocking heroic figures like the slave-owning Davy Crockett.

Unlike my British counterparts, my introduction to stand-up comedy took place at school and came via vinyl recordings of Bill Cosby's 'Chicken Heart' (1966) and Bob Newhart's 'The Driving Instructor' (1965). Yet I do not recall finding either one particularly funny. Their material was inoffensive, and this was most likely the reason why teachers deemed their humour to be suitable for young ears. Crosby and Newhart were typical of mainstream stand-ups in the post-Vaudeville era, and American stand-up avoided ethnic stereotypes and the formulaic jokes that typified British trad comedy. Introducing stand-up comedy into the classroom appeared to be a way of filling time or as a treat, and never seemed to be connected to learning. Looking back, this was indicative of the reproduction and circulation of cultural capital in an American setting. As youngsters, we were being exposed to what was, ostensibly, a form of low culture as distinct to the high cultural forms, which are imparted to middle class children and reproduced within their educational institutions. However, it should be noted that the schools for dependents of military personnel differ vastly to schools in the inner cities of Los Angeles or Chicago. When we lived in Hof, Germany, for example, there were regular field trips to the local concert hall to see the local symphony orchestra perform. Such outings would have been rare, if non-existent in inner city schools and I was fortunate in that regard to have such an experience, even if I found it rather boring. Thus, in comparison to many of my comedy peers, my education must seem middle class, but within the military, the divisions of social class are reproduced in the binary distinctions of officer and enlisted classes, and so the system is designed, not with the

perpetuation of the kinds of class-bound social divisions found in Britain, but tailored instead to reproduce the social and cultural capital of the armed forces, and to inculcate respect for the political institutions of the United States (the flag, the Constitution, the office of the President and so on). Therefore, within the Department of Defense (sic) school system, as is the case outside the military, the boundary between high and low culture is often blurred, and people tend to be cultural omnivores and will consume products according to whatever tastes are formed in their habituses.

At home, my parents owned no stand-up albums, but they were film enthusiasts, which meant that comedy was mainly experienced through Hollywood films or television sit-coms. I loved the sick-silly comedy of Jonathan Winters, who appeared on American television and in films like *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (Kramer, 1963). Like some of my participants, I liked the Marx Brothers' films but mainly for Groucho's quickfire wit. In my early teens I heard a recording of African-American political comedian, Dick Gregory, and was impressed by his social consciousness - his *negritude*. He was a committed activist and was frequently interviewed in *Jet*²⁷, in which he spoke out on civil rights, feminism and the Vietnam War. His style was cool and sharp, and he dealt directly with the issues of race and Jim Crow, while Cosby avoided any mention of it. Gregory predated the rise of Richard Pryor (another favourite) by a few years. At boarding school, I was introduced to the stoner comedy of Cheech and Chong by my roommate, Ed, who also introduced me to The Firesign Theatre via a cassette copy of *The Continuing Adventures of Nick Danger* (Columbia, 1969)²⁸. Firesign Theatre's comedy is clever, erudite and absurd, and makes references to philosophy, popular culture (especially The Beatles) and Carlos Castaneda's (1974) *Tales of Power*, a book that was popular with hippy mystic-intellectuals. Other friends had copies of George Carlin's *Toledo Window Box* (Little David/Warner Brothers, 1974) and *Occupation: Foole* (Little David/Atlantic, 1973) on vinyl. Carlin had a cool, hippy style and, unlike Cosby or the British trad comedians, he spoke directly to members of my generation. His main themes were the power of language,

²⁷*Jet* is a magazine that is marketed towards African-Americans. My father would buy *Jet* and *Ebony*, which was more celebrity and lifestyle-oriented but carried a lot of photo-journalism on the Civil Rights movement. *Jet* is a weekly news and current affairs digest.

²⁸This appears on their 1969 album *How Can You be in Two Places at Once When You're Not Anywhere at All* and is an affectionate spoof of film noir.

recreational drug use, war, and political hypocrisy, all of which were absent from the discourses of British trad comedy of the period and which had a major influence on my approach to comedy. Richard Pryor's (1979) video, *Live in Concert*, was a revelation and showed how far advanced African-American comedians were in comparison to their black British counterparts, who were solely represented by the up and coming Lenny Henry – who continued to rely on traditional joke-forms and performed as 'black'. Here is worth quoting Fanon (2016: 110), who argued: "For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man". This summates the situation in which black British performers found themselves and it is possible that the idea of inherent blackness may have been considered hostile and alien to white British audiences, meaning that the only acceptable form of blackness was one that had been constructed from stereotypes that had been produced by white men, who controlled the entertainment industry, and racial pseudo-scientists. When I first saw *The Comedians* (Granada, 1972) in 1971, I found it not only dated and racist, the jokes told by these middle-aged men was reminiscent of the kinds of jokes that kids told each other on the playground. Furthermore, they appeared to serve as metaphors of Britain's fustiness and its morbid tendency to nostalgia, which constantly harked back to past glories: the Empire and the age of deference when everyone 'knew their place', whose narrativised discourses were disguised as nuggets of humour that were decontextualised from their social relations. Trad comedians were skilled technicians, whose expertise in telling mass-produced jokes with perfect timing and delivery, were held up as the pinnacle of comedic craftsmanship by joke aficionados. Trad comedians had therefore achieved partial consecration by television's commissioning editors, who perhaps saw in them a kind of continuity with a romanticised past, which existed in their imaginations.

In Seventies Britain, there were few black light entertainers of any significance on British television - save for Charlie Williams and Kenny Lynch²⁹. The former was a 'mixed race' Yorkshireman and a former footballer and miner who appeared frequently on *The Comedians*, while the latter was an all-round entertainer, who had a couple of hit singles in the early 1960s and often appeared as Jimmy Tarbuck's comic foil. Williams made copious use of the

²⁹In the 1980s, Lynch formed a controversial songwriting partnership with Buster Mottram, the former tennis player and erstwhile member of the National Front.

same racist humour that was favoured by his white counterparts³⁰, and I suggest this was *his* way of relating to his overwhelmingly white and working-class audiences. Lynch also played to white expectations, and my father was unrestrained in his disgust for Lynch and accused him of playing the 'Uncle Tom'. One must remember that this was only a few years after the Black Power salute at the 1968 Summer Olympics, and yet here was Lynch projecting an internalisation of his social status outwards as low status 'humour'. By contrast, Black American entertainers appeared to possess a sense of class consciousness and self-respect that was lacking in Black British entertainers of the time. Thus, Williams and Lynch, regardless of their professionalism, could not be considered as suitable role models for me as a young subversive artist. Thus, there was a mismatch between the class habitus of the trad black and white comedians and my counterculturally-inclined habitus. Yet, it is also ironic to note that, for all its apparent social progress in comedy terms at least, the United States in the 1970s remained deeply divided along racial lines in terms of housing, education and job opportunities. If a black character appeared in a Sixties Hollywood action film, they were usually killed off before the third reel. In British film and television, they were almost invisible.

Starting out in cabaret

First, a confession: unlike some of my contemporaries, I was not a punk, but I was a post-punk. Born in 1957, I sat somewhere between the tail-end of the hippy subculture and the beginning of punk, and considered myself to be a 'freak'. Like many participants, my cultural capital played an important role in how I saw the world. Music has always been important to me and my tastes were eclectic, and ranged from glam to Krautrock and from folk to so-called 'prog rock'. My favourite bands and musicians are partly indicative of my cultural capital and included Roxy Music, Hawkwind, Led Zeppelin, Captain Beefheart and Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention, and I only began listening to punk rock in 1977 when I started recording songs by Buzzcocks and The Clash from the radio. Sartorially, the punk style alienated me, even though I had been wearing torn jeans and defaced t-shirts from around 1975 – the same sort of

³⁰ These were: Irishmen (Paddies), Welshmen (Taffies), Scotsmen (Jocks), Blacks (Williams oddly referred to Blacks as 'coloured chaps') and the catch-all term for South Asians: 'Pakis'.

style favoured by the Ramones. In 1978, after seeing John Cooper Clarke on television, I began dabbling in punk poetry and in 1980, I became a disk jockey on a local land-based pirate radio station called Radio Fiona, which broadcasted to North Hertfordshire and East Bedfordshire, and played mostly rock 'n' roll and rockabilly. My show, called 'Hot Valves' (from the Be Bop Deluxe EP of the same name), featured post-punk, Sixties psychedelia and some pop music. To the best of my knowledge, I was the first and only person to play the Dead Kennedys single 'Too Drunk To Fuck' (1981) on the air in Britain. When Two-Tone erupted onto the music scene in 1979, I was an early enthusiast, not only because of its speeded-up ska sound, but because of the bi-racial composition of bands like The Specials, The Selector and The Beat seemed to speak to my own mixed ethnic heritage. Although I did not see myself as a punk, I internalised much of its spontaneity, angst and sneering as forms of subcultural capital, the manifestations of which were projected outwards as symbolic cultural capital. It is this cultural capital that informed the onstage attitude of many of the early alt comedians, myself included, and though I did not consider myself to be a punk, its explosion sent shockwaves across the field of cultural production and one could not fail to have been affected by its energy.

Punk provided us with a new kind of attitude, which is dispositional and is related to the deployment of symbolic *countercultural* capital. Attitude was a theme that emerged in my interviews with Tony Allen and Bob Boyton, the latter of whom says, "what matters is not what the subject is about but what the attitude is", while Allen (interview) claims "It isn't about material, it's about attitude". These quotes recall the words of the Eddie Waters character in Trevor Griffiths' television play *Comedians* (BBC, 1979) "It's not the jokes; it's what lies behind them. It's the attitude". In the alternative space, jokes were rejected because they seemed passé and reactionary, and belonged to the hacks of trad comedy. Some alt comedians, like their counterparts in the post-punk music movement, wanted to comment on the politics of everyday life (Reynolds, 2005: xxiii) and jokes were too obviously intended to be funny, and appeared to distract from the performers' role of truth-teller. I will return to the subject of truth-telling later in this section.

Like many of my participants, I never set out to become a comedian, and my entry into what later became my profession was accidental rather than

intentional. My roots as a stand-up lie in a brief performance at my undergraduate course Christmas party in December 1986, when I was asked to perform a short stand-up routine because I had ‘funny bones’. However, I had no experience of performing stand-up because at this juncture, it was my intention to become an actor or join a rock band. There were no cabaret courses in Newcastle as there were in London and no books about how to perform stand-up. If such books existed, then they were likely to have been written within a traditional framework of joke-telling and presentation. According to Double (2005: 3) “There is a long tradition of older comedians giving advice and informal tuition to less experienced acts”, but he also notes that the early alt comedians had some performance experience prior to performing comedy. In my case, this included a brief dalliance with punk poetry (1977-79); a spell as a pirate radio deejay (1980-85) and a couple of years in amateur dramatics (1984-6), therefore autodidacticism and bricolage seemed to be the best way forward. I did this by watching other comedians and by using a trial and error. Like other alt comedians, I mixed genres together to create a whole, and we also see this with post-punk bands (Reynolds, 2005; S Friedman, 2009: 3). The Pop Group, for example, combined the sounds of dub reggae, free form jazz, funk and punk rock to create a sonic whole (Reynolds, 2005: 73-74). For me, drawing from different genres seemed to be the most logical approach. For example, George Carlin’s routine, “Some Werds”, on his album *Toledo Windowbox* (Little David, 1974), provided the inspiration for material about the foibles of the English language, of which the following fragment is an example.

Disgruntled? You never meet anyone who is gruntled.

Memories of the first gig are hazy, but the experience was exhilarating, and I wanted to repeat it. However, there were no regular cabaret clubs in Newcastle where I could try out my material and develop as a performer, because I also realised that it would take years to become a good comedian, therefore to get stage time, one would need to establish a cabaret club. To achieve this, social capital would have to be utilised to recruit likeminded people to the cause. In October 1987, I approached fellow students with my idea and we formed The Fun Committee in the same month with a view to setting up a cabaret club. CAGG was established in December 1987 and I became its

resident compère. Without this regular practice as a compère, it would have been difficult to get much needed stage time and develop as a performer. However, the task of writing material was difficult in the first months, but by the beginning of April 1988 I had created observational pieces about insects called 'Flies and Wasps', which came from a fascination with insects and made use of my physicality. The following example has been reproduced from memory.

When flies see us, they see us in slow motion.

[Moving and speaking in slow motion] "I'm going to get you, you filthy bastard"!

The fly sees this and says "fuck off" [sticks two fingers up]... and flies straight into the sticky flypaper.

At this point, I only had around five minutes' worth of material; my longest piece, of which the above example was a part, was 'Flies and Wasps' but this was probably around three or four minutes in length, if I stretched it out. As a performer, I realised that to get a booking at clubs around the country it would be necessary to devise more material in order to fill a twenty-minute set. Open spots or open mike spots are always five minutes in length, and once a performer has passed this entrance exam, they progress to a half-spot of ten minutes, which inevitably leads to a full spot of 20 minutes. Only headline acts, those who appear at the top of the bill, are given extended sets of 30 minutes or more. I needed inspiration. The moment came in the summer of 1988, at The Earth Exchange Cabaret in Highgate where I saw Roy Smiles performing a set in which he played all the characters in a play. This provided the basis for a cinematic piece that included the eponymously titled *Film Trailer*; a British Pathé newsreel parody simply titled *Newsreel* and a 1950s sci-fi horror film spoof called *The Shopping Centre That Ate the World* in which I played all the characters, and is the product of my cultural capital; my love for, and self-guided knowledge of, the sci-fi horror film genre of 1950s Hollywood. *Shopping Centre* was influenced by, but also a synthesis of, *Dr Strangelove or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Kubrick, 1962); *It Conquered The World* (Corman, 1956) and the preamble to the song 'Cheepnis' by Frank Zappa and The Mothers of Invention (DiscReet, 1974). The *dramatis personae* for this piece included a Nazi scientist that was based on Werner von Braun; a useless

President, and romantic male and female leads. Here, I had incorporated the motifs, clichés and narrative devices that made up the sci-fi horror film genre. Unfortunately, the only copies of the original scripts for *Newsreel*, *Film Trailer* and *Shopping Centre* were in the appendix of my undergraduate dissertation, which I have since lost, thus I am unable to reproduce extracts.

The inspiration for *Shopping Centre* occurred on a bus journey as I was riding past the ever-expanding Eldon Square Shopping Centre in Newcastle City Centre. The completion of the Metro Centre in Dunston near Gateshead was also a contributing factor to this piece. I imagined these places as monsters that not only devoured public spaces but also as predators that were feeding upon gullible humans by lulling them into a trance and draining them of their money and humanity. *Shopping Centre* therefore served as the alchemical means of transmuting the base metal of my disgust with consumerism into comedy gold. It was always received well by Tyneside audiences, who recognised the local references and had serious misgivings about these shopping complexes. Yet *Shopping Centre* was an inflexible piece because it did not allow for updates, and was limited by its scripting. *Shopping Centre* was also too geographically specific for audiences outside of Tyne and Wear to comprehend, and I needed material that could be transported anywhere. *Newsreel*, on the other hand, was short and satirised the departure of troops bound for another pointless war and was based mainly on my memories of seeing newsreels before the features at the cinema in the early 60s, but it was weaker than the rest of the material. *Shopping Centre* and *Newsreel* were withdrawn after my first stage-death at Sheffield University in May 1989, which although a crushing experience was a much-needed lesson in writing and performing comedy. Stand-up is a reflexive practice and although it is discomfiting, stage death can prompt a performer to either reflect on the reasons for their death and produce stronger material, or leave the profession. I chose to do the former. It is also easy for a lazy, less reflexive performer to blame the audience, when the problem often lies with one's material or delivery. *Shopping Centre's* and *Newsreel's* withdrawal left a gap that needed to be filled, and I went through many pieces, none of which can be recalled here. However, the *Film Trailer* remained and became my signature piece, because of its inbuilt flexibility and modular construction, its sections were easy to

update,³¹ and the voices were drawn from a constantly-updated master list of personalities that I could impersonate. The art of selecting voices for impressions is the product of years of training one's ear to identify how the voice is being produced. Is it nasal or adenoidal? Is the speaker producing the voice from the chest or throat? How are the organs of speech – the tongue, the teeth, the lips and the hard and soft palates – being used? What about the accent? How long will it take me to learn it? I usually know instinctively if the speaker's voice is within my vocal range and this ability to tune into people's voices and imitate them can be likened to playing music 'by ear', where one picks up an unfamiliar instrument and plays a tune on it for the first time. However, without the mannerisms, the voice is only half an impression, because gestures act to complement the voice and make the impression more convincing. I had always been interested in political cartoons and my approach to impressions was that of a caricaturist. Impressionists and caricaturists have an eye for detail and distort a person's physical attributes or voice for comic effect (Bal et al, 2009). Though the voices in the *Trailer* were changed frequently, two impressions would remain until the mid-1990s and provide examples of the caricatural approach to comedy impressions. The first was Marlon Brando³², who would take a tissue or handkerchief from his pocket, look at it, begin to speak, change his mind, wipe his brow, scowl a little, appear anguished, go to speak, hesitate, stare at the tissue, raise his arm in the style of a Shakespearian actor and deliver a belch or a grunt. This would take around thirty seconds to perform, much longer than the other impressions which would only last a maximum of a couple of seconds. In this 'scene' I was caricaturing Brando's method acting³³ and, especially, his mumbling, pause-laden performance in *Apocalypse Now!* (Coppola, 1979). In caricatures, physical attributes are seized upon and exaggerated for emphasis. Exaggeration is a necessary component of the caricature because it magnifies the difference

³¹For instance, I introduced South African president F.W. De Klerk and Cecil Parkinson (who replaced Kenneth Clarke) (Diary entry, 1/3/90). De Klerk was folded into *The Trailer* because of my association with the Anti-Apartheid Movement but also because Nelson Mandela had not yet been released from prison.

³² This impression was recently re-imagined as the 'Holographic image of Marlon Brando'.

³³Although it is commonly referred to as "method acting", the name that its creator, Lee Strasberg gave it was "The Method". The technique is based on Constantin Stanislavsky's System, but diverged from the original through its insistence that actors literally 'live' the character in their daily lives throughout the period of their performance. The Method and The Technique are highly naturalistic forms of acting, which are characterized by the actors' complete psychological and emotional engagement with the character and his/her world; this is referred to as "emotional memory". Brando was not student of Strasberg's but a student of Stella Adler who had worked with Stanislavski.

between a person and a thing (Hillier, 1970; Bal et al, 2009). The second impression was Dr Ian Paisley, who debuted in 1990. I had been performing impressions of Paisley for my friends and workmates since the late 1970s. His oratory style was instantly recognisable and willingly lent itself to parody and such a voice is a gift to a comic-impressionist or caricaturist. In *Film Trailer*, I gave him the words “I am the anti-Christ”! This was both a reference to his outburst of “I denounce you as the anti-Christ” when Pope John Paul II spoke to the European Parliament in 1988; and a comment on his ‘fire and brimstone’ oratory. Sometimes this would be swapped for the words “Never! Never! Never!”, which he said in a speech condemning the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985. Distinctive voices like Paisley are a gift to impressionists, because they make the task of mimicry easier, providing the performer is skilful enough to grasp important elements, such as intonation, pitch and accent. Prominent figures that have less distinctive voices are much harder to mimic because there is nothing in the speaker’s voice that makes an impression recognisable to audiences.

Late 1989 saw the introduction of more topical comedy into my set, but writing this kind of comedy can be demanding for some performers because it dates very quickly, like the news from which it originates. It is this for this reason that many comedians avoid it and play safe by relying on tried and tested gags, but for a clever comedian, current affairs provide a rich seam of material that can be mined repeatedly. The short shelf-life of topical comedy never deterred me, because I possess a genuine interest in current affairs but, moreover, I wanted to avoid becoming stale. Topical comedy is usually political and often satirical, and I provide some examples below. This kind of comedy can be favourably compared to the living newspaper of the Blue Blouse troupes, because it informs the audiences of current events while poking fun at them. This material seemed to hint at a change of direction from theatrically-based material to something that more resembled stand-up comedy. Like other comedians of the period, I had a piece about Thatcher, which plays with the joke-form:

Anyone here interested in astrology?

I'm a Libran, which means I'm kind, gentle, easy going [pause]
Thatcher's a Libran... [pause] Astrology's a load of bollocks, isn't it?

(Notebook 1, 1989)

For lazy hacks, the mere mention of Thatcher's name, to which they might add a dash of misogyny, was an easy way to generate laughs. Instead, I took a cursory knowledge of astrology's description of the Libran character and counterposed it against her authoritarian personality, while at the same time commenting on the dubious scientific benefits of the astrology in the punchline. This is then reinforced by the rhetorical question "Astrology's a load of bollocks, isn't it?". The comedy comes from the tension between the notion of Thatcher being gentle and the media image of the Iron Lady. Therefore, any suggestion of kindness on her part was absurd, given the suffering of the communities that had been destroyed by her government's evisceration of the traditional industries and the lack of consideration for how these workers might be retrained or redeployed.

Thatcher was eventually toppled in 1990 by a combination of two factors: her autocratic style of leadership and the Community Charge or Poll Tax, which replaced the local rates as a source of local government finance. The Poll Tax was a flat tax that effectively benefitted the well-off, while punishing those with low levels of social and economic capital – the poor and the low-waged. Anti-Poll Tax campaigns were organised by Militant and the SWP to resist its imposition, yet the Kinnock-led Labour Party refused to oppose the tax and urged people to pay it, thereby reinforcing the image of a party that had lost its way. The minister with cabinet responsibility for the implementation of the Poll Tax was Nicholas Ridley, who featured in a couple of pieces. Ridley was a hardcore *laissez-faire* capitalist and was reviled by the Left, particularly for his role in the privatisation of the nationalised industries and his attacks on the Miners (qv. 'The Ridley Report', 1978). In this piece, I cast him as an aspiring comedian.

I write jokes for politicians... Nicholas Ridley came up to me and said, "Buddy, write us some gags because I'm thinking of moonlighting as a comedian. I hear there's a lot of money in it". So I said, "Nick, me old mate"... cos we're close, like... [half aside] I live in Newcastle and he

lives in London, which is as about as fucking close as I want to get to him... “Nick, of course I will. How about one about the Community Charge (Poll Tax)”? Anyway I did...I wrote one that he did at conference... “Why should a duke pay more than a dustman”? [shout] BUT HE FORGOT THE PUNCHLINE! Why should a duke pay more than a dustman? [shout] BECAUSE HE FUCKING CAN!

(Notebook 1, 1989)

This piece was written in response to Ridley’s speech to the 1989 Conservative Party conference in which he attempted to justify the hated tax by asking, “Why should a duke pay more than a dustman”? The piece is framed by announcing to the audience that “I write jokes for politicians” and from there I played with the absurd suggestion that Ridley was not a serious politician but a comedian; a very bad comedian. Ridley’s question was insulting; the tax was an unfair burden that had been imposed on people who did not have the means to pay and by assigning it the quality of fairness, he was being intellectually dishonest. When he was forced to resign in July 1990 over comments he made about the European Union - particularly Germany - Ridley claimed that he was resigning to spend more time with his family. My response was little more than undisguised venom:

It’s about time he spent some time with his family. His career is hanging by a thread. He should be hanging from the end of a rope! By the way, his name is an anagram of Nice Shy Old Liar.

(Notebook 2, 1990b)

Ten years of neoliberal economic policies had not produced the promised results of mass home-ownership. This and an item on BBC News about homelessness prompted me to write the following piece,

I saw this report on the USSR. Party leaders have country houses while some people have to live 3 families to a small flat – in this country people have to live in cardboard boxes!

(Notebook 2, 1990b)

The point here was, as far as I was aware, there was no homelessness in the Soviet Union. It was not my intention to give praise to the Soviets but to draw attention to the fact that for a highly advanced capitalist nation, with its promises of freedom and potential riches, homelessness in Britain had been increasing since 1980 and this was generated, in no small part, by the sale of council houses and the high numbers of repossessions that had taken place in the wake of Black Monday in 1987. The Thatcher government's economic policies were predicated on the notion of efficiencies and local authorities were forbidden to use their capital receipts from Right To Buy to build replacement properties. At least the Soviet Union could get something right for a country in which there were ostensibly no personal freedoms and food shortages. Such images were the stuff of television news bulletins, with its images of long queues of people waiting for hours outside a shop with empty shelves. Indeed, the regular airing of such images seemed to be the state's warning for those tempted to embrace the illegitimate doctrine of 'communism' as a solution.

There was a tacit consensus among comedians that any material written about television was a lazy way to generate laughs. The reason for this was never properly explained to me, but it is a certainty that one cannot assume that everyone in the audience has seen the item to which one is referring. However, there was a Findus 'Lean Cuisine' advert that demanded to be mocked, which featured a man who invited his girlfriend around for dinner, only to serve her a frozen ready meal. My response to this was:

Has anyone seen that Findus Lean Cuisine ad? [sings] Hey good looking, what you got cooking? [spoken] This guy invites his girlfriend around for dinner and instead of cooking her something *special*, he serves her a frozen ready meal! Now if I were that woman, I'd be thinking one of three things: one, do you think I'm fat? Two, can't you cook? Three, don't you like me? BASTARD!

(Buddy Hell on *The Late Show*, BBC2, May 1990)

This advert mediated the 'perfect' female form to the viewer as well as suggesting that if one were to eat Findus Lean Cuisine, they would be rewarded with rapid weight loss and the company of a handsome young man with a 'six-pack' abdomen. By pointing out the absurdity of the advertisement's premise

that consuming mass-produced frozen food leads to a fulfilled life, I was attacking a diet industry that convinces women to hate their bodies, but I was also critiquing the trope of the male who is unable to cook a proper meal. The word 'BASTARD' at the end of the piece was spat out with Alexei Sayle-style venom that was in turn redolent of punk rock's denunciatory statements. This piece would always get plenty of laughs, especially from women in the audience³⁴ but it was only useful as long as the advert was on television and was dropped in late 1991.

I made a brief visit to London in March 1990 and appeared at one of the early Black Comedy shows at the Albany Empire in Deptford that was organised by David Bryan and Jenny Landreth (interview). My diary entry reads:

BLACK COMEDY CLUB @ Albany Empire

Debut of Geordie. Debut proper of new intro. Reintroduced expressions as part of intro. The idea is to get some good laughs in at the beginning. Need more expressions or short bits. Ambulance is starting to drag in the second half. Needs some attention. Need more IMPRESSIONS! More use of facial expressions. The use of a good expression at the end of a weak line can have great comic effect.

(Personal Diary, 1990b)

The point about opening one's set with strong material is important, because it establishes the rhythm for what follows. Double (2005: 205) writes that "rhythm is probably as important to comedy as it is to music"³⁵. For me, 'setting the beat' as I called it, initially meant listening to other comedians before a gig but I soon noticed that I adopted their timings and rhythms, and it was not until the beginning of my middle period in late 1991 that I began to experiment with music as an aid³⁶. This initially included listening to Public Enemy, Stereo MCs and The Spin Doctors before gigs, because I felt their sonic energy – their

³⁴ On the circuit, stealing another person's material was frowned upon, but I once watched open-mouthed as an open spot performed this piece verbatim at one of the short-lived Comedy Pit Clubs at The Greyhound pub on Streatham Common.

³⁵ Timing in comedy is a much-discussed topic among comedians and comedy aficionados, but little has been written about this important element in comic performance (Attardo and Pickering, 2011: 233-250). I would suggest that the affinities between music and comedy are evident in their shared use of punctuation, which are obvious in pauses; changes of pitch, speed, tone and volume. The use of rhythm can be seen in the pause before a punchline (Attardo and Pickering, 2011: 233-250).

³⁶ By this point in my career, I had yet to discover which music worked best.

rhythms - matched my onstage energy as a physical performer. However, by the time of my epiphany in 1996, the choice of music would tend towards the phased/flanged sounds of Ride or anything with guitarists either playing power chords or using a fuzzbox. It is difficult to describe the deeply personal relationship between my musical choices, informed by habitus, and how they worked on my sense of timing, because this is an area that requires further study.

Playing the Black Comedy Clubs was different to playing other clubs on the circuit, because these were gigs in which the audiences were composed mainly of people of West Indian origin. These gigs always made me feel anxious about what I perceived to be my lack of blackness. My habitus, formed through my experiences of living on air bases on which there were often few black people and coupled with my mixed heritage, could be perceived as alien to black British comedy audiences. It is worth mentioning the experiential differences between African diasporic groups. Ben Carrington (2008) writes of his experience as a football-supporting black Londoner conducting ethnographic research in Leeds, which has a strong Black cricketing community. It is also worth noting that these experiential differences reveal the fallacious reasoning behind the notion of a homogeneous black culture. There are black *cultures* and at times, these will conflict with one another. Indeed, few people would suggest that all black people listen to hip-hop or dancehall reggae, nor would they suggest that customs of the Kru people of Liberia are the same as the Igbo of Nigeria. Black, thus becomes a contested descriptor, given the fact that, in the early 1990s, there were few if any West Africans in the audiences, let alone African-Americans. Furthermore, the term 'black', as Fanon (1966) would argue, has been constructed in opposition to 'white'. Yet, contradictorily, the concept of 'white' culture, for example, may be associated with white supremacist discourses and rightly so. Whatever the case, construction of 'black comedy' associated as it is with as skin-deep grasp of culture, indicates a subcultural or even countercultural control of space, and is a response by sections of the African diaspora to the domination of mass cultural production by white middle-class people.

Being a person of mixed ethnicity, I had grown up hearing claims that people like me would 'grow up confused' or we would be 'depressed' about our alleged 'condition'. Claims like these are rooted in the mythology of ethnic

purity, itself informed by the pseudo-science of Social Darwinism, and supported by the narrative-figure of the 'tragic mulatto' of American pulp fiction (Hall, 2003: 251; McNeil, 2011: 370-376). Even the word 'mulatto' has zoological origins and is based on notions of hypodescent; the so-called 'one drop rule' (Sundstrom, 2001: 285-307). Yet my physical appearance has often led some white people to read me as 'Arab' or 'Pakistani'. This way of reading ethnicity, again, has its origins in zoological classificatory practices, which Jin Haritaworn (2009: 115-132) calls the "scopophilic gaze". For the white supremacist, however, I was just a 'darkie', whose citizenship and nationality were of dubious legitimacy. In hindsight, my skin colour and my accent could have been used as examples of *détournement*: these outward signifiers of ethnicity and national origin could be seen as 'usual', while my comedy offered something unexpected and unusual. Audiences will often make snap judgements based on a performer's appearance and will usually refuse to believe their description of themselves.

Many comedians open their set by telling the audience a little about themselves and for me, this was a way to address issues of ethnicity and difference in a city where much of the population was white. For a while this worked, but there were times when audiences that had been raised on trad comedy or who were too 'right-on', would not appreciate the material. For some audiences, I was just a Yank who was mocking the English for cheap laughs.

As you can tell from the accent, I'm not from around these parts [pause] I'm Geordie! [in a Geordie accent] Why aye, ya bugger, it's canny lush to be here, hadaway and shite, ya soft southern bastard!

Because anyone from south of the River Tyne is a SOFT SOUTHERN BASTARD! Gateshead is just south of Newcastle across the Tyne Bridge...people from Gateshead are called COCKNEYS!

Not many black people in Newcastle. I was sitting on the bus, it's full, except for one empty seat next to me and there's one guy standing. He's looking at me, looking at the seat (repeat 3 times). I can actually hear this guy thinking "Ah divvent wanna sit next ta him! His blackness might rub off on wor! Ah might develop a sense o' RHYTHM"!

(Notebook 2, 1990b)

Claiming I am a Geordie when my accent is transatlantic is patently absurd. In this routine, I speak the words of the man in the bus in a Geordie accent complete with rising pitch towards the end of the piece. This accent had taken me eighteen months to master and I was initially worried that my imitation of their accent would irritate the Geordies but as it turned out, they rather liked it. The line, “His blackness might rub off on wor! Ah might develop a sense of rhythm” was influenced by Dick Gregory, who performed a routine about moving into an all-white neighbourhood as a black man. This piece also mocks the trope that black people make great dancers because of a supposedly innate sense of rhythm, which may be pathogenic to white bodies. The idea of blackness as a contagion was discussed by Fanon (2001: 31-33) in *Wretched of the Earth* in which he describes the colonisers’ use of Christianity as a form of social decontaminant. Moreover, notions of inherent rhythmicality come from the Vaudeville and Music Hall eras in which black performers were mainly employed as song and dance acts rather than as comedians.

‘Geordie’ would segue into the ‘Cockney Wide Boy’ character, which was devised in May 1990. My diary entry for May 17, 1990 reads:

Thought of “Cockney” equivalent to “Geordie” for use in Tyne and Wear.
Although it may be good to use both in London

(Personal Diary, 1990b)

This was a largely improvised, but derivative, routine that utilised a variety of Cockney clichés and examples of rhyming slang that was inspired by Alexei Sayle’s preamble to ‘Hullo John, Got A New Motor’ on *OTT* (Central Television, 1982). The routine always ended with,

Gawd bless the Queen Mum! Gawd bless ‘er! She’s a game old bird...
I’d still do ‘er, like... you know what I mean? [half aside] Bag and all! But
at the end of the day, right? At the end of the bleedin’ day, right? It’s
night!

I took the idea of the 'Cockney Wide Boy' character from a security guard that I met at the Barbican Centre while working there during the summer holidays. Unfortunately, and unbeknown to me at the time, the last line bore a resemblance to one of Phil Cornwell's lines, "At the end of the day, it gets dark" (BBC2, 1988). This piece was eventually dropped in 1995, because I was bored with it, but I also thought it was unoriginal. One of the problems of working on a live circuit with hundreds of other comedians is the possibility that others may have the same idea, and there seems to be no way around this problem. 'Cockney Wide Boy' was often well-received almost anywhere I went, except for New Variety gigs where it would be met with complete silence, and I suspect the reason for this was due to it being read as a slur on working class Londoners. Again, this kind of misreading occurs because of a mismatch of habituses.

I performed at the Edinburgh Fringe for the first time in August 1990. The Fringe was, at times, a bizarre and terrifying experience: our venue was in a notorious dive bar called the Phoenix Club on Cowgate, beneath the George IV Bridge that was frequented by elements of Edinburgh's criminal underworld. The week before the Fringe someone had been stabbed in gent's toilet, and this did not augur well for our time in Edinburgh. The show that I was involved in was a joint venture between CAGG and Arnold Kuenzler-byrt's Salamander Club (Lyttle interview). Our show began a week before the official opening of the Fringe. On 8 August, the unofficial first day of our run, I wrote: "Had trouble settling in". The next day is no better: "Performed a pissed set. Spent most of the time dealing with hecklers and battling the constant chatter" (Diary entry, 9/8/90).

A few days later, I played Malcolm Hardee's "Arrrrrh! It's the Tunnel Club" at The Pleasance. I wrote:

Won through, though dipped in the middle. Interviewed by R4
Kaleidoscope. Learned to relax on stage again.

(Personal Diary, 1990b)

Learning to relax onstage was a constant theme during this period. The next diary entry is on 27/8/90 and reads "Introduced strip pine Cortina to set. One of my better performances". 'Strip Pine Cortina' was a reference to a

contemporary interior design trend for stripped pine furniture in the late 80s and early 90s and I associated it as a signifier of middle-class left-liberal metropolitanism and its separation from the dire social conditions created by the Thatcher government. 'Strip Pine Cortina' was a kind of *homage* to one of Alexei Sayle's rants about Stoke Newington residents knitting jumpers out of muesli.

My next diary entry of 29/8/90 reads:

TUNNEL CLUB

Followed Emo Phillips! Malcolm (tell us a joke, show us your dick/bollocks) Hardee made things even more difficult by giving me a shite introduction and heckling me from offstage. Went for it anyway. I used the time honoured "I don't give a fuck, nothing can ruffle me approach". Won through in the end with Trailer. Quite a learning experience this one.

(Personal Diary, 1990b)

Malcolm had a habit of setting performers up for a fall – especially if they were unknown to him. He knew that following Emo Phillips would be difficult, but after a difficult start I managed to stay the course and went off to laughter and a round of applause. I talk about a "don't give a fuck" attitude but I only seemed to have had this attitude occasionally, because again I seem to have been worrying too much about the words, rather than relaxing and engaging with the audience. At this juncture, I still performed like an actor who 'did' comedy, and this was evident in my reluctance to break the fourth wall and address the audience directly. This is mainly because I was frightened of being heckled and was worried that I would not be able to summon up a clever putdown. Again, this comes with practice and few comedians are good at the beginning of their careers and take a long time to find their voice and relax on stage. American comedians like Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor, George Carlin and Bill Hicks had begun as straight stand-up comedians but at some point in their careers had undergone epiphanies and changed direction (I Ellis, 2012; Zoglin, 2008b: 3-4). For instance, Carlin was initially recognised as a TV comedian and was known for "his sharp parodies of commercials and fast-talking DJs and a "hippy dippy

weatherman”, but he realised that he was “talking to the wrong audience” (Zoglin, 2008a; Zoglin, 2008b: 17-40). By the early 1970s, he changed; grew his hair long, wore a beard, took psychedelic drugs and adopted a position against the Vietnam War (Zoglin, 2008a; Zoglin, 2008b: 17-40). He believed his role was to be a truth-teller; a shaman, rather than a crowd-pleasing gag-teller. For me, a similar process began in 1992 and was completed by 1996, but in 1990 I was an inexperienced comedian who was still performing a lot of lightweight ‘crowd pleasing’ material and punctuating it with bursts of political humour. Truth-telling can be likened to Foucault’s (1983: 1-76) Parrhesia, or speaking the truth without regard for the danger it may present. Speaking the truth in this way brings with it consequences such as censorship or audience disapproval. However, when political discourse is limited to official channels and dissenting points of view are forbidden, political humour becomes a means of challenging dominant socio-political discourses and articulating discontent, but it remains a form of carnivalesque because it cannot overthrow the system on its own. Even so, politically subversive humour has the potential to raise political consciousness in audiences.

Finding my voice

Finding one’s comedy voice or style can be compared to a search for the Holy Grail, and it make take years for a comedian to find his or her voice. A hint of my future direction occurred at the time of Gulf War One, the preparations for which began during the Edinburgh Fringe of 1990. I spent the next few months until the war’s end devising related material, while many comedians ignored it. In February 1991, there were news reports about carpet-bombing and these provided me with an opportunity to engage in some rather light-hearted word play,

I see B52s are carpet-bombing Iraqi positions – they’ll be shelling them with cushions next! Firing cuddly toys from the barrels of howitzers... ping!

(Notebook 3, 1991)

Norman Lamont, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, was charged with the task of travelling around Europe to gather support for the Gulf War. Part of his task was to raise money for the war effort.

This war's costing a few quid isn't it?

The Chancellor, Norman Lamont (he's the one that looks like Dracula) is going around Europe asking for money (for the war effort).

Things must be getting really bad... I saw him at [insert name] tube station asking for spare change.

So I said to him, "Why don't you fuck off and get a proper job"?

(Notebook 3, 1991)

In this piece, the Conservatives 'scrounger' narrative is turned on its head by casting Lamont as a mendicant outside a tube station begging for money from passers-by to support the war effort. Many of these jokes were delivered with a great deal of punk-style anger and there were times that I compared my feelings about the oppressive politics of the dominant culture as a form of pain. Thus, my comedy acted as a form of catharsis. Double (2000, 2007a: 2-22) cites Richard Pryor as an exponent of this kind of humour. Pryor took the pain of his upbringing in a brothel, the beatings he received as a child, his cocaine addiction and setting himself on fire, and turned it into comedy (Double, 2007a: 2-22, 2007b, 2007c). My pain comes from the frustration of being an ordinary citizen who is beset by grasping and symbolically violent political leaders that I am physically unable to stop. My only recourse was to lash out verbally through the medium of political humour, thus it subscribes at once to De Certeau's (1988) 'tactic as the art of the weak' and Bakhtinian (1984) carnivalesque. Political humour thus became a tactic for dealing with the frustrations and anger with the political system and megalomaniacal politicians, but is also an attempt to passively resist symbolic violence.

My transatlantic accent, thought by many people to be a 'strong American' or Canadian accent concealed my backstory, and I was read by

many audiences as another American. One way I dealt with this was through the following piece:

Yeah, I'm half-American but I'm not like a lot of Americans, I have good sense of geography. [breaks into character] "Hi could you tell me where Lee-i-sester Square is? Is Scotland Welsh? Is France in England? Can I have a glass of water"?

The great thing about being American is that I get to be first off the plane. Ok, so the plane is 35,000 feet in the air has been hijacked by Abu Nidal! [makes whistling noise] Splat!

(Notebook 3, 1991)

The first part of the joke relies on common tropes that Americans have poor geographical knowledge and pronounce foreign place names awkwardly. It was partly inspired by our neighbour at Selfridge Air Force Base in Michigan, who asked my mother if "England was in France". Many comedians use self-deprecation to endear themselves to the audience and here I use my anxiety of being seen as another American abroad by using a plane hijacking as a scenario. Abu Nidal appears because his organisation, the Abu Nidal Organization, was accused of being behind the bombing of Pan Am flight 73 in 1986. This piece was performed infrequently from 1991 to 1992 and was effectively an effort to ingratiate myself the audience by pandering to any anti-American sentiment. Sometimes having an American accent told the listener two things: first that I was fresh from the United States and knew nothing about Britain, and second, I was making fun of the British. Once, I was accused of 'faking' the accent and told by a punter that I was, in fact, West Indian; a counterfeit 'Yank.' At the end of 1991, alt cab as a movement had ceased to exist and this was reflected in *TO's* decision to change the name of the Cabaret section to 'Comedy' (see Appendix). The space was changing and becoming more conformist to meet the increasing demands of television.

My career lasted for another eight years and by 1996 I had finally discovered my voice. Bill Hicks, and to a lesser extent, Sam Kinison, had begun to have an influence on me from around 1993. Hicks was dark and like Carlin and Pryor, he talked openly about recreational drug use (a subject that I also

adopted) and political hypocrisy (Hicks, 2004: 36-62). Kinison, on the other hand, was rather politically incorrect, but also talked about drugs. What I liked about Kinison was his anger and his rhythm; he was more abrasive than Alexei Sayle (another early influence). What Hicks and Kinison were doing was more free-form and not bound by a script and I wanted to return to that style of performing, where I relaxed more and took the audience on a journey. I had done this only rarely; the first time was in Edinburgh in 1990, when I felt there was no pressure on me. I wrote in my diary:

One of these days [indicating with an arrow to the previous days] I adlibbed (sic) for about 30 mins. Most of which I can't remember. A lot of it was site-specific. Out of this came "Shoplifting" which needs to be hammered into shape. [...] These 30 mins (sic) provided me with a blueprint for future performances...

(Personal Diary, 1990b)

Whatever happened on that night had somehow been lost in the intervening years and now, at this moment in my career it had suddenly come back to me. The idea of ad-libbing or improvising can be compared to Situationist practice of *dérive*, which although intended for walking through the urban space can be applied to the act of comedy improvisation. A comic will know where the journey begins and ends and can take many detours, make a few stops and still arrive at the correct destination, which is marked in this case by end of the set. However, to improvise, a performer needs to be both relaxed and confident about themselves and what they are doing. Eventually, I began to assume an attitude of punk-style insouciance; I took the view – and this was inspired by Albert Camus's (1982) *The Outsider* - that if I said something onstage, which was not an established piece of material, that I would have to follow it through and live with the consequences of my actions. To paraphrase Meursault, the novel's central character: I chose this path for myself and I could have chosen another path; the path to safety and the security of my comedy set (Camus, 1982: 115). This took a great deal of courage, for previously, I was afraid to break away from the page, now I felt that I was free of fear and nothing mattered. How I had arrived at this position is due to a combination of factors

that included being evicted from my flat and my mother's death and it was immediately after that event that I performed an improvised riff on the marketisation of the National Health Service. From 1996 onwards, most of my material was created from improvisations. If the improvisation failed to ignite laughter, the established material acted as a backup, or I could continue until laughs were forthcoming. Improvisations that worked, those that were not specific to a time or place, would be developed into regular pieces. One thing that cripples a performer is pandering to what he or she thinks the audience wants, and not what they, the comedian *feels* inside. It is only by projecting one's inner space outward that one can break the chains of non-stop gag-telling and start telling the truth and talk about their pain. Towards the end of the decade, the material was more political and formed around 70% of my set. In 2000, I left the circuit and set out on the path to academia.

6. New Spaces II: CAST, New Variety and the Hackney Empire

6.1 Preamble

My association with CAST and The Hackney Empire began with my undergraduate work placement there in the spring of 1989. My dissertation supervisor, Richard Stourac, had suggested the Empire to me when I was unable to find a placement with a community theatre company on Tyneside. My job at the Empire was to review local and national newspapers and cut out any articles that were related to the theatre and file them into an ever-expanding archive. I also dealt with telephone enquiries and performed general administrative duties. When I had some spare time, I would explore the building, sometimes finding myself upstairs in the upper circle, which had been closed for safety reasons (no one knew I was there) or below the stage, marvelling at the amazing machinery. I returned to the Empire for a few months in the summer of 1989 to research potential donors for the theatre and carrying out administrative tasks. Even though the shows were going well and the Empire was more popular than ever, the threat of financial ruin was ever-present.

For this case study, I have made use of the Hackney Empire Archives at the University of East London and first-hand testimony in the form of interviews with Roland Muldoon as well as the work of Catherine Itzin (1986) and Sandy Craig (1984), who wrote about Britain's alternative theatre movement and included informative chapters about CAST's work. S Craig (1984) was also a local government officer with Hackney Council and was instrumental in facilitating the purchase of the Hackney Empire (Muldoon, 2013). Roland Muldoon's book *Taking on The Empire: How We Saved The Hackney Empire for Popular Theatre* was published in early 2013 and I have found this useful because it offers a useful first-hand account of the period that helps to fill in the gaps.

6.2 Left-wing rock 'n' roll kids versus the square lefties

While there had been left-wing political theatre in Britain; the WTM, the Unity Theatre and Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop, for example, highly

mobile political theatre - the kind of theatre that could simply 'pop up' anywhere - only began in the mid-1960s. Formed in 1965 by husband and wife team, Roland and Claire Muldoon, (née Burnley), CAST was the first of such companies. Roland came from a working class Irish Conservative-voting family, while Claire came from a working-class Yorkshire family that had been involved in the Independent Labour Party (Muldoon interview; Hughes, 2011). The Muldoons and the core of what would become CAST met at the Unity Theatre in Camden, North London, where they worked as stage managers. In 1965, The Muldoons were expelled from Unity for allegedly plotting a coup against the management committee (S Craig, 1984; Itzin, 1986; Kershaw, 1992; McDonnell, 2010: 98); the catalyst for their expulsion hinges on a dispute over the nature of Unity's music hall productions that Muldoon believed should be modernised for a younger generation of left-wing audiences. For his trouble, he was labelled a "Freudian Marxist" by the committee (Shallice, 2007). According to Roland (interview) there was "a generational gap and, you know, we were rock 'n' roll or whatever and they weren't". While Unity may have seen music hall as an authentic working-class form of entertainment (which it was), their approach was somewhat nostalgic and curatorial (McDonnell, 2010). Muldoon's mention of "rock 'n' roll" is instructive because it reveals how important this new music was to the youth of the 1950s and 1960s and how it helped to mark the difference between young people and the parental culture. The BBC, for example, saw rock 'n' roll as a passing fad and the only radio stations to play this kind of music were Radio Luxembourg and later, the pirate radio stations like Radio Caroline and Radio London. It is likely that Unity regarded rock 'n' roll in a similar light to the BBC and furthermore saw it as being tainted by the conditions of its capitalist relations of production.

Unity was aligned with The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and The Left Book Club, which meant that all matters had to be referred to the CPGB's headquarters on King Street (McDonnell, 2010; Muldoon interview). The Muldoons represented the positions held by the emergent New Left, which had begun with the Aldermaston CND March, and were thus in opposition to the altogether more aesthetically conservative position of the CPGB. This was a struggle, as Baz Kershaw (1992: 82) observes, "between the old left and the new left" on the field of political-aesthetic discourse and these generational tensions rested on the fulcrum of rock 'n' roll. We can liken the tension between

CAST and Unity as a form of repulsion that occurs between two autonomous poles on the *countercultural* sub-field. This repulsion inevitably led to the constitution of a new space of *countercultural* production that tapped directly into the socio-political concerns of Britain's politically-conscious youth. These concerns were increasingly being articulated through countercultural formations like the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), the Anti-Apartheid Movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement (Kershaw, 1992; Hughes, 2011; Muldoon, 2011). CAST wanted to attract this younger audience to Unity and, in so doing, inject new blood into an ageing British Left that was rather nostalgic and culturally insular.

6.3 The birth of alternative theatre

Taking Ray Levine and David Hatton (Red Saunders followed later) with them, the Muldoons established themselves at the Working Men's' College in Camden, where Roland was now working as a drama teacher and it was here that the idea for CAST was developed. CAST's philosophy was rooted in what Muldoon calls "archetypical theatre", which works by breaking the fourth wall and playing off the audience by addressing them directly (qv. Brecht, 1976). CAST developed their theatre with the idea of fitting into folk clubs, where performers played 20 to 25 minute sets, which meant the plays needed to be short and sharp. This technique is what Muldoon refers to as 'presentationalism',

...you present yourself to the audience... talk directly... any scene that you can take in 60 seconds, you can do in 50... cut, cut, cut...

(Roland Muldoon, interview)

CAST's style of quick cutting between scenes was primarily influenced by television advertisements with their fast edits and use of slogans acting as anchorage to a series of representational images (Kershaw, 1992; Shallice, 2007; McDonnell, 2010). Theatrical innovations such as these had been taking place for decades and it is worth mentioning Vsevolod Meyerhold's spectacles, whose montage style was developed from the cinema (he had been closely associated with Eisenstein) and whose episodic style had an influence on the work of Piscator and Brecht (Stourac and McCreery, 1986). The Muldoons also

borrowed the idea of music hall from Unity, which had in Roland's words "kept it alive, more than anybody" adding "Unity Theatre had seen the folk value of the music hall and they had a very good team of people doing this... you know, people like Lionel Bart" (Chambers, 1989; Muldoon interview). This reminds us of the crucial role played by Unity and other left-wing companies as a training ground for young playwrights (Chambers, 1989). New technology has an evolutionary effect on theatrical forms: it inspires the artist(s) to render human the machines, devices and the very mechanics of industrial production and co-opts them into a new aesthetic practice – in this case, avant-garde theatre.

Brecht's (1966) concept of scientific or 'epic' theatre extends and synthesises Meyerhold and Piscator's work to create a kind of theatre that is fully engaged with political discourses and dispenses with the naturalism³⁷ of the so-called legitimate theatre (Brecht [1966] and Suvin [1972] refer to this as 'bourgeois' theatre, while Bourdieu [2016]) would call it 'commercial'), which is fixated with characters, emotions and performer hierarchy (leads, principals, chorus and so on), and is therefore diversionary. Darko Suvin (1972: 72) refers to bourgeois theatre as having an "illusionist" and "individualist" aesthetic, while the epic theatre possesses a "critical" and "dialectical" aesthetic. On one hand, bourgeois/commercial theatre seeks to exploit the audiences' emotions and on the other, epic theatre seeks to inform and inspire its audiences to take action. Brecht's (1966) use of what he called the *Verfremdungseffekt* or the 'distancing' or 'alienation' effect, deliberately breaks the fourth wall to engage directly with the audience, reminding them that they are watching a play and not a representation of real life. CAST's archetypalism is therefore a bricolage adaptation of Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, which combined elements of rock n roll, satire and music hall/variety to create a *countercultural* kind of popular theatre that spoke directly to their generation but was still anchored in Marxism despite its rock 'n' roll appearance.

However, to describe CAST as 'agitprop' is incorrect and misleading, and Muldoon rejects this term as a means of describing CAST's practices. Popular theatre is the term that is favoured by Roland, seemingly because of its close

³⁷ Naturalism refers to the predominant acting styles of the legitimate theatre that emphasises the character's emotions, behaviours and so forth. This kind of acting is often associated with the acting techniques of Constantin Stanislavski. So-called 'method acting' was developed from Stanislavski's technique by practitioners like Lee Strasberg, whose Actors' Studio produced Hollywood names like Marlon Brando and Rod Steiger.

association with popular culture. CAST's rejection of formal terms like 'agit-prop' is what Bourdieu (1993, 1996) would refer to as "position taking" on the field. Officially, all theatre of this kind was singularly described by authorities as 'street theatre' regardless of whether it was performed on the street (Muldoon, 2013). According to Kershaw (1992: 82) CAST's style was a form of "carnavalesque", because it did not adopt the didacticism of continental agit-prop and was, instead, satirical and adopted a countercultural position of opposing the status quo - regardless of whether it was the authority of the state or the authority of the vanguardist left parties like the CPGB (Muldoon interview). Kershaw's (1992) use of the term "carnavalesque" to describe CAST's work seems to trivialise it and ultimately devalue it against the relatively legitimated work of agit-prop companies like Red Ladder, who S Craig (1980: 33) correctly describes as the "epitome of agit-prop". Muldoon prefers to use the conveniently coined term, 'agit pop', to describe CAST's work because they used popular cultural forms like rock 'n' roll, while being, at the same time, agitational. As if to reinforce this, CAST's first show was called "Agit Pop" and featured Adrian Mitchell, Ram John Holder (who played the character, "Porkpie", in the Channel 4 sitcom *Desmond's* in the 1980s) and Janet Street-Porter, whose husband, Tim, operated the lights (Muldoon, interview). CAST's first proper play was *John D. Muggins is Dead*, which had Roland Muldoon playing the eponymous character, a young US soldier in Vietnam. Muggins was a sort of everyman character who was at everyone's beck and call (Itzin, 1986; Kershaw, 1992; Muldoon, 2010). The name comes from the popular expression "Muggins" for a 'dogsbody' archetype. This character-incarnation of Muggins was inspired in part by Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk* and partly by Music Hall song (Muldoon interview). Muldoon (interview) explains the essence of Muggins,

...our character said "Don't talk to me about capitalism. I've eaten Walls sausages all my life"... um... uh... it was that...being cheated and mugged by society with our characters.

(Roland Muldoon, interview)

The very mention of "Walls sausages" here is in stark contrast to CAST's main rivals, Red Ladder (originally called Agitprop Street Players) who were formed in 1968 (Shank, 1978; Itzin, 1986; Red Ladder Website, 2013). Both

theatre companies took antagonistic positions to each other on the new alternative theatre field. CAST was satirical and used elements of popular culture, while Red Ladder's style was more didactic and rooted in the continental tradition of agit-prop; this is particularly evident in their use of Meyerholdian and Piscatorian visual imagery and is best illustrated in their early productions like *The Cake Play*, which was about productivity bargaining (Shank, 1978; S Craig, 1984; Itzin, 1986; Red Ladder website, 2013). The central visual theme of this play centred on the cutting and distribution of a massive cake (S Craig, 1984; Itzin, 1986). Such visual imagery, while no doubt arresting, was effective yet arguably too alien for average working class British tastes. CAST understood the value of using popular culture to support the message, which they rooted in the experience and practice and politics of everyday life - hence the reference to Wall's sausages. Their preference for this kind of approach is inscribed on their habituses and expressed through the use of cultural bricolage in their performances. The Muldoons' social and cultural capital was thus at variance with the more orthodox Red Ladder, not only because of their working-class origins, but because of their knowledge and use of British popular cultural forms.

Muldoon (interview) often depicts CAST as a band of outlaws, who were aligned with no party or group. CAST played unusual venues like universities, technical colleges and pubs. Additionally, they often opened for bands like The Rolling Stones and Pink Floyd and could thus claim to have some connection with left-leaning youth (Muldoon interview). By contrast, Red Ladder became the house agit-prop company of the Trades Union Council (TUC) because of their close association with tenants' groups and trade unions. They were also the first political theatre company to receive Arts Council funding and their application was supported by the TUC, thus they were closely bound to the labour establishment (Shank, 1978; Itzin, 1982). Muldoon (interview) was under no illusions about CAST's role as mischief-makers, "I didn't ever think it was gonna lead to [laughs] a socialist revolution". However, not taking sides with one leftist faction or another led to accusations from sections of the Left that CAST was being "too countercultural" (Muldoon interview). Roland (interview) recalls one particular example:

Ewan McColl came along and he said to us, “You know, you shouldn’t take the piss out of Mao Tse-Tung and Fidel Castro at the same time as attacking the enemies”... so we were defence as well... we’re satire... you know we’re living here... we’re talking about working class consciousness here and what they say and all the rest of it..

(Roland Muldoon, interview)

Like many *countercultural* producers of the 1960s, Roland rejected the political vanguardism that characterises many of Britain’s revolutionary left parties and took a sceptical position against sections of the left that refused to critique authoritarian figures that were considered to be on the same side. In this respect, CAST’s position is close to that of the Weimar cabarets, which critiqued the Right but also pointed out the failure of the Left to respond to new threats and challenges posed by reactionary forces. By describing themselves as satirical, CAST could claim to be rightful inheritors of the anti-establishment positions previously held by the proponents of the earlier satire boom (*TW3*, *Private Eye* et al), only in this instance, the satirists had come from solid working class backgrounds rather than Oxbridge or public school. We can also see an echo of the struggle between the old and new that Roland talked about when he and Claire were expelled from Unity, with the old being represented by the CPGB and the orthodox left, and the new left represented by new libertarian socialist and anarchist political currents. The left-wing political field with its cast of regulars was now being challenged by upstart new actors that they were powerless to stop. The old guard would be forced to adapt or be consigned to the margins as an irrelevance.

1968 marked a turning point for British theatre generally when the **Theatre Licensing Act** was repealed, meaning that scripts no longer had to be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain’s Office (Morrison, 2014). This also meant that improvisation was finally legalised. During this time, CAST formed a brief, but often uneasy partnership with political playwright, John Arden and his partner/wife Margaretta D’Arcy In 1968. Arden wrote a play for CAST using the Muggins character entitled *Harold Muggins is a Martyr*, which as Kershaw (1992: 124) notes became “the focus for a series of epic encounters between three generations of political radicals committed to subversive cultural action”. The play premiered on 14 June, 1968 at The Unity Theatre and included actors

from CAST, Unity as well as Arden and D'Arcy (Kershaw, 1992; McDonnell, 2010). Arden recruited John Fox (who would go on to found Welfare State International) and Albert Hunt "to turn the approach to the theatre into an environment" (Kershaw, 1992: 124). However, the pressures of a tight schedule exposed the ideological differences between the parties. Unity felt that the spectacles created by Fox and Hunt would "offend the neighbourhood" (Kershaw, 1992: 124), while the Muldoons and Unity were opposed (for very different reasons) to Arden's inclusion in the play of a nude woman. According to Kershaw (1992:127), "D'Arcy and Arden were keen to question the sexual exploitation of the fashion [for nudity]", which had now been unleashed by the repeal of the **Theatre Licensing Act**. The immediate aftermath of the act's repeal saw many gratuitously exploitative musicals like *Hair* and *Oh! Calcutta* in which nudity was a strong selling point (Barnes, 1969). The inclusion of a stripper was apparently done with the intention of analysing the sexual exploitation of women (Kershaw, 1992:127). However, this attempt at analysis was regarded by the Muldoons as being somewhat naïve, and although it appeared to be well-intentioned, it was, at any rate, rejected by CAST in the bluntest of terms (S Craig, 1980; Itzin, 1986; Kershaw, 1992; McDonnell, 2010; Muldoon, 2011).

After a successful visit to Berlin in 1971, CAST split up in 1972, with Red Saunders taking half the group and going off to form Kartoon Klowns, which later became the foundation of RAR (Muldoon interview; Itzin, 1986). The split occurred in the middle of filming 'Planet of the Mugs' (CAST had turned down a film offer from Andrew Loog-Oldham, the former Rolling Stones manager), which was never released. However, the main reason for the split was because the Muldoons had become parents and this made touring difficult, which invariably highlighted tensions within the group, money was another concern, but they had also fallen out with each other over the need for an Arts Council grant. McDonnell (2009: 103) notes that during this juncture: "The group sat on the sidelines while fractions within the working class began mobilising against the new Conservative government, led by Edward Heath". However, CAST had no other choice: the Muldoons had a young child and as Roland (interview) notes facetiously, "they (the rest of CAST) didn't want to take their share of babysitting". The Muldoons also needed a regular income to provide for their young family and continue their work, and this forced them into a position where

they had to apply for a grant or consider other options. During this time, Roland worked for Counter-information Services (CIS), which specialised in producing “anti-reports” into multinational companies and industrial conglomerates (Muldoon interview). Even so, CAST managed to produce one play during this period: *Come in Hilda Muggins* was staged in 1972. Muldoon describes the play as “awkward”; one that they had to “drag around the country” (McDonnell, 2010: 104). This was followed in 1975 by the play that would cement their reputation as Britain’s foremost subversive theatre troupe and eventually secure their future. *Sam the Man* was billed as “a Cartoon History of the Labour Party since 1945 to date” (McDonnell, 2010: 104) and was a savage critique of the Labour Party’s betrayal of the working class. According to Muldoon (interview), *Sam the Man* was based upon Ralph Miliband’s book, *Parliamentary Socialism* and listed every twist, turn and lie of the Labour Party, and helped to provide CAST with their first ACGB grant of £5000. The Arts Council grant allowed CAST to work full-time, but it put pressure on them to produce two plays a year; it also meant that they had to recruit new performers to replace those who had departed four years earlier. The Arts Council grant also meant that CAST altered their direction and in McDonnell’s (2009: 104) words “The revolutionary “gang” became the revolutionary theatre company”.

6.4 The Road to New Variety

When CAST received their first Arts Council grant it marked a major change in direction from their earlier plays: not only were they compelled to produce two plays a year, they introduced more variety elements to their work. This meant more solo work from Roland, who often addressed the audience in the style of a stand-up comedian. What makes this work different from previous plays is the impact of Gramsci’s (2003) theory of cultural hegemony. This is particularly evident in CAST’s use of satire as a means of raising consciousness in their audiences as well as making them laugh (Mascha, 1998). *The Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci, 2003) were translated into English in the early 1970s and Roland (telephone conversation, 7/8/13: 1739) told me that he had encountered Gramsci’s theories through a discussion group while he was involved in CIS (during CAST’s hiatus) and later attended a course devoted to his work. This period foregrounds CAST’s future direction as variety promoters and alternative

impresarios and is most evident in plays like *Sam the Man*, which makes use of stand-up comedy as a vehicle for radical ideas.

Feminism (second wave feminism), had become an increasingly important focus of 1970s counterculture and had been formally adopted as a cause by the International Socialists (IS), the forerunner of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which Roland (interview) had joined in the middle of the 1970s, but had left shortly thereafter. The IS organised Marxist seminars for CAST to provide them with a theoretical foundation from which to work (Hughes, 2011). Feminism thus began to feature prominently in CAST's work. This is particularly evident in their 1979 play, *Full Confessions of a Socialist* that was developed from *Confessions of a Socialist*, which was originally devised in the first quarter of 1976 but not performed until 1978, and happened against the backdrop of ACGB cuts (HE/CAST/SHO/2/1-7). In *Confessions* Roland performs a stand-up comedy version of his Muggins character and opens with the line "I hate my wife and my wife hates me". Here he is parodying the hackneyed set-up of the northern club comedian's sexist 'take my wife' joke but one audience in particular questioned the line's construction. Muldoon explains,

"...afterwards they stormed on the stage at Edinburgh [...] and demanded that I change the line to "MY wife hates me, I hate her" and it was all right from then onwards"

(Roland Muldoon, interview)

On the other hand, Roland (interview, 2010) tells us that many men made a literal reading of his character and believed that he was expressing the very things that they were thinking (Harry Enfield's "Loadsamoney" and Warren Mitchell's "Alf Garnett" characters have also suffered from this). Roland's Muggins character in *Confessions* was a send up of the trad comedians of the WMCs and the popular Granada Television series, *The Comedians*. *Confessions* mainly discusses automation through the Universal Gottlieb Junction Joint Machine, but takes in the contradictory nature of working class package holidays to Francoist Spain and the failures of Harold Wilson (HE/CAST/SHO/1/1-7). The SWP also recorded the play on audio cassette (HE/CAST/SHO/2/8-11).

The final performance of *Full Confessions* occurred a month before their prescient “Gala Evening of Variety” at the Star and Garter pub in Putney in May 1979 (*Time Out* 80, 1979:21) that featured CAST, Limousine (billed as a “funky seven piece band”) and the Covent Garden Community Theatre Group (HE/CAST/SHO/2/9/1) and was a benefit for single parent families. This show took place a month before The Comedy Store opened and provides us with a glimpse of CAST’s future direction. It also reveals to us the kind of cultural capital the Muldoons possessed; this was not a stand-up comedy event, rather, it was an effort to revivify the moribund genre of variety theatre. Unfortunately, when I asked Roland about this show, he had no recollection of it. Yet this date tells us that the idea of a new kind of live entertainment genre was in gestation and ready to be born. It also tells us that the idea of creating a new form of entertainment cannot be solely attributed to The Comedy Store.

Roland took *Full Confessions* to New York as the guest of New York Labor Theatre and won the *Village Voice*’s Off Broadway Theater Award (or OBIE). He says that he improvised performances every night and delivered the play “on the mike, a la stand-up comedy, direct to the audience” (ibid). This is where the field of political fringe theatre begins to transform the comedy field but only at the *countercultural* level. Around this time, Roland had “tentatively” joined Tony Allen’s Alternative Cabaret collective, but the late nights were not conducive to family life and he left after seven gigs (Muldoon interview). Roland also performed at the early Comedy Store, but he admits that he was not well received by the audience and was not used to this (Muldoon interview). The Comedy Store has always had a reputation for being a difficult gig for anyone performing political material and as Nick Revell (questionnaire) points out,

...the audience would be a mix of counter-cultural and very mainstream people who were there for the heckling and the simple fact it served drink till 2am or whatever time it closed. So it was quite a volatile environment. Particularly doinig (sic) political stuff - some people cheering, others threatening physical violence.

(Nick Revell, questionnaire)

The clash between aesthetic sensibilities: on the one hand, the alt comedians and on the other, audience members that had been acculturated to

accept only gag-driven comedy as legitimate, indicates a mismatch of habituses. CAST's other plays from this period include *What Happens Next?*, "which warned trade unionists of the dangers of complacency over the issue of race" and was written in conjunction with the ANL (Muldoon, 2013:25; HE/CAST/SHO/2/1-7), and *Goodbye Union Jack*, a piece that examined Britain's industrial decline, which was both a celebration of TUC General Secretary Jack Jones's imminent retirement, and a pun on his name and status. According to Muldoon, *Goodbye Union Jack* prompted a great deal of late night debate over the play's title (Muldoon, 2013: 26). Alongside autodidacticism, discussion and debate are important elements in countercultural pedagogy and here we see the role of cultural forms in stimulating debate. This indicates that the play had fulfilled its role in challenging the cultural hegemony and the dominant political consensus. However, *What Happens Next* attracted controversy and the guarantee against loss was not covered by some Local Arts Associations. Roland believed that the decision was a direct result of the group's involvement with the ANL (HE/CAST/SHO/2/1-7). *The Cornish and Devon Post* (9/9/78) reported that CAST were due to play at the St John's Ambulance Hall in Launceston, but this was cancelled at the last moment and the venue was moved to the White Hart Hotel. A letter from the local Conservative Association published in *Western Morning News* (8/11/78) reads:

It seems disgraceful that public money should support the Anti-Nazi League, and after discussion attempts were made to form a branch of the League.

An explanation is certainly required from S.W. Arts and an enquiry as Mr Scott suggests is probably the only way to sort out the situation and to ensure that S.W. Arts keeps well out of politics whether Left or Right.

(HE/CAST/SHO/2/1-7)

This letter ignores the very real threat of the rise of the far-right and the increase in racist attacks. The murder of Altab Ali in Tower Hamlets earlier in the year does not appear to have fazed the letter's authors (Widgery, 1986). What the authors appear to have ignored was that the ANL's founding statement was signed by Labour MPs and public figures like John Gielgud,

John Conteh, Larry Adler, Johnny Speight, Billie Whitelaw and Professor Zygmunt Bauman (HE/CAST/SHO/2/1-7). At this juncture, CAST appears to have become political theatre's equivalent to The Sex Pistols, whose tour of the country under the name 'SPOTS' (Sex Pistols On Tour) in 1977, attracted similar problems with venues, under pressure from local authorities, cancelling shows at the last moment (Savage, 1991:390-392).

After *Confessions* and immediately before they fully established New Variety, CAST toured satirical plays like *Hotel Sunshine* and *Sedition 81*. The former play criticised British political establishment's attachment to the nuclear 'deterrent', while the latter mocked the upcoming Royal Wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer (Muldoon interview). The play included a scene in which they staged the mock execution of most of the Royal Family. In *Sedition*, Muldoon plays a "crazed dope fiend living on an Arts Council grant" who hands out "spliffs" to the audience as a "tax rebate" at the end of the show (Shallice, 2007; Muldoon, 2013; Muldoon interview). Roland is, at once, sending up the tabloid stereotype of the layabout 'lefty' and mocking the journalists who form these opinions, yet he is also 'sticking two fingers up' to them.

When asked about the possible influence of punk on CAST, Muldoon (interview) claims that CAST was "proto-punk". We can situate this word within the counterculture by looking at bands that have been retrospectively defined as proto-punk, most of which were based around the Ladbroke Grove anarchist scene (CAST were based up the road in Kensal Green). Tony Allen's Alternative Cabaret was based at The Elgin pub, also on Ladbroke Grove and was part of this countercultural milieu. CAST were not anarchists, they were (and still are) libertarian socialists. Roland's attitude is punk in terms of the way he confronts and challenges CAST's critics. It also goes beyond the point that other theatre companies were prepared to venture: the handing out of a massive "spliff" at the end of a show may sound rather passé these days but we must remember that in the Sixties, Seventies and early Eighties, the smoking of cannabis was seen rather differently by the authorities (often depending upon where one lived), and heavy fines³⁸ could be imposed for its possession³⁸. Thus,

³⁸ In 1975, I received a £95 fine, which was roughly equivalent to twice my weekly wage, for the possession of less than 3 grams of cannabis resin. Between 1980 and 1981, annual "Smokey Bear's Picnics" were held in Hyde Park where hundreds of people would gather to smoke cannabis in open defiance of the police. The final picnic was quickly shut down by the Metropolitan Police's SPG.

because of cannabis's illegality, the act of handing the audience a massive joint can be seen as an act of subversion in itself: the ideal 'topping off' to a politically subversive play.

6.5 Responding to Thatcher's symbolic violence

CAST's reputation for subversive acts often attracted the attention of the press and on one occasion, Roland recalls an incident in 1982, when the *News of the World* (*NotW*) had sent a reporter (described by Muldoon [interview] as a "Benny Hill lookalike") and a photographer to obtain evidence of CAST's onstage drug-taking and ACGB money being wasted on a simulated assassination of Margaret Thatcher. The journalist did not get his story, but this did not stop him from fabricating one and the following Sunday, the *NotW* reported that CAST had "spent £34,000 of "taxpayers' money on drugs" (Muldoon, 2013: 115). There was no point in suing the *NotW* for printing a malicious falsehood either, and as Roland says "I asked the late Paul Foot if I could sue them, and he said you can only complain as they're so powerful they can print whatever they like" (Muldoon, 2013: 115). The printing of sensational stories such as these reminds us of the press's contribution to a tapestry of myths and slurs that was deployed as a propaganda weapon to discredit the Left in the Eighties. What this also serves to illustrate is how sections of Britain's notionally 'free' press are motivated by sales to the extent that fabrication is often seemingly preferred to producing a truthful copy. Conversely, such 'news' items help to reinforce the notion, on the part of the legitimating authorities, that there are such things as 'worthy' (legitimate) arts and 'unworthy' (illegitimate) arts. These classifications seem to accompany the revived Nineteenth century social, but notional, classifications of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. One, the heritage form, is characterised by opera and so on, nominally deserves funding on account of its legitimacy that rests entirely on its assumed social value. The other, the low cultural form, here apparently characterised by CAST's politically subversive theatre, is afforded no measure of legitimacy.

Muldoon (interview; 2013: 30) says that, despite their lack of funding, CAST saw *Sedition 81* "as a challenge to the New Comedy" and with the Arts Council subsidies now cancelled, CAST was placed on hiatus and the Muldoons migrated to the embryonic alternative space, creating New Variety as

a form of cultural intervention. “We were setting down a marker” insists Muldoon (interview), “because you can’t believe that you can have a left idea without something going on”. Thus, *New Variety* assumed simultaneous positions against light entertainment, old variety and the Thatcher regime. At this point in time, political comedy on the embryonic alt cab circuit was limited to a small number of performers (Herbert, W Lee questionnaires; Boyton, Gribbin, Kelly, Dembina, Darrell interviews). It is difficult to say with any degree of certainty whether or not CAST was entirely responsible for this shift in attitudes on the circuit. Indeed, Tony Allen was already performing politically subversive material as early as 1979. One thing is for certain: the economic austerity that was being imposed on the country by the Thatcher government was beginning to have a deleterious effect on people’s lives. This and the inner city riots, coupled with the continued occupation of Northern Ireland were starting to filter through to the alt cab circuit and by 1982, we can see that the process of importing political discourse into the new comedy field is more or less complete. This is evident in Alexei Sayle’s appearance on the late-night show *OTT* (Central Television, 1982), in which he delivers stinging diatribes about austerity economics; the ideological turpitude of the Social Democratic Party and the government’s moralising rhetoric in the aftermath of the inner city riots. Other performers of this kind would follow, and the alt cab and *New Variety* circuits were the only spaces that allowed for views like these to be expressed. Indeed, these performances can be described as didactic because the comics conveyed knowledge to their audiences through the medium of humour. This knowledge was not available elsewhere because the discourses produced about the riots within the corporate media tended to frame any discussion in terms of criminality. Furthermore, the range of permitted discourse within the mainstream media was narrow and focussed almost exclusively on efficiencies, consumer choice and personal responsibility as well as Thatcher’s quasi-*Poujadiste*³⁹ notions of entrepreneurialism and petite bourgeois self-denial (Bourdieu, 2003). These positions opposed the so-called ‘permissiveness’ of the 1960s and 1970s, and were fused with idealised notions of Victorian moral conduct.

³⁹ Poujadism takes its name from Pierre Poujade, the owner of a book and stationers shop in Lot, France, who formed the Union de Défense des Commerçants et des Artisans (UCDA) to organise tax protesters. The UCDA gradually became associated with Poujade himself. The UCDA’s loose doctrine was referred to as ‘Poujadism’ and was characterised by anti-intellectualism, xenophobia, anti-parliamentarianism and petite-bourgeois asceticism (Trouchard, 1956; Bourdieu, 2003). Therefore any reactionary conservative movement that espouses such beliefs is often described as ‘Poujadiste’ by political commentators.

Sedition 81 was thus an affront to the Thatcher regime's appeal to moral rectitude as well as a subversive marker to the new performers on the alt cab circuit.

CAST's main parliamentary nemesis was the Conservative MP, Teddy Taylor, then the MP for Glasgow Cathcart (1964-79) and a prominent member of the reactionary Monday Club. When the Conservative Party won the 1979 General Election, Taylor lost his seat but his cause was shared by others in the party who wanted to abolish the ACGB or, at least, restrict its funding to what they considered to be more legitimate causes. Taylor was returned to the Commons in the 1980 Southend East by-election and immediately resumed his witch-hunt against CAST (Muldoon interview). According to Mike Parker (unpublished newspaper article draft [1], CAST archives, 1986), Taylor said "It is an outrageous waste of money. I'd like all grants withdrawn from this theatre company and intend to make representations to the authorities". This view was shared by others in the Conservative Party, most notably Norman Tebbit, the MP for Chingford, who had urged the abolition of the ACGB during the Heath government. CAST was also targeted by James Goldsmith's magazine *NOW!*, which served as a vehicle for Goldsmith's reactionary political views (Muldoon interview; *Daily Telegraph* obituary, 1997). Goldsmith, who was known to take a dislike to anyone who questioned his business methods, had been knighted in Harold Wilson's 'Lavender List'⁴⁰ and, in 1976, had issued 60 writs against the satirical magazine *Private Eye* with the intention of bankrupting it and imprisoning its editor, Richard Ingrams (Milne, 1986; Bindman, 2007). Few people were willing to confront him. Yet CAST welcomed the negative publicity that Taylor and others had helped to generate for the press and delighted in winding him up, because any publicity, however negative, is often perceived as good publicity and can often work to one's advantage. Indeed, the negative publicity generated by the media over the antics of bands like The Stones or the Sex Pistols only served to enhance their image and increase their popularity. In this respect, CAST's claims to being rock 'n' roll or proto-punk are not without

⁴⁰ The so-called 'Lavender List' was Harold Wilson's 1976 resignation honours list. Those who appeared on the list were mainly from the political Right and questions were inevitably raised as to Wilson's judgement in the list's drafting. The most curious inclusion of all was a knighthood for James Goldsmith, who had been concerned about Britain's 'slide into communism' and had held meetings with former military officers who shared his views and were planning to stage a coup d'état against the Wilson government and install The Earl of Mountbatten as Prime Minister. The coup never went beyond a show of force at Heathrow Airport under the rubric of 'anti-terrorism manoeuvres' (qv. Curtis, 1999; Kennedy, 2016).

foundation: they were theatre's equivalent of a rock band and used tricks that played upon and enhanced their subversive reputation (De Certeau, 1988).

It was around this time that CAST moved into The Diorama⁴¹, near Regents Park. The Diorama, as its name suggests, was a Georgian cinema that was built in the 1820s and had been squatted by a number of diverse groups including CAST, the new circus company Ra Ra Zoo; film-maker, Derek Jarman and "other fragments of the hard-pressed counterculture" (Muldoon, 2013: 31). At the same time, CAST's funding for its theatre projects was terminated by the ACGB and they created New Variety. With a great deal of variety and comedy expertise already under their belts, CAST were better placed than other fringe theatre companies to make a traverse migration from the field of alternative theatre to alternative talent agency/variety promoters on the border of the new field of alt cab. This is indicative of their *countercultural* competence: being able to spot underground opportunities and to seize upon them by using their DIY skills to create cultural spaces in a way that other companies would have found difficult to execute (De Certeau, 1988; McKay, 1996; Bourdieu, 2003). Muldoon (Interview, 2010) says,

I mean from my point of view, I won an OBIE in New York (1979 -81) for what was stand up theatre basically... which was a comedy rant for 60 minutes... um... and they could see it in *The Village Voice*... but they didn't have a problem with that concept at all... if you see what I mean... and I would... and we all were doing sort of stand-up type plays by the end, you know, New Variety began in 1981... and *Sedition* was '81, which was a tour of Britain as a cabaret-comedy show...

(Roland Muldoon, interview)

Here, Muldoon mentions "comedy-cabaret" as a distinct form of entertainment and it is possible to deduce that CAST realised what was about to happen to alternative theatre companies and were unconsciously preparing for the time when they would have to leave theatre altogether. The left-wing theatre field was being squeezed; most companies would be forced to relocate, disappear entirely or, like Red Ladder, took the *countercultural* capital they

⁴¹ The Diorama is part of the Crown Estate and so technically belongs to the Queen.

possessed and used it symbolically when they migrated to the partly legitimated field of touring theatre in 1985.

The Comedy Store has often been credited with breaking alt com to a wider audience and rightly so, but the groundwork had been done throughout the 1970s with acts like John Dowie (who came out of Birmingham Arts Lab) performing in art centres around the country; 20th Century Coyote's appearances at the Band on the Wall in Manchester (Peters, 2013) and CAST's more stand-up orientated plays towards the end of the decade. CAST's *raison d'être* was different to that of The Store: they were very much part of the *countercultural* space, while The Store assiduously constructed itself on the margins of the dominant culture. Out of its two promoters, Don Ward and Peter Rosengard, only Ward had some knowledge of the entertainment industry - albeit the seedier side of the industry⁴² (Cook, 2001). Rosengard was looking for a British version of American stand-up comedy, while Ward's comedy roots were in an altogether more traditional, if not, low-brow field of the performing arts, as the compère of a strip club (Cook, 2001). Thus, we can see that The Comedy Store was the product of Ward's hard-headed business sense and Rosengard's amateurism. The Muldoons, on the other hand, were from working class backgrounds and had brought their aesthetic dispositions with them to the field of popular entertainment. Their cultural capital was thus produced by their work in alternative theatre.

It is also worth noting that after its move to new premises in 1982, The Store left its former life as an avant-garde comedy space behind and became a straight stand-up comedy club. Ward now forbade anything that resembled variety on his stage – this included comedy impressionists, whom some impresarios and comedians tend to regard as 'cheats', because they use their vocal skills rather than jokes to raise a laugh (Balloo, Gribbin, Kelly interviews). However, in 1982, The Store was the only venue to have actually done this; the rest of the clubs referred to themselves as cabaret clubs and offered variety bills. In the same year CAST began its New Variety shows at the Old White Horse in Brixton. The pub had a small hall attached to it and had been used as a billiard hall. The Old White Horse had been 'discovered' by their administrator

⁴² Don Ward was previously the compère and organiser of a strip club but had also worked as an unsuccessful stand-up comedian.

Warren Lakin⁴³ who had driven around London looking for venues. There were a large number of pubs like the Old White Horse in London, whose halls and function rooms had once hosted pub rock bands, but were now being used to store unused equipment or had been turned into games rooms. Many of these rooms would be given new life when they were turned into alt cab or New Variety venues, and most of the time a pub landlord would be happy to allow the room to be used, because it meant increased bar takings.

6.6 The birth of New Variety

Variety as an entertainment form had been, rightly or wrongly, identified in the public consciousness with the BBC's variety shows like *Seaside Special* and the other *variety-style* programmes, all of which seemed hark back to a bygone era but had, in reality, been pieced together from scraps of memories and held together with the glue of mythology. *The Royal Variety Performances* on ITV also cemented in the public memory a mythologised continuum of variety that had seemingly existed for eons, but which appeared to live in a hermetically-sealed space outside of history. In addition to this, the BBC screened *The Good Old Days*, a Baudrillardian (2008) simulation of music hall that bore a passing resemblance to the form itself. The general public's perception of variety and music hall was thus a somewhat sanitised one that was helped along by this simulation. Indeed, in the WMCs, to which many variety performers had migrated when the theatres had closed, variety was mainly overshadowed by show bands, bingo, strippers and comedians. Programmes like *The Wheeltappers and Shunters Social Club* (Granada Television, 1975) used the WMC format and usually offered one variety act per show, but they played second fiddle to the racist and sexist jokes of rising star Bernard Manning and the guest comedians that appeared on the show. Many of the variety artistes that appeared in the halls and theatres had been recruited to the new medium of television in the 1950s, but these performers were mainly stand-up comedians or double acts like the popular Morecambe and Wise. The plate-spinners, jugglers and paper-tearers were mainly left behind and

⁴³ Lakin, a former local Southend journalist, would later go on to manage Linda Smith (he was also her partner) and run the Sheffield-based talent agency, Cabaret Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the late 1980s. He now co-runs Lakin McCarthy Entertainments also based in Sheffield.
<http://www.lakinmccarthy.com/about.asp>

appeared for the occasional television special but, as an entertainment form, variety had been shunted into the sidings. Occasionally rolled out like a vintage steam train on a heritage railway line, it could only remind visitors of its glorious past. Old style variety was comatose and on 'life-support', and contrary to Michael Grade's thesis on BBC4's *Story of Variety* (BBC, 2012), the concept of variety had actually been kept alive by CAST/New Variety on their circuit and at the Hackney Empire. Grade, for whatever reason, appears to have overlooked this, and I would suggest this is because his background in legitimated entertainment caused him to misrecognise New Variety as a form of entertainment, and this is possibly because of CAST's reputation for subversive acts.

For the Muldoons, New Variety was more than just a simple revival of a dead form; it was a fresh version of variety that situated itself in the present and still contained strong traces of rebellion. Significantly, New Variety was positioned against Allen and Sayle's Alternative Cabaret collective.

Alternative Cabaret was... um... limited in our opinion, because it only had a few acts... you know, it had a theory that it had a few acts who would go on tour wasn't for everybody... but New Variety was for everybody.

(Roland Muldoon, interview)

Here, Roland highlights what he sees as Alternative Cabaret's limitations. Its roster of performers was small, and many had left for other fields by 1982. His claim that New Variety was "for everybody" therefore reveals that it was for all-comers rather than a select group of performers that were linked through social capital. Even the employment of the word 'New' as a prefix to 'variety' serves to mark a distinction between the old politically disinterested variety and the new variety. To this end, CAST made a conscious decision to filter out the racists and the bigots (Muldoon interview) that had cluttered up the television's variety output. In this way, the Muldoons applied their judgements, produced through in their habituses to make distinctions and thus lay the foundations for what they saw as a new socially inclusive popular form of entertainment. Its emphasis on variety and its refusal of what Roland saw as an

'alien' entertainment form in the shape of cabaret (interview) defined it aesthetically and relationally.

Muldoon (interview) is insistent about variety's socio-political value,

[...] we keep it alive; so that it can flower again at a time of social confusion [...] you can't believe that you can have a left idea without something going on.

(Roland Muldoon, interview)

It is interesting that Roland uses the words "social confusion". We can see this in the socio-political upheavals that are characterised by the constant cultural and ideological battles on the terrain of the class struggle, which had reached fever pitch by the 1980s and had been stoked in part by the Conservative-owned press. The Thatcher government had encouraged people to think of themselves as individuals or entrepreneurs with no thought for the society in which they lived. Conversely on the British Left, there is a po-faced, self-referential and inward-looking attitude among some parties, and certain forms of culture (youth culture, especially) tend to be viewed as peripheral or vulgar. Rock or reggae music are seen as having no function other than as diversions and for some on the Left, 'culture' means aspiring to bourgeois culture; in other words, the kind of mass-produced high cultural forms that are produced by what the Frankfurt School called 'the culture industry' (Adorno, 2001). Yet having left ideas are meaningless if they cannot relate to people's everyday lives, and culture is a means of connecting with those lives and addressing social concerns. Laughter and dancing are closely bound to the body and thus both activities may be seen as 'base' by the more ideologically ascetic Left parties that are hoping to recruit new members. Yet it is culture that holds us together as a society and within whatever communities we happen to belong to; it occupies a crucial role of everyday life. Few but the faithful are prepared to commit themselves a life of political asceticism and self-denial. There is little point in proselytising on street corners if the promise of joy and celebration are seen to be absent. In this sense carnivalesque cultural events serve a very vital function in terms of allowing members to let off steam.

6.7 New Variety and funding

CAST had been running its New Variety shows in parallel to its theatre work from 1982, but the Muldoons had found that by 1985, they could no longer continue touring their plays and devoted their attention to their work in New Variety. From this point onwards, they are known as “CAST/New Variety” (though they would often use a confusing variety of names). Though CAST had been forced to abandon their theatre work, they had harboured serious thoughts of returning to it at some future stage (Muldoon interview). Meanwhile, it would put most, if not all, of its efforts into its circuit and eventually, the Hackney Empire.

Including the first venue at the Old White Horse in Brixton, there was a core of eight spaces throughout London. In the early 1980s, CAST/New Variety secured funding from the Greater London Council (GLC) for a tour of London’s 32 boroughs (Muldoon interview). How they managed to secure funding can be attributed to a mixture of audacity, charm and serendipity. Tony Banks, then Labour’s GLC councillor for Tooting, had written an open letter defending subsidies for the arts and culture in the *Evening Standard*, so when Labour formed the majority on the council in 1981, Banks became the chairman of the influential Arts and Recreation Committee. Muldoon (interview) tells the story,

And I wrote to Tony Banks saying “Well, let me help you” and then he... the weird thing was that I was on the tube with my daughters going to meet him and he was there, sitting opposite us and my daughters were so charming and we were so great and was so charmed by us [...] Then I went into the GLC building... into the office and there was this bloke... that I’d been on the tube with... but, anyway, he said “I’m going into the chamber now to get a million pounds when you come back, tell me what you would do with it”... So I divided it by the minimum Equity wage into a million, when he came back I said, “You should employ 200,000 [slight laugh] artists, of which one third will run off with the money, one third will be absolutely fucking useless and the other third will change the world”... you know... and, uh... he didn’t do that... but he made it accessible for us to get money...

(Roland Muldoon, interview)

Access to GLC funding was vital to the New Variety circuit because without this, they would not have been able to pay the acts at a rate that was just above the Equity minimum wage (Muldoon interview). CAST/New Variety was one of a handful of promoters who paid the going rate for performers. Other promoters were less generous, and many would operate a sliding scale on which headline acts were paid substantially more money than the support acts or the compère. This financial hierarchy can be traced back to the days of Music Hall and it was an issue which led to the 1907 performers' strike for better pay (Honri, 1997). Of course, there were less scrupulous promoters who would, in spite of a full house, pay the acts a pittance and pocketed the remainder of the takings. Promoters like these did not last long in the business with word of their underhandedness being spread around the circuit⁴⁴.

Under Labour, the GLC committed itself to arts and culture and took a strong line on equality and under the leadership of Ken Livingstone; the GLC allied itself to the Rainbow Coalition, which opposed racism, sexism and homophobia (Campbell and Jacques, 1986; Garnham, 1987). It also pursued green policies and thus opposed Thatcher's neoliberal economic and social policies. The Rainbow Coalition became a target for the right-wing press, which cited its policies as extravagant and indicative of Labour's profligacy in local government. However, London is a multicultural city and the celebration of these cultures was seen by Livingstone and the ruling Labour group as vital to creating social harmony and cohesion as well as celebrating the city's diversity. The generosity of the GLC's grants was never matched by the ACGB, which were paltry by comparison (Muldoon interview). The ACGB was under a new picked chairman, William Rees-Mogg, whose view of the arts and culture was based largely on his bourgeois aesthetic disposition. His vision was imposed through his policy document "The Glory of the Garden", which showed a preference for legitimate art practitioners, and also split the ACGB into regional arts boards, making the touring of plays difficult, because a grant application now had to be submitted to each regional board (Dorney and Merkin, 2010). In 1986, the GLC was abolished and responsibility for funding the arts fell to the

individual borough councils and Greater London Arts (GLA) (Hipkin, 1986: 41-42). As a result, the New Variety circuit was reduced to a core of six venues (including the Hackney Empire), all of them in Labour-controlled boroughs: Lambeth, Hackney, Haringey, Hillingdon, Brent and Waltham Forest. These venues continued alongside The Hackney Empire until they were each forced to close because of a funding shortfall.

6.8 Disseminating the message/educating the public

Publicity is important to any cultural promoter and the way in which the message is disseminated to the public is crucial for attracting audiences. Posters and flyers typically combine images with text and during the 1980s, publicity materials like these were produced by small-scale operations using DIY methods to save money, since only commercial operations – financially supported by sponsorship and large volumes of door receipts – could afford professional typesetting and printing. CAST's posters were originally hand-drawn and used photographs of the performers, which were juxtaposed with the name of the acts. The Hackney Empire posters adopted the variety block format, and this was a deliberate attempt to recall the posters of the music hall and variety eras. Muldoon says that they

...did them in a contemporary form, because we knew we were [...] borrowing from the great variety tradition [...] also, we were using names; the names aren't just a picture, you know, you're gonna have Seething Wells and Paul Merton and... so you needed these kind of distinct dots... which is a fascinating thing to do... cos nobody but nobody was doing anything like that [...] the people look at them and say "Cor, look Frank Skinner" and you know... you know... Eddie Izzard or you know [...] they're all on at the Old White Horse for £2.50 and it's like a variety bill... but a contemporary variety bill... and then along came desktop publishing and then everything changed...

(Muldoon, interview)

Like CAGG, CAST found that once desktop publishing was introduced, the nature of the posters changed. With the production of digitised promotional

materials, the public now came to expect slick, uniformly produced posters with no spatial inconsistencies (however small) and other flaws that gave the posters their character. What is also interesting about CAST's posters and those of the Hackney Empire is what Muldoon (interview) describes as the "subliminal" use of the proscenium arch at the top of the poster (at CAGG, this was a 'masthead'). According to Muldoon (interview), this was done deliberately to plant the seed in the public's mind that what they were about to see was a variety show. It was therefore a very subtle means of educating a public whose habituses had no conception of variety shows as a live form of entertainment. On the other hand, variety was seen as outmoded, possibly *déclassé* with old artists appearing occasionally on television on shows like the BBC's *Seaside Special*. Posters like these refuse the aesthetic of the pure gaze and, instead, engage the viewer by providing them with the necessary information to make choices or pique their curiosity to the extent that they may go and see the show being publicised. Alternatively, the graphic design and the information provided on the poster may appeal directly to a viewer, whose habitus may possess a political-aesthetic disposition. Posters and flyers like these give equal space to form and function. CAGG's posters, for example, deliberately recalled the photomontage style of John Heartfield and asked the viewer to consider the form equally with its function (see Figure 12, Appendix 3.4).

Roland (interview) was quick to point out that there is no link between the old and new forms of variety and the relationship between the two variety generations is symbolic in both the use of the word itself and the appropriation of old variety's visual language, which can be seen in the use of the 'variety block' style that was common to music hall/variety posters (see Figure 6). CAST's posters reveal their cultural capital, which has been symbolically deployed to communicate an educative as well as a promotional message.



Figure 7

If we compare Figure 6 to the classic variety block poster in Figure 7, we can see some similarities.

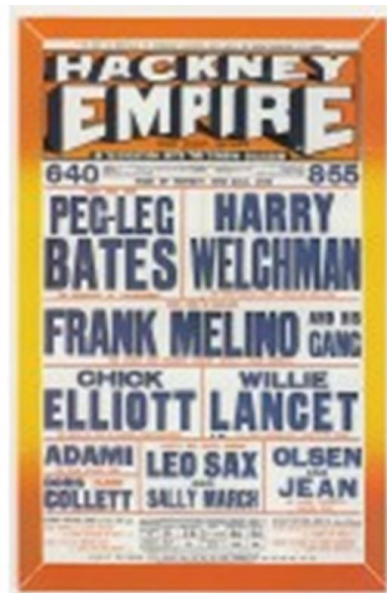


Figure 8

The classic Hackney Empire poster above (Figure 7) is from the 1950s when the variety theatres were at the beginning of their long decline. This poster tells us that there are nine acts on the bill, most of whom are speciality acts or comedy characters – there are no stand-up comedians on the bill. If we compare the number of acts on this bill to the first poster (Figure 6), we can see there are fewer acts in the new Hackney Empire poster. This was because each performer, apart from the headline act, performed for 20 minutes each. In the music hall/variety era, a performer's set would last a few minutes and there were two shows a day. We also see in Figure 6 that there are two stand-up

comedians on the bill (Julian Clary as the Joan Collins Fan Club and Paul Merton); while a mixture of character comedians and speciality acts complete the bill. By comparing both posters we see that New Variety is paying homage to a past form that has been embodied in their habituses, while simultaneously updating the poster design by including an image of the headline act, which was absent from the crowded variety posters of the past. In this way, the design of Figure 6 emphasises the generational gap between the old and new forms of variety theatre. This homage to the past is evident in the title “Summer Show” and recalls the summer seasons and end-of-the-pier shows at Britain’s seaside resorts.

In addition to the Hackney Empire, CAST operated a circuit of six venues around London that were modelled on variety theatres, meaning the stage was ‘end-on’ and the seating arranged in rows rather than cabaret-style. CAST already possessed a full lighting and sound system, while many of the alt cab clubs had rudimentary lighting and sound systems and although they offered variety, many of these clubs could not employ jugglers, for example, due to ceiling height restrictions. New Variety shows often consisted of a poet, a comic, a speciality act⁴⁵ and a band to close the evening. Here is a hand-drawn flyer for a New Variety show at Wood Green Trade Union Centre. This particular flyer was created using Letraset and pen, and typify the DIY approach to publicity that can also be found in CAGG’s posters and flyers. New Variety’s hand-drawn posters are indicative of restricted production, and although they were reproduced thousands of times over, they retain the mode of restricted production. Poster art tends to lack the legitimacy of the consecrated wall art (paintings) displayed in galleries, unless they are part of an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, for example. However, these publicity materials are created by artists, who have had training in graphics at art school or university, and although they lack the glamour and social value associated with legitimated art, they qualify as art of a particular kind, and are consecrated within the tight circles of counterculturalists and avant-gardists.

⁴⁵ These were often jugglers or street performers.



Figure 9

The bills shown on this flyer (Figure 8) demonstrate the mix of performance styles that could be seen at any New Variety show. The acts on these bills demand a closer look. There are only three acts that can be described as stand-up comedians. Janice Perry, for example, is a performance artist, while Gary Howard, who appears with veteran comedian John Dowie, is a former member of the acapella group, The Flying Pickets and the 7:82 Theatre Company. Skint Video, listed for November 2, is a musical comedy double act and are given an entire evening. Indeed, we can see that music is strongly represented and each show features some kind of musical act. One name that stands out is Hank Wangford (real name Dr. Samuel Hutt, who was also a general practitioner), a spoof country and western star, who played alongside Billy Bragg and The Frank Chickens at miners' benefits (Raines, 1988). Wangford came from a Communist family and his father had been a journalist (Raines, 1988). His band was also popular at the GLC free festivals that were held in open spaces around London. We can see some overlap between performers on these bills and GLC, which further emphasises the close relationship between CAST/New Variety and the former. The door prices here are set at an affordable level and most alt cab shows in London never cost more than a couple of pounds. The Comedy Store and Jongleurs were charging an admission price of around £5.

This flyer (Figure 9) for the Cricklewood Hotel uses a mix of desktop publishing and handwritten lettering in the individual panels. The dayglo colouring also attracts the eye making the flyer stand out.



Figure 10

October 23 and 30 are specifically billed as comedy nights, we can see that October 30, especially, is not dominated by stand-up comedians and the night mixes poetry, spoof magic and character comedy, whereas on October 23 there are three stand-up comics and a speciality act. October 16 is more typical with poet Claire Dowie; comedian-accordionist, John Maloney; Red Stripe (formerly of acapella band, The Flying Pickets and 7:84 Theatre Company) performing acapella and dance, and juggler, Steve Rawlings, completing the bill. The use of the performers' photographs is also an innovation, and this was later adopted by CAGG after 1989. Music Hall posters never used photographs and potential punters had only the performers' names and the bill matter to guide their choices, which had been informed by the embodiment of cultural capital and realised through the objectification of the music hall performance.

Flyposting, although frowned upon by the authorities, was at this point still legal and was CAST's principal method of publicising their shows. Pete Moreland and Tim Horrocks were charged with the task of covering London in A0 size posters. Without quite realising it, CAST found themselves involved in

what were called “the poster wars” with the so-called poster ‘mafia’, who were working on behalf of the recorded music industry and promoter, Vince Power, of the Mean Fiddler group (Muldoon, 2013: 62). These companies banded together and took down the Hackney Empire’s posters, but CAST fought back. Muldoon (2013: 62) explains:

We adopted the guerrilla strategy of drawing the enemy fire more and more into the Hackney area, where we could react more easily, by printing and posting more than the normal amount [...] Each time we put ours up, they put theirs on top, and then we would put up another one on top of that, to which they would respond by bringing in another poster from Hammersmith or Kilburn (where two Mean Fiddler venues were located) , or any one of the other centres from outer London, in order to try and obliterate our posters.

(Muldoon, *Taking Back The Empire*, 2013: 62)

Eventually, the Empire entered into a truce with the poster companies, and this led to the formation of Diabolical Liberties (DL), now a major player in outdoor advertising, to do the flyposting. DL also took on contracts from other promoters and the profits were ploughed into The Empire. However, Hackney Council was not pleased with the borough’s walls and hoardings being plastered with posters and decided to act and paid for a team to remove them. The council even tried to pursue the matter in the courts but to no avail (Muldoon, 2013). In an ironic twist, DL accepted a contract from the council’s in-house quango, Heart of Hackney, who were attempting to ride the coattails of the International Anniversary Celebration of Pablo Picasso by promoting an “evening of wine, women and song” at the Central Methodist Hall opposite the Empire (Muldoon, 2013:64). In a stunt to highlight the council’s double standards, Roland, his dog Bengy Cockalorum and Pete arranged a photo shoot with *The Hackney Gazette*, which showed them putting up a poster for the event (Muldoon, 2013: 64). The council’s Picasso event attracted few, if any punters and the show moved across the road to the Empire. The anti-flyposting team was disbanded shortly thereafter. Pete returned to the Empire to work as the electrician and Tim ran DL as a full-time business, which thrives today (Muldoon, 2013: 64).

6.9 The Hackney Empire

The Hackney Empire, built in 1901 and designed by the renowned theatre architect, Frank Matcham, was owned and managed by the huge Stoll-Moss chain of halls. In contrast, the nearby Hoxton Hall, which was located in a similarly economically deprived area, had been very much a people's music hall, but its legitimacy had been questioned by the authorities and it was closed down under pressure from the police in 1871 (Hoxton Hall website). The Empire had a much larger capacity and a palatial interior; its architectural style was a statement of classiness and upward mobility. Hackney, in London's East End, had always been rather down-at-heels with a large working class community and historically high levels of poverty, but this was an increasingly popular form of mass entertainment, for which an analogy with television in the 1950s and 1960s can be easily drawn. Its location was specifically designed to draw in the working classes and the emerging middle classes – especially the petite bourgeoisie - to whom the music halls had increasingly appealed in an effort to clean up in the 1890s. Indeed, as history shows us, no effort on the part of the halls to self-regulate was satisfactory enough for the watch committees and the authorities.

After World War I, The Empire made the transition to variety and it remained as a variety theatre until 1956 when Stoll-Moss sold it to ATV for use as a television studio. In 1963, Mecca, the bingo hall chain purchased The Empire and converted it into a bingo hall. However, by the beginning of the 1980s, Mecca had ceased to use it as a bingo hall, mainly because the raked seating was unsuitable for bingo and because English Heritage refused them permission to alter the seating or remove the seats altogether and fit tables. The condition of the Empire had been deteriorating since it fell into disuse as a major venue and many of the architectural features, like the terracotta domes on the top front elevation of building, were dangerously decrepit and had been removed by Mecca. The interior had been thoughtlessly decorated with flock wallpaper and paint which concealed its ornate decorative features. The upper circle was in a serious state of disrepair and practically unusable and there was buddleia growing in the masonry at the top front elevation. Anyone taking over The Empire would have to be prepared to spend thousands of pounds making

good the defects. Hackney Borough Council pursued a different line: they wanted to demolish the building and replace it with a multi-story car park (Muldoon interview).

CAST had originally considered purchasing a 200-seat former cinema in Kilburn but were tipped off about the Hackney Empire by word of mouth, and to their surprise in 1985, Mecca offered them the building for £1,000 but the offer came with certain conditions, namely, that they restored the terracotta domes at the top of the theatre, which Mecca had removed (Muldoon interview). Indeed, Mecca was more than keen to dispose of the Empire, because they had been instructed by English Heritage to replace the domes. However, the cost of replacing the domes was expensive (at £250,000 each) and because the Empire was a Grade II* listed building, any replacements had to be produced by an approved architectural mason. CAST immediately organised 'dome benefits' to raise the necessary capital and there many who believed that they could not find the money. In the end, Andrew Puddephat, the leader of Hackney Council made the money available to purchase new domes through "planning gain", which came through an increase in land value that is derived from planning permission being granted on the land (Muldoon, 2013: 54).

The Hackney Empire was officially reopened on 9 December, 1986 on the occasion of its 85th birthday (CAST had formally occupied the building in the previous month). Local people were employed to assist in the running of the Empire. For example, Harry Goodwin, one of the Empire's former doormen, was hired to perform the same role (Muldoon, 2013: 45). Others like Pete Moreland, who joined in 1982 was already running lights and sound for CAST, and performed the same jobs. Brian Wren, who had joined for *Mrs T and the Red Teds* in 1985, became the theatre manager and Ann Cartwright, who had written her Masters dissertation on CAST, was given the role of administrator (Muldoon, 2013: 45-46). The front of house team and bar staff were hired on a casual basis (Muldoon, 2013: 45-46).



Figure 11

From the very moment CAST took over the Empire, it was a financial struggle and the theatre had been threatened with demolition as early as 1986. The biggest drain on resources was the Empire's much-needed restoration. Roland (interview) admits this is something for which they were not prepared. To oversee the restoration project, CAST established two charities; The Hackney Empire Preservation Trust (HEPT) had a board made up of local residents and others, and which was chaired by the poet Benjamin Zephaniah.

Separate to HEPT was the Hackney Empire board of governors, which included performers Mark Hurst, Otiz Cannelloni and Ian Saville, and promoter Jean Nicholson (all Hackney residents), who ran cabaret nights at The Crown and Castle in Dalston, was also member along with what Roland describes as "key workers" from the New Variety circuit venues (Muldoon, 2013: 56). Muldoon (2013: 56) admits that in HEPT they had, "created a trust and a board that was sympathetic to their views". If the Muldoons had created a board and trust that was antagonistic to their aims, it is unlikely that they would have survived for very long but having local residents on the board of HEPT was crucial in demonstrating their commitment to the community. CAST also based their operations at the Empire; this included New Variety Management Company (NVM)⁴⁶, which was managed by Claire. However the ever-present threats of demolition and financial ruin meant that HEPT had to widen its

⁴⁶ NVM was the first agency to manage the careers of fledgling alt cab artistes who were now beginning to appear on television in ever increasing numbers.

network of supporters and find celebrities who could lend their names to the restoration project and, to their credit, CAST had some early success in attracting many high profile names to their cause, which included Michael Caine and Lenny Henry among others.

In spite of this new support, CAST still had to make a final payment of £50,000 to Mecca and faced a further penalty of £50,000 if they failed to meet the April 1988 deadline. CAST were holding out for a lifeline from Hackney Council that was worth £150,000. It was during this month that I was on my undergraduate work placement at the Empire and I was present when the domes were finally replaced. I later chatted to Roland in his office, and he indicated that he saw CAST as a band of South Sea pirates boarding a ship. I wanted to know more:

You know... and, uh... we had no money and no nothing... you know... we were like... you know... south sea pirates taking over and having to turn... to look respectable of course... there's people going "The Hackney Empire? My God, who are these people"? They're not that terrifying left wing group that we've heard about or the group we haven't even heard about. Who are these people who've captured this building that we all ignored? An iconic, historical building that the industry... the commercial industry had said, "We don't want it anymore. We don't want the Hackney Empire. Fuck the Hackney Empire"... the Empire is in Hackney, there's no tube, low-waged area, poverty, East End.

(Roland Muldoon, interview)

Muldoon regards CAST as a band of outlaws, which indeed they appeared to be in the eyes of legitimate cultural practitioners. They were not regarded, in the conventional sense, as responsible people; they were seen, mainly because of Teddy Taylor's moral vendetta and the scare stories in the right-wing press, as dangerous subversives. If the Right attacked CAST for being 'dangerous Lefties', then the Left rarely praised them at all. Roland admits "The Left was never turned on by our claim that we were providing a counter-hegemonic challenge to the status quo" (Muldoon, 2013: 65). This position has as much to do with CAST's refusal to be part of one Left group or another. In their early days they played for any audience on the Left. The many left-wing benefits that the Hackney Empire hosted were also criticised by some on the

Left, who questioned the fees they were being charged but forgetting that theatres cannot afford to run on goodwill. Furthermore, the staff still had to be paid and could not be expected to work unpaid.

When word of their acquisition of the Hackney Empire became public, it was inevitable that old style variety agents or the “nostalgia clan” as Muldoon (2013: 96) refers to them, would contact the theatre and ask to put on shows. Muldoon was adamant:

We, for our part, did not want to encourage their retro ideas. We thought that we should emphasise the gap between old and new variety by not having too much of the old variety on. On the rare occasions when we did let the ‘old school’ promoters in, they weren’t successful, thus proving our case.

(Muldoon, *Taking Back The Empire*, 2013: 96)

Muldoon recalls one occasion when Jack Seaton brought the British Music Hall Society to the Empire and how he found it difficult to tell these old-timers to refrain from using their ‘cheeky chappie’ asides (Muldoon, 2013). Muldoon does speak of one particular old-style show with some fondness: Frankie Vaughan’s show had been a great success, though it had only broken even, and Muldoon speaks highly of his professionalism and magnetic stage presence as well as the absence of racism. Frankie Howerd on the other hand, made a racist joke directed at Asians seated in the front row of the Empire when he appeared there in 1989 (Muldoon, 2013). When Roland confronted Howerd’s management, they brushed it off by claiming “he was forced (sic) to do that when he was working in the clubs” (Muldoon, 2013: 97.) Other old-timers who appeared on the Hackney Empire’s stage included paper-tearer Terri Carol and the ventriloquist and magician, Terri Rogers and her foul-mouthed dummy, Shorty Harris and Black American jazz ‘hooper’, Will Gaines. Rogers, a transsexual woman, had also appeared in cabaret and made an appearance on Granada’s *Wheeltappers and Shunters’ Social Club* in 1974. Newer speciality acts, many of whom had come from street performing, were now rubbing shoulders with some of the ‘old timers’ who had spent years treading the boards of the old variety theatres. However this cannot be read as evidence of a direct link between the old and the new forms of variety, and likewise the old and new

forms of stand-up. The old and new came from very different aesthetic and stylistic origins and were shaped by very different discourses. The old variety had existed during a time of colonialism, while the new variety had grown up with its consequences, especially the nationalism and the racist discourses that stemmed from post-colonial anxiety, which were embedded in the light entertainment of the period and treated disinterestedly by performers and impresarios alike. Though Muldoon would reject the label of 'avant-garde', the positioning of CAST/New Variety and the alt cab circuit was in direct opposition to nostalgia *inter alia*, and appears to indicate a kind of aesthetic disposition that was typical of the historic avant-garde, in the sense that all such movements demanded a break with past. The refusal of nostalgia can be traced back to the Muldoon's time at Unity and their opposition to the moribund nature of the latter's music hall evenings, but it is also present in the countercultures that emerged in the latter half of the Seventies with punk and post-punk, and is indicative of a sense of the post-modern avant-garde: the opposition to a romanticised and idealised retelling or reconstruction of the past, rather than opposition to a conservative aesthetic *per se*. The conservative aesthetic is solely concerned with the preservation of the past and art schools, conservatoires and similar institutions reproduce the techniques of 'classical' artists through the systematised instruction of their students. On the one hand, the autodidacticism of the Muldoons and others broke with this formal approach to artistic production and on the other, the variety performers of the past were either too entrenched in their positions to be of any use, or they had died and taken their techniques with them to the grave. Thus it was only possible to create performances from scratch using bricolage, autodidacticism or both. The new performers had created their own styles through the use of these techniques and they were produced and reproduced by groups like CAST/New Variety either through auditions or talent shows.

The Hackney Empire began its annual talent show called The New Act of the Year (NATY) in 1987, which launched the careers of Linda Smith (the first winner), Stewart Lee, Simon Day (as Tommy Cockles), Paul Tonkinson, Ronni Ancona and Ardal O'Hanlon (Muldoon, 2013). The creation of this award had two functions: to serve as a rival to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival's prestigious Perrier Awards and to provide a steady supply of new acts for the New Variety circuit and the Hackney Empire (Muldoon, 2013). The theatre also hosted full

shows from Julian Clary (as The Joan Collins Fan Club) and productions like *At Home with the Hardys*, which was developed from Jeremy Hardy's Radio 4 programme *Unnatural Acts* (BBC 1987-1988). In addition to comedy, the Empire also hosted concerts, opera and an annual Christmas pantomime. The latter production had been part of the Empire's programme since CAST assumed control of the theatre.

In 1989, a fledgling black comedy scene was beginning to emerge in London under the aegis of David Bryan and Jenny Landreth's Black Comedy, which took place first at the Albany Empire in Deptford and then transferred to the Electric Cinema in Notting Hill, and eventually spread out to other English cities with established Afro-Caribbean communities (Landreth interview). New Variety seeing the underground potential of all black shows also capitalised on them and started running the 291 Club⁴⁷, which opened in 1990 and emulated the famous nights at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem. These shows were billed primarily as talent quests; Roland says that they did not want to use the word "competition" but does not say why. I would suggest that the word "competition" came with its own social and cultural baggage and was often associated with the battles of the bands and similar gladiatorial contests that offer few rewards for the contestants.

The 291 Club grew in popularity and was eventually recorded for London Weekend Television (LWT) and was compèred by Miles Crawford, who also ran a similar show, called 'Cabarave'⁴⁸ at The Comedy Café in Shoreditch. Some performers found these shows difficult, with the audience being encouraged to let off steam, often on cue for the cameras. Muldoon (interview) claims that the quest became a search for new talent and this word was appropriated, particularly, by self-styled 'urban' radio stations like Choice FM, whose target audience was young and black. Again, the use of alternative language shows us how the Muldoons sought to create a linguistic distance between themselves and the establishment and by so doing carved out new territory for themselves, but this also reminds us how such words percolated into everyday speech.

⁴⁷ The club's name comes from the Hackney Empire's address: 291 Mare Street.

⁴⁸ Cabarave was the only gig that I had ever booed off the stage. This happened before I could even open my mouth.

6.10 The decline of the New Variety circuit

By 1992, CAST/New Variety's reduced circuit of weekly clubs had closed. The Labour-controlled councils that had once supported them cancelled their subsidies. The last venue to close was the Old White Horse in Brixton. The reasons for the councils' funding cuts could easily be blamed on the high cost of implementing and collecting the Community Charge or Poll Tax, which was phased out and replaced by the Council Tax in 1993 - the year after John Major's election. The demise of their circuit did not spell the end for the Hackney Empire, which kept running despite the difficulties of keeping the theatre financially afloat (Muldoon, 2013: 43-45). Muldoon gradually left most of the running of the Empire to others but retained the role of Chief Executive (Muldoon, interview). The Empire continued to struggle financially even though the shows were more popular than ever.

Financially, The Empire was initially supported by modest grants from the ACGB and Hackney Borough Council, who later withdrew their funding in the middle of the 1990s. A typical ACGB grant was around £150,000 per annum and accounted for 12% of the Empire's annual turnover, the rest was made up of door receipts and higher than average bar takings. NVM, which was wholly commercial and operated without subsidies, had an annual turnover of £50,000 (Muldoon, 2013: 130). Roland says that The Empire was underfunded and when we look at the theatre's capacity of 1,200, it is easy to see why: if we look at the neighbouring Theatre Royal, Stratford, which has a capacity of 400; it received an annual grant of approximately £400,000 (Muldoon, 2013: 130). Here again we see how arts funding was allocated with those deemed less legitimate being awarded less money than those theatres offering legitimate cultural fare. However, there is another explanation for this: the ACE operates a funding tariff that separates producing venues from non-producing venues (Arts Council of England information sheet, n.d.). The former applies to theatres that produce new works in house, while the latter refers to venues that stage shows produced by outside companies or individuals.

CAST were mavericks who did things their way. CAST was self-consciously *countercultural*; an underground theatre company that took control of The Hackney Empire against all the odds and transformed it from a shabby neglected former bingo hall in a run-down corner of the East End of London into

an Off West End Theatre. It would be easy to suggest that they were not entrepreneurial and while they were certainly naive in the early days of running The Empire, they managed to achieve a great deal with limited resources. If entrepreneurial spirit meant keeping running costs down by paying staff a pittance, then this was not CAST. Their entrepreneurialism came from their *countercultural* practice of running a successful but cash-starved theatre company. Indeed, they were used to operating on a shoestring budget but the high costs associated with refurbishing the Empire could not be met solely by the cash donated to The Empire by its patrons who generously put money into one of the many buckets at the end of the evening, nor could they have managed to achieve this through bar takings alone, which were used to pay staff. The Empire's pay structures were more egalitarian than most, but this did not mean that everyone working for the organisation was paid the same; CAST paid themselves a little more than the casual staff because they were taking greater risks (at one point, the Muldoons had to re-mortgage their home to help finance The Empire). Even though pay for front of house and casual members of staff was above the Equity minimum wage, tensions developed between CAST's technical staff and The Empire's administrators with the latter demanding pay parity with the former. Roland admits that he was not always comfortable with the role of Chief Executive because this meant that he was in the unenviable position of having to sack people if necessary and this was an obvious conflict between his socialist impulses and the hard reality of running a business with people they regarded as comrades (Muldoon, 2013: 139-204). The pay issue was eventually resolved but this incident set the stage for future conflicts, for as early as 1990 factions developed within organisation: on the one hand there were the "Respectables" as Roland (Muldoon, 2013: 139-204) calls them and the Loyalists on the other, who supported CAST and The Empire. The Respectables wanted to seize control of the theatre and turn it into an orthodox provincial theatre staging less riskier shows that, in their eyes, would attract more funding from the Lottery Fund. The Loyalists, predictably, wanted to maintain the status quo.

Over the years these battles would involve Hackney Council, now committed to neoliberalism, which wanted to win some European Union funding for its gentrification projects, would try and undermine CAST's management of the Empire in the process. One example of how the Council tried to scupper the

Empire happened when CAST produced its own box office system, HEBOS (Hackney Empire Bums on Seats) rather than spend large sums on the approved PASS system. The Council lobbied the Empire to accept this system, but CAST were adamant. However, some of the Empire's front of house team had been secretly colluding with the Council. Although, CAST won this battle, more internal struggles would develop when they started applying for Lottery Fund grants, but the fund imposed new people on the Empire – management consultants - one of whom was the last chief executive of the disgraced Barings Bank (Muldoon, 2013: 316-328). Following a fundraising campaign led by Griff Rhys-Jones that raised £15 million and a further £4 million coming from the Lottery Fund and £1.3 million from businessman, Sir Alan Sugar, a large-scale refurbishment of the Empire began in 2001 and was timetabled to be completed in December 2002 (Muldoon, 2013: 233-249). All performances were relocated to the much smaller Bullion Room on 117 Wilton Way, but in 2003, the building contractors working on the refurbishment of the theatre and its adjoining buildings (like the Samuel Pepys pub) went into administration throwing the project into doubt (Muldoon, 2013: 249). The Arts Council convened an emergency meeting to decide the future of the Empire and it looked for a time as though they would call time on the theatre (Leitch, 2003). The Empire eventually reopened in the following year on January 28, 2004, but within months the management consultants would stage a coup.

By 2005, Roland was ostensibly forced into retirement (Claire had left during the previous year) and their places were taken by more management-oriented people who were sympathetic to the 'Respectables'. Simon Thomsett, who replaced Roland as artistic director in 1992, left in 2009 by "mutual consent" and was replaced by arts consultant, Claire Middleton. The same year, the Hackney Empire announced that it was going to close for nine months to consider its future. I attended an angry public meeting in November 2010 at which Roland spoke passionately about CAST/New Variety's achievements on a fraction of the money the Empire was now receiving. In spite of its financial problems, The Empire never went dark under the Muldoons. He also noted how the buddleia⁴⁹, which had been removed from the Empire's front elevation in 1986, had now returned to re-colonise the building.

⁴⁹ Buddleia is a prolific weed that grows on waste ground and will establish itself on buildings that have been neglected. Once it is established it will severely damage masonry and cause damp to the property

After the Hackney Empire, the Muldoons assumed control of The Cock Tavern in Kilburn (Shallice, 2007). Here they revived New Variety and introduced a regular Gramsci Night on Tuesdays in the upstairs room. Unfortunately, this venture did not last long because of the high costs associated with running a pub (Muldoon interview). The Muldoons are currently focussing their efforts on New Variety Lives, which continues the New Act of the Year Showcases (NATYs) and carry on their original work in variety. They also run regular shows in Ludgershall in Buckinghamshire where they have made their home (Muldoon interview; Muldoon, 2013).

thus compromising its structural integrity. The Buddleia's return was seen as a sign that decay had made a metaphorical return to The Empire.

7. Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to answer some questions regarding alt com and, more generally, about cultural transformation in late 70s Britain. In the process, I have uncovered some truths about the formation of the cabaret circuit and its eventual demise and replacement with a stand-up comedy circuit. One could argue that tastes had simply changed but it is not enough to claim they change without explaining how this happens; they change because new agents enter the field and adopt positions in relation to established agents. We must also consider what Bourdieu (2003: 57) said about external changes and their impact on fields: the election of the Thatcher government brought with it a great deal of cultural and political opposition, which was unable to express itself in the official world. Indeed, in the years before 1979, the Conservatives had signalled their intention to make structural changes to society, which would be reconstructed along the lines of a model free market economy. This meant not only dividing workers and undermining the support of their main parliamentary opposition, the Labour Party, whom they regarded as a major obstacle to its reforms, but it also meant eradicating the so-called permissive society that was a product of the countercultures of the Sixties and Seventies. Trade unions and council housing were identified as the loci of working class reproduction, and by attacking those institutions, the Conservatives hoped to refashion British society and its national economy in its own free market image. For its part, Labour barely fought back and from 1983 onwards, after Neil Kinnock had assumed the leadership of the party, it chose to abandon its deeply-held principles and adopted the logic of the free market. Its timidity can be seen in its feeble opposition to the Poll Tax, and its leadership's inability to land meaningful blows on the government. The field of discourse was therefore limited only to those positions that were deemed legitimate by the Tory-supporting press and the Conservative Party itself, and anything outside this narrow discursive space was mocked as 'loony left'. Commercial entertainment, which is aimed at mass markets, offered no resistance and no space for dissenting ideas, preferring instead to plough roughly the same furrow it had done since the 1930s. Alternative theatre movement had its funding cut and was driven from the field of cultural production altogether in 1983. The impact of these external changes

meant that performers from alternative theatre (another restricted field of production) and related fields had to construct a new space within the restricted sub-field, in which they could continue to circulate oppositional political-aesthetic discourses and develop a new form of entertainment to challenge the staleness of its commercial counterpart, and although the Comedy Store appeared to catalyse this new movement, a space was constructed outside of it; first, by Tony Allen and Alexei Sayle and their Alternative Cabaret circuit and then by CAST who created New Variety in response.

From 1979 to 1985, the cabaret circuit was underground and only those who performed on it or the punters, who were 'in the know', were aware of its existence. This was a restricted field of cultural production, and it was during this time that the space was at its most countercultural: performers took risks and experimented with form and content, while audiences, who had been acculturated by their education and participation in a variety of left-libertarian and post-punk countercultures, attended these shows expecting the unusual. This was in sharp contrast to the WMCs, where audiences had fixed expectations and if these were not met, then trouble could ensue for the performers – especially comedians, who relied entirely on mass-produced jokes. In terms of aesthetics, these were determined by the kind of cultural and *countercultural* capital accumulated in the habituses of the performers. American stand-up comedy, which was often only available on imported recordings, also played a part in determining the direction of alt com. Yet, some comedians were also fond of British comedians who were either part of the demob comedy movement, Oxbridge or those who were the 'wordy' comics like Les Dawson. The hacks of *The Comedians* were mostly despised for their old-fashioned approach and reliance on pre-packaged jokes. Alt comedians opposed television light entertainment, rather than WMCs or what took place within them, but they also opposed the Oxbridge comedy of the pre-alternative years, and sought to reclaim entertainment for themselves and the working class, rather than produce entertainment that was consciously intended to attract the patronage of the middle-class. However, alt com tended to be seen by many working-class people as a "bit arty" and full of swear words (Hurst questionnaire). Alt com, like avant-garde art, was rejected by many working-class people as having no function and here, function was regarded as more important to form, hence the commonly-used criticism that alt com was not

funny. This recalls the working-class approach to art that Bourdieu (2003) describes in *Distinctions*, in which art must be seen to have a purpose that is immediately perceptible to the senses or, to put it another way, its function needs to be *obvious*: this is a joke and it is either funny or unfunny depending upon the listener's tastes. Therefore, the leftfield nature of alt com and other entertainment in the alternative space was alienating to many working-class people, whose cultural experiences were limited to the WMC or television sitcoms like *Love Thy Neighbour* (Thames, 1972).

Stand-up comedians (alt comedians), though few in number, broke the rules that bound trad comedians and adopted of a kind of 'tell it like it is' style of comedy that was produced through personal experience and political activism and yet, in its early years, the space was dominated by a combined force of punk poets and street performers, who produced much of the comedy innovations. Other kinds of entertainment from chansonniers to big bands effectively made the space a *countercultural* mirror image of the commercial cabarets. This was a form of entertainment that fits Bourdieu's (2016) description of 'art for art's sake', because of its separation from the principles that governed the dominant entertainment sub-field, and its amateurism (as opposed to amateurishness). While, at the same time, it also functions as 'social art' because of the social consciousness of some of the performers (Bourdieu, 2016: 56). But to create avant-garde art, one must know something about art in the first place, and exposure to different kinds of cultural products and practices, often produced on the restricted sub-field of cultural production, were combined to create a whole. Alt com was an avant-garde form of comedy that had been created using DIY and which drew from elements of fringe theatre, critical theory, rock music, dance, and was influenced by the aesthetics of American stand-ups like Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor, and were imported to Britain and given a localised inflection. My personal experience of performing stand-up comedy began in much the same way as those performers who entered the new sub-field in 1979, I had to make use of bricolage to create material and my performances. I always approached my work from the position of an artist, rather than as a technician; a teller of jokes. When I entered the alternative space in 1987, I had a conscious understanding of the doxa governing the alt space. This meant that I wrote my own material and I avoided the narrowness of formal joke-telling, and like many artists, I wanted to speak

out about injustices I had observed or internalised, or make humorous points about current affairs, and my practice was influenced in part by the BA (Hons) Creative Arts course, which impressed upon me the importance of producing art that had a relationship with the society in which it was produced. In *The Rules of Art*, Bourdieu (2016), discusses how commercial forms of art were created to appeal to as wide a taste constituency as possible to maximise profits, which meant that producers and their intermediaries (agents and so forth) were closely aligned to middle class interests. Thus, commercial producers reject the notion of 'art for art's sake' and submit to the demands of the mass market. By contrast trad comedy had a kind of mass appeal; jokes were crafted by professional jokesmiths and told mainly by men, who told us nothing about their lives or anxieties. Audiences came to expect the predictable, while alt com refused predictability. There was nothing more predictable than the racist and sexist jokes told by trad comedians. The idea behind them was ostensibly to produce laughter and nothing more; no one was expected to engage with ideas and yet, it would be foolish to assume that such jokes are created free of discourse. They are not. By contrast, I wanted audiences to engage with ideas and take something away from my comedy rather than simply laugh for a little while and go home with nothing. This chimes with Brecht's (1964) concept of epic theatre, which demanded more from audiences than a simple identification with characters and their emotions; audiences were expected to suspend disbelief and were encouraged critically engage with ideas being expressed onstage.

Education, whether through formal pedagogy or autodidacticism, played a part in the production of entertainment within the space. Many performers had been to university, polytechnic or art school and those performers whose education ended when they left school, were autodidacts. Often, those who had been through Higher Education had taken courses that offered a component of critical thinking. It was in this institutes of Higher Education that performers first learnt to analyse and deconstruct art, and we can see this in Alexei Sayle, on the one hand, whose art background was symbolically deployed as cultural capital, while Martin Soan, on the other, adopted an autodidactic approach to the study of art. In each case, art was seen, not as distraction, but a fundamental part of the space. Friedman's (2009) claim that performers mixed high and low cultural forms can be seen in the work of many alt comedians -

myself included. One way in which avant-garde art can be defined is through its appropriation of ideas and practices from other creative fields. Avant-garde theatre, for example, used cinematic techniques of montage, while avant-garde cinema was influenced by painting. In the alternative space, elements from rock music, art and fringe theatre were incorporated into comedy performances. Initially, this was an unconsecrated avant-garde that was produced by a mix of educated working class (Sayle) and non-Oxbridge middle-class performers (Mayall and Edmondson), who combined avant-garde and fringe theatre with political comment and physical comedy, which was given no space within the existing cultural architecture of the official world. Within the alt space, therefore, the stage became the laboratory in which new ideas could be tested. As S Friedman (2009) notes, early alt performers often mixed different genres and this illuminates the DIY approach to comedy, which reveals the avant-garde and countercultural practices at the heart of alt cab that could also be found in post-punk music. Genre-mixing, I would argue, is an indicator of how DIY was used to create new art-forms from scratch. We can see resonances of this in post-punk music in bands like the Pop Group, for example, who created a new sound from fragments of dub reggae, jazz and punk rock. For Sayle and I, it meant combining physical comedy with political humour and absurdity, and for Martin Soan, it meant mixing art with props, dance, nudity and absurdity. Sayle and I had some grounding in theatre practice, while Soan was a self-taught performer who served his performance apprenticeship on the street and the seaside. I consciously took ideas from the cinema by making use of Fifties Hollywood themes in *Shopping Centre* and *Film Trailer*, the latter of which utilised the fast editing techniques used in stitching together footage to make film trailers. In each case, therefore, bricolage played a crucial role in shaping our performances.

The contribution of CAST to this live entertainment scene had been largely overlooked and often reduced to footnotes or a brief mention, yet if it had not been for them, the comedy industry as we know it today might not have existed. With the closure of Alternative Cabaret and the exodus of the space's star performers to television, the alternative space was on the brink of collapse. CAST stepped into the vacuum and created New Variety in opposition to what was left of Alternative Cabaret, and insisted that theirs was a British rather than continental style of entertainment. In creating New Variety, they set down the

marker for others to follow. We can see their format being copied across the alternative space; even Jongleurs appear to have modelled their 'brand' loosely on New Variety. Indeed, CAST had some experience of variety: Roland Muldoon had been using stand-up comedy as a theatrical device in the years before the opening of The Comedy Store, and this too is largely forgotten and yet, it is a good example of pioneering work that preceded alt com as a genre.

CAST's New Variety circuit, perhaps more than the alt cab clubs or The Store, bore a closer resemblance to variety theatre than much of the alt cab circuit. This is because it was shaped by the Muldoon's political-aesthetic dispositions as theatre practitioners and variety/music hall enthusiasts, and is apparent in the choice of the name for their project and the way in which they reconstructed variety as an entertainment format. However, they distanced themselves from the past by creating not simply a new aesthetic, but they also rejected the mawkish sentimentality that was found in music hall evenings and Publand Variety. Yet Lidington (1987) refers to CAST's New Variety circuit as "cabaret" without appreciating the essential difference in formats, which is most evident in the choice of alt cab and New Variety's respective room layouts. CAST's cultural capital influenced the choice to consciously adopt variety theatre's regimented seating-style for their clubs, rather than the more intimate cabaret-style that; while the stage was 'end on' to imitate the proscenium arch of the variety theatre (Muldoon interview). Alt cab clubs varied in their seating arrangements, however in my experience the cabaret seating style dominated the space. Although Jongleurs' original venue in Battersea used a thrust stage, the seating itself was cabaret-style. The Comedy Store, on the other hand, utilised a mix of theatre-style and cabaret seating.

New Variety bills consisted of fewer acts than music hall/variety, which would feature many acts over several hours. Yet for all its similarities to alt cab, New Variety differed in other ways. First, the use of the name 'CAST' to preface 'New Variety' can be seen as a brand, which had symbolic *countercultural* value in the eyes of their audiences. CAST's work as political theatre practitioners and their subversive reputation contributed to their value as producers of a particularly *countercultural* entertainment form. Second, New Variety was

subsidised⁵⁰ and, unlike the rest of the space, performers were paid the Equity minimum wage (Muldoon, 2013). The same could not be said for many other clubs, which operated sliding pay scales according to the performer's position on the bill, their seniority on the circuit or other arbitrary factors. In this sense, New Variety also opposed the large-scale commercial producers like The Comedy Store and Jongleurs in terms of business practices and their class habituses. Yet the Hackney Empire, despite it being run by CAST, was a commercial enterprise and this can be seen when its profile was raised considerably by *The 291 Club* (LWT 1991-93). Indeed, the Muldoons never avoided media exposure and courted it either through their infamy as artists, or their possession of the new form of entertainment that had a marketable value. Therefore, by the time, they had taken possession of The Hackney Empire is it arguable that the Muldoons had made a traverse migration once again from the alternative space to the official world. Their subsidised productions aside, the Muldoons remained true to their subversive origins and acted as the custodians for oppositional entertainment forms. Thus, when positioned against the rest of the mainstream entertainment field, they continued to appear *countercultural*. It is worth noting that, although CAST, The Bradford Alternative and CAGG received Arts Council subsidies, there was no artistic interference and we were allowed to produce what we wanted. The Arts Council's only condition was that we had to show we were making a profit and could eventually exist without funding - although this was often more difficult than the Arts Council assumed.

This was therefore as space defined by its practices, which leads me to the structural similarities between alt cab and post-punk. First, it is necessary to mention that the cultural interventionism of RAR continued in the alternative space and post-punk music scene as non-racism and non-sexism. This cultural interventionism was particularly evident with New Variety, where a form of ideological vetting took place, in the shape of a formal audition (rather than an open spot), to weed out anyone whom they regarded as the potential reactionaries. In this sense, the Muldoons were similar to post-punk band, The Pop Group, who performed a similar screening process (Reynolds, 2005: 73-79). Therefore, we should not view post-punk as a vaguely-defined set of

⁵⁰ NV received its funding from the Greater London Council and the borough councils in which its regular shows were located. The Hackney Empire was subsidised by Greater London Arts and the London Borough of Hackney.

genres that post-dated punk but as a countercultural movement that was characterised by its opposition to cultural orthodoxy, and commercial and social hierarchies. Here, I agree with Gracyk's (2011) view of post-punk as a movement rather than a unified genre, and I would describe it as an overarching *countercultural* movement/mileu that included music, entertainment and art.

In the Table 1 (below), I have provided an at-a-glance comparison of shared homologies between the post-punk music, alt-cab and New Variety spaces. We can therefore see that, in these examples of performance practices, there is a post-punk homology that binds the fields of rock music and live entertainment into a *countercultural* movement that is characterised by its restricted mode of production.

Table 1

Post-punk	Alt cab	New Variety
Democratised social relations	Democratised social relations	Democratised social relations
Amateurism	Amateurism	Established a new professionalism from amateurs
Avant-garde tendencies	Avant-garde tendencies	Avant-garde performers welcomed
Politically and socially conscious	Politically and socially conscious	Politically and socially conscious
Engaged with struggles of everyday life	Engaged with struggles of everyday life	Engaged with struggles of everyday life
Rejected predictability	Rejected predictability	Rejected predictability
Punk poetry	Punk poetry	Punk poetry
	Alternative comedy	Alternative comedy
Name assigned retrospectively by journalists and academics	Name assigned by journalists	Chose its own name

Unconsciously a movement	Unconsciously a movement	Already part of wider alternative movement
Multiple genres	Multiple genres	Multiple genres
Left-leaning/libertarian socialist	Left-wing elements but too diverse to quantify. Many right-wing/apolitical performers	Left-leaning/libertarian socialist. Weeded out reactionaries.
Filled a vacuum left by punk	Filled a vacuum left by political fringe theatre	Kick-started alternative theatre movement in 1969. Invented mobile socialist theatre. Filled a vacuum left by political fringe theatre

Countercultural capital was produced through participation in RAR and 70s countercultures, and was used in its symbolic form as *attitude* and this could also be found in post-punk music of Gang of Four, The Clash and The Specials, for example. However, by the late 1980s this was absent from many of the new entrants to the space, who had no experience of political or social activism. Alexei Sayle and Tony Allen, for example, were early exemplars of how activism became part of the new comedic aesthetic; both men were activists and their experience of activism informed their attitude and provided the basis for their comedy. Other performers who had experience of political theatre also utilised their *countercultural* capital to write material. The same could also be said about recreational drug use, for one could not talk about any drug without having taken it themselves. This differed vastly from traditional comedians who only talked about drugs as a means of questioning a person's mental abilities or judgments. This, I would argue, was an aspect of the alt comedian's work that was inspired by both by the example of rock stars and countercultural figures. Many performers, be they comedians, poets or jugglers, were influenced by rock music (and possibly reggae and later hip-hop). Rock 'n' roll and youth culture had a marginal effect on the light entertainment of the official world and was either mocked or lampooned. One exception was Freddie Starr, the former lead singer of the Merseybeat group, The Midnites, who

performed impressions of Elvis Presley and Mick Jagger on television after being 'discovered' on *Opportunity Knocks* (Thames Television) in 1970 (Imdb entry, 2016). CAST used their love of rock 'n' roll, not only as part of their performances, but as means of identification and differentiation. They opened for rock bands like The Rolling Stones and this helped to secure their place in the history of the countercultures of the 1960s (Doggett, 2007).

By the middle of the 1980s, the old order had been mostly overthrown and the *doxa* that had dominated the sub-field of commercial entertainment was transformed. However, pockets of resistance remained and the likes of Jim Davidson, the Conservative Party-supporting trad comedian, still appeared on television in sitcoms like *Up The Elephant and Round the Castle* (Thames, 1983 – 1985) and its sequel, *Home James!* (Thames, 1987-1990). However, alt cab and alt com's impact on the official world was fleeting because the politics espoused by the likes of Ben Elton on television programmes like *Saturday Live* would again be challenged by an influx of new ideas from within and outside of the field, and this would have a transformational effect on live entertainment itself. For example, alt cab's democratisation of live entertainment, which resonated with the democratisation found in post-punk music was inevitably resisted by the commercial players that proliferated towards the end of the decade. Professional comedy courses emerged with the aim of producing comedians rather than cabaret artists (see Appendix A1.4). Courses like these produced dozens of new comedians, who performed to a formula that was taught to them, and here, we can see similarities between the formal institutions of art education that teach students techniques that have been transmitted from generation to generation with the aim of producing art for mass consumption. The idea of DIY, and the experimentation that comes with avant-garde art, was therefore effectively supplanted by conformity and a return to the joke-form that dominated comedy from the variety era to the end of the 1970s. To this end, the boundary between alternative and 'mainstream' was effectively dissolved, and the once radical *TO* began to include advertisements for shows by mainstream comedians like Roy 'Chubby' Brown and others. Trad comedy, which was once seen as reactionary was now seen as classic comedy and the joke-form returned. Alt cab was therefore displaced by a combination of commercial interests acting on the space from outside, and its internal tensions and contradictions. When I use the word 'commercial', I am describing something

that is produced for the widest possible audiences. Commercial entertainment is therefore safe, if at times slightly dangerous, but it adheres to bourgeois/middle class tastes and expectations. In this sense, the countercultural elements were objectified and then recuperated as slightly risqué forms of comedy, which frequently pushed the boundaries of taste, itself a slippery concept based on whatever preferences are produced by an individual's habitus.

Commissioning editors also recognised the value of stand-up comedy as a cheap form of entertainment and sought to include it wherever possible, but this was a double-edged sword, for although television exposure brought fame for some performers, for those that were not stand-up comedians, it meant less work and eventually being squeezed out altogether. Television-orientated comedians took up positions that were opposed to what they perceived to be the 'political correctness' of the space's established performers. New comedians like Jerry Sadowitz and the new Oxbridge wits, David Baddiel, Robert Newman, Steve Punt and Hugh Dennis, became the space's leading exponents of what was being called 'new lad' humour. Meanwhile, Jongleurs and The Comedy Store established commercial bridgeheads within the alt space, with the latter barring variety acts and the former embracing it but with the proviso that it had to be safe enough to be sold to the hospitality industry.

Vic Reeves also challenged the *doxa* of the alternative space by producing work that was constructed outside the restraints imposed by the space's language police, and yet, without the alternative space, which made room for all kinds of new performers, his brand of comedy might not have been tolerated in the official world, because it was simply too weird and too absurd for mainstream tastes. Reeves's 'Big Night Out' show in New Cross was ready made for television and within couple of years his brand of comedy, which owed more to *The Goon Show* than American stand-up, established itself as *de rigueur* and mainstream. Indeed, Reeves (real name Jim Moir) was not a stand-up comedian but an aspiring gameshow host-cum-light entertainer. The demands of television on the space led to a lack of experimentation and a growing aesthetic conservatism that would dominate the comedy circuit of the 1990s. If alt cab achieved anything, it was to finally consign racist and sexist comedy to the dustbin of history, and introduce new forms of comedy to the entertainment sub-field.

Finally, this project has uncovered areas for further research. *Countercultural* capital as a concept requires some development and in common with Bourdieusian concepts of capital, habitus and field, it is a work in progress. In terms of its utility beyond cabaret and comedy, *countercultural* capital can be used to explain the way in which countercultural formations take and control their spaces and how capital is produced, reproduced and circulated within them. For me, countercultural capital is a more flexible concept than Thornton's subcultural capital, which refers to the symbolic use of capital in a subcultural context, because it helps to explain how small-scale and underground producers of art reproduce themselves. Rock music and comedy intersections – particularly with regard to comic timing and phrasing – are a much-neglected area of study and I am already engaged in an ongoing autoethnographic study of my stand-up comedy performances. I am also interested in exploring the space between shamanism and comedy performance, an area that I have only touched upon in my autoethnography. Then there are the much-neglected performance styles within alt cab and New Variety that deserve more academic attention than they have thus far received both in this study and elsewhere. This would include punk poets, street performers and black comedians. Given the numbers of punk poets, especially, it is surprising that there is nothing written about them. It is my intention to produce a separate case study of CAGG in Newcastle as an example of a pioneering alt cab club that was formed through its use of social and *countercultural* capital. The current comedy industry is worth millions of pounds, but has never been subjected to a comprehensive examination, and although comedy has seen some academic attention in recent years, the industry itself and its relationship to culture and society is long overdue.

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Appendix 1

A1.1 Left-wing politics as embodied *countercultural* capital

The number of participants who were members of left-wing parties was small given the assumptions made about the space by observers. Only three participants came from families, in which one or both parents were members of the CPGB, and two had been members of political parties and this is a fraction of the agents operating in the space (Boyton, Kelly, Darrell interviews; Gordillo, P Ward questionnaires). However, it is reasonable to argue that the overall political orientation of the space was left-libertarian rather than being tied to one left-wing group or another. It is also fair to argue that not everyone subscribed to this and there were performers who took no position on politics or kept their views to themselves. Some participants (Mulligan, Smart questionnaires) – myself included - had acquired their *countercultural* capital through participation in demonstrations, protests or had been members of campaign groups like CND. This is especially true of those participants who entered the alt entertainment space between 1979 and 1986. This was the circuit's most *countercultural* period in terms of experimentation, innovation and political consciousness.

Political education usually takes the form of seminars or discussions and is uncertificated, it stands in opposition to the formal *capitalist* education of the dominant culture. Bob Boyton, who joined the circuit in 1983, was a member of the Young Communists and later the CPGB. He admits sardonically:

I'm one of the few people in Western Europe who joined the Communist Party in 1968. I drifted away about '82, '83, but having been a very active member for most of those 15 years.

In claiming to be “one of the few people in Western Europe who joined the Communist Party”, Bob admits that joining the Young Communists in 1968 was seen as unfashionable, and possibly ‘uncool’ because the student and worker protests, strikes and sit-ins of that year were led by anarchists,

libertarian Marxists and Trotskyists (Horn, 2007). This is because the CPGB, like its sister parties in France and Germany were opposed to the so-called New Left in 1968 and, in the case of French Communist Party (PCF), had urged workers to abandon their strikes and return to work (Horn, 2007). Bob (interview) was also involved with a fringe theatre company prior to joining the circuit, and for many who were politically active, the fringe theatre companies were often attractive because they acted as a cultural carrier of political messages. Bob's comedy was often political and as a trade union activist, his cultural capital provided a foundation for his routines and gave them a form of *countercultural* authenticity.

Another performer who used his political education to construct his material was Anvil Springstien (real name Paul Ward), who was a member of the Militant Tendency in the early to mid-1980s (questionnaire). Originally from Liverpool, Anvil began as a street performer with an act called 'The Human Anvil' that played at local festivals and Militant's branch events on Tyneside. His interest in left-wing politics was activated through reading Marx while he was a youth worker in Liverpool, and this shaped his political-aesthetic disposition and thus his choices. His self-guided study of Marx gave him the tools with which to transform an ordinary street spectacle into a political speech that *made use* of street performance skills (Ward questionnaire). He explains:

I stayed awake all night and wrote a forty minute show where the hammer represents the cultural and industrial might of the masses which, when given the correct leadership, would smash through the stranglehold of international finance capital, as represented by the brick... Eight hours later I shuffled the handwritten A4 pages together and, after putting a staple in the top left hand corner, penned the title 'The Human Anvil'.

Anvil Springstien, questionnaire

This street spectacle reminds us of early street theatre companies like Red Ladder, who favoured strong visual imagery to carry its message (Itzin, 1984; Stourac and McCreery, 1985). In the carnivalesque performance of the Human Anvil one could delight in the rousing socialist speech and cheer as the

socialist hero rose from the debris of capitalism represented by the smashed brick and paving slab. However, such an act was physically demanding and after suffering a couple of broken collarbones and some cracked ribs, Anvil moved into stand-up comedy in 1989, and he continued to use his *countercultural* capital to write material, which contained a great deal of social and political comment from a Left perspective (Ward questionnaire).

Countercultural capital was also produced through other forms of activism. Tony Allen (interview), for example, was “a squatting activist” based in the Ladbroke Grove area of West London (Wilmot, 1989). The Elgin pub, in Allen’s words, became “a hub of sort of lefty and anarchist, sort of, activity” (interview). Allen’s experiences were used practically and in two ways: first, the practice of squatting was embodied and projected outwardly as symbolic *countercultural* capital through his comedy routine. Second, the location of Alternative Cabaret was selected precisely because the Elgin was a meeting place of local activists (Allen interview). Moreover, it was located in Ladbroke Grove, a *countercultural* hub in the 1970s whose residents included bands like Hawkwind, Mick Farren’s band The [Social] Deviants and The Pink Fairies, all of which were associated with the free festival movement and other *countercultural* events and ‘happenings’ of the period (Parkin, 2007). The Clash was formed nearby at the Westway and CAST based themselves up the road at Chippenham Mews in nearby Kensal Green. We can regard free festivals and other meeting places as facilitators for the circulation of *countercultural* capital. Such events and meeting places provided platforms for the dissemination of ideas and sites for the circulation of *countercultural* capital. It is also possible to argue that the Elgin functioned as a *countercultural* space because it was a place to meet and discuss tactics over a pint or two. The Elgin was an official space that was constructed as a *countercultural* meeting point within the minds of those who met there.

For my part, I had been active in the Hunt Saboteurs and the Eastern Animal Liberation League as well as CND and my local Anti-Apartheid Movement branch in Hitchin, Hertfordshire. I had also been a member of Friends of the Earth from 1977 – 79. However, compared to my left-wing participants, my background was unusual for the fact that neither of my parents were left-wing or socialists, though I was orientated towards the Left. However, before 1979 I lacked a political education, and a chance conversation with a

work colleague converted me to socialism. Yet I saw the Labour Party as too capitalistic for my tastes and increasingly detached from its roots as a trade union movement. I was not aware, at this stage, of other left-wing parties apart from the SWP, whose 'Stuff the Jubilee' stickers could be found on lamp posts around the country in 1977. Therefore my politics were shaped more by the number of single issue campaigns in which I was involved rather than through a political party. My political education has been self-guided and is therefore full of gaps. I could not, for example, pass myself off as a Communist or Trotskyist because I lacked intellectual anchorage in those ideologies. I adopted a position that I describe as 'libertarian socialist' with anarcho-syndicalist impulses and, like many of the post-punk generation I was opposed to the Conservative Party as much as 'capitalist Labour' (Reynolds, 2005). It would also be reasonable to claim that my view of the world had been partly shaped by the events of May 1968 and the strikes and sit-ins in Paris and Munich (I was living in Bavaria at that time). Furthermore, the image of the Black Power salute at the 1968 Olympics and the Black Panthers, looking sharp and cool in their all-black attire and berets, were also etched on my memory. Thus it could also be argued that the media played some role in shaping my countercultural experiences but images can only act superficially on one's consciousness. Bourdieu (2003) is insistent on the crucial role of education in the production and reproduction of cultural capital, and it is no less important in terms of education within countercultural formations.

Although membership of political parties among performers was negligible, the influence of left-libertarianism on the space was considerable and had an unconscious effect on many performers. In his discussion of Flaubert in *The Rules of Art*, Bourdieu (1993: 44) argues there is a "structural affinity" between the avant-garde and the political vanguard that is a "rapprochement" between anarchist intellectualism and Symbolist movement with the "distances between them prudently maintained". We see in alt-cab, not a homology with vanguardist politics but, rather, a structural affinity with post-punk and the libertarian socialist intellectualism of the Situationist International, whose work drew upon the Frankfurt School and the young Marx of the *Theses on Feuerbach* (Marx, 2002). Levels of education also played their part in shaping the political-aesthetic dispositions of the participants and guided their choices in relation to performance styles and material.

A1.2 Making distinctions

'Old school' comedy and light entertainment of the 1970s were mentioned by many of the participants and the words they used to describe the official world indicates an unconscious understanding of the avant-garde. The word 'alternative', particularly acted as a means of signification and differentiation, and reminded audiences, promoters, performers and journalists that they inhabited a second world of entertainment that opposed the predictability and staleness of the official world. When asked what they thought the terms "alternative comedy" and "alternative cabaret" meant to them, the participants' responses were broadly similar. Randolph the Remarkable (real name Phil Herbert) (questionnaire) told me:

'alternative' came about as we were an alternative to mainstream white stand ups. larry grayson , kenneth williams , frankie howerd, hattie jaques- all things carry on.

Phil presents us with a binary choice between 'the alternative' or the 'cool', and the mainstream or 'the straights'. Yet while 'alternative' was used, as a marker of differentiation, there appears to have been few, if any, alternatives to the word 'alternative'. There was 'underground' and in many respects, this suited the embryonic space but for whatever reason it was not used. Notably, the word 'alternative' while it is an important marker of distinction for the performers themselves, was not universally adopted by them (C Craig, 2000). CAST, for example, preferred the term 'New Variety' because it suited their format but for other reasons that are explained in Chapter 6. The word 'alternative' had originally been employed in the name of the Alternative Cabaret collective, and was later employed by the journalists to refer to a kind of comedy or cabaret that broke with tradition (see Appendix 1). Dave Thompson, who opened the Alley Club at the Horse and Groom in central London in 1985, preferred to use the term "new comedy" to describe his club

(Thompson questionnaire). Nevertheless, 'alternative' established itself as a term of reference and came to represent a distinction between the old and the new, the uncool and the cool and the fresh and the stale. Randolph's point is reiterated by Andy Smart (2013):

It marked us out as different. I'm very proud to have been part of it. It didn't get rid of Thatcher, but it did marginalise Jim Davidson, and Bernard Manning and other racist and sexist comics.

Being "different" was important marker to the alternative performers and we can see this reflected in members of a particular subculture, who used style and argot to mark themselves out from the rest of the crowd (Hebdige, 1993). Difference hinged on a notion of authenticity that was predicated on the belief that writing one's own material was more 'real' than reproducing the industrially-produced jokes told by the 'uncool' traditional comedians. Although the alternative space's comedians may have marginalised some traditional acts, it is worth remembering that Jim Davidson still managed to get work, first in sitcoms like *Up the Elephant and Round the Castle* (Thames Television, 1985) and then later in gameshows like *The Generation Game* (BBC1, 1995-2001) and *Big Break* (BBC1, 1991-1998), and has maintained a relatively high profile ever since (source: Imdb website entry, 2016). Manning, Charlie Williams, Stan Boardman and others returned to the WMC circuit. Yet Andy also acknowledges comedy's limitations as a potential instrument of social and political change that is demonstrated here by the mention of opposition to Thatcher. However this would deny satire's role as a form of passive resistance, for while satire is unable to raise a weapon in open revolt, it has the potential to raise social and political consciousness in its audiences and can exist as part of an overall strategy of cultural and political resistance (Mascha, 1998).

For John Gordillo (questionnaire), the terms "alternative cabaret/comedy" can be located in a specific moment in time.

Yes but purely as description of what was happening until – at latest - the early 90's. It describes a shift in the comedic targets/power relationships – a move away from the frilly shirted racists & hacks that came before.

John references the traditional comedians' sartorial style as well as their reinforcement-through-joking of the dominant power relationships. He claims the alternative label ceased to have any meaning in the late 1980s and this can be attributed to the newer comics' symbolic cultural capital they imported into the space during the transitional period, which militated against so-called political correctness (see Appendix 1). As a “dominant discourse”, alt cab and the attitudes that were articulated around it, was faced with a dominant cultural backlash from around 1984 with the Conservative supporting press printing often apocryphal stories of ‘political correctness gone mad’. Women, gay and ethnic minority rights were regarded by these papers and those who read them as evils that would limit individual freedoms.

Mark Hurst (questionnaire) points out some of the drawbacks and perceptions of the alternative label:

There were very different ideas and expectations, especially as you moved around the country as to what 'alternative' meant. I don't mean literally, but, what it was a by word for. Some people thought it meant they were going to see political comedy, some thought it was just middle class arty, and to others, it meant 'loads of swearing'.

Of course it was all those things a lot of the time. What it was supposed to be, I suppose, was a signal saying, ' Non racist, non sexist' I was ok with the label myself.

Mark Hurst (questionnaire)

It is telling that Mark uses words like “arty” and “middle class”, these words reveal the way in which many people perceived the divide between alt

cab and traditional entertainment, yet they also remind us how art appreciation and productions is perceived as a middle class pastime or occupation (Bourdieu, 2003). S Friedman (2011) observes the divide between alt com and traditional comedy was a cleft between not just old and young but working class and middle class. He argues that working classes tend to have lower levels of cultural capital and thus make their comedy judgements based on their class habitus (S Friedman, 2011). However, one's appreciation for cultural forms is contingent on independent variables (Bourdieu, 2003: 8), and having come from a mixed American-British working-class background, my exposure to American stand-up in its commercial and *countercultural* forms, transcended the class-based tastes of British comedy consumers (Friedman and Kuipers, 2013). Therefore, given my levels of a more specialized cultural capital in the shape of the Firesign Theatre, I found the references in Oxbridge humour easy to understand.

Bernard Manning represented the official world, and was mentioned more than any other traditional comedian. This was particularly the case when performers spoke of their differences with the old school performers and why they felt alt com was a necessary antidote to what they saw as the staleness of the official world. Mark Kelly (interview) admits:

I'd never considered being a comic, because I'd associated comedy, obviously, with Bernard Manning and so on...

The comedy of the traditional comedians seemed to exist in a space outside of time. Thus it often recalled memories of the immediate post-war period with its rationing and austerity; the mother-in-law joke being an example of this now fading world (Dembina interview). For Ronnie Golden (interview), the old school comedy was beyond its use-by date:

So, yeah, it was a new thing. I mean, America's had stand-up for years and years and we've had character comedians... I mean, comedy was

the province of older men, you know, I mean... before the so-called alternative comedy, I mean it was... comedians were just old geezers, who were left over from the 30s and the 40s and doing gags and suddenly it was... this was a brand new thing, there were no rules. It was kinda quite exciting.

A division between American and British forms of stand-up comedy is indicated here by the respective characteristics of each form. American stand-up has, since the 1950s, been more personal-political, whereas British stand-up was ostensibly apolitical with comedians concealing their inner selves behind their jokes. Ronnie's use of the phrase 'old geezers' signifies the generational gulf between the old and the new and reveals the tension with the parental culture, in this case represented by traditional light entertainment. This is reinforced by "who were left over from the 30s and the 40s", which serves to illustrate the official world's resistance to change. He uses words like "exciting" and "new" to mark differences between his generation and the old geezers and character comedians. When Ronnie claims that within this movement "there were no rules", he is not referring to an absence of *doxa*, rather the fact that the *doxa* itself was inverted in relation to the official world's unspoken and codified sets of rules to the alternative space's virtual lack of rules. The idea of what constituted entertainment, like art, was in the eye of the producer and audience. Therefore traditional stand-up could never serve as an adequate model on which to base one's performance.

Traditional stand-up of the 1970s was reactionary and refused any engagement with the realities of everyday life, and light entertainment was often insular and nostalgic. Cultural products from the official world represented the decline of Britain as an industrial and imperial power and rather than look forward, its cultural industries sought refuge in a romanticised version of history. The young upstart comedians that challenged the dominant hierarchical principle were not only regarded as unfunny, they were seen as alien invaders. Bernard Manning, in a *Daily Mail* obituary that was apparently written by him before his death in, claimed:

In their obsession with turning comedy into a branch of Left-wing politics, they forgot that the only point of jokes is to make people laugh. And that was what I was good at, whether I was on the cabaret circuit in Manchester or at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas.

Bernard Manning, *The Daily Mail*, 20/6/07

If what Manning says is true, then WMC comedy was a branch of right-wing politics that wore its jocularised symbolic violence on its sleeve, while at the same time denying its effect or intent. The irony of this statement lay in the fact that the racist comedy of the WMC stand-ups is illustrative of the superiority theory of humour in which the butt – always a social formation - is deemed inferior to the joke-teller and his class (Hobbes, n.d.; Double, 1991; Lippitt, 1995b). Manning and his fellow comics may not have found alt com funny, but it is worth remembering that the charges that were made against alt com were similar to those made against ground-breaking productions such as *The Goon Show*, *That Was The Week That Was (TW3)* and *Monty Python's Flying Circus* by the press as well as establishment entertainment figures. Outside of its rare outings in broadcast media, subversive humour tended to be confined to the visual arts and to the pages of magazines like *Punch*. Both *The Goons* and *TW3* were broadcast on mainstream media (The Home Service and BBC1 respectively), while *Monty Python*, - though produced by Oxbridge graduates - was consigned to the cultural ghetto of BBC2, the Corporation's minority interest channel because of its leftfield content.

Manning's and his fellow comedians' technical skills are commonly used as a rebuttal to criticism by his defenders. Steve Gribbin (interview) observes:

Some of them were brilliant technicians... then again, I always say to people, when people say "Bernard Manning was a brilliant technician" is a bit like going to see a skinhead band, who are in the BNP saying "Oh, they got a really good lead singer"... so what?

Manning and his some of his fellow comedians may have possessed the technical competency required to deliver precision-tooled jokes, but their comedy was not only mass-produced, it was reactionary and violent. In their hands, the joke was a weapon that could be deployed against any minority group; it was an iron fist inside a velvet glove. The use of the word 'technicians' is instructive because it illuminates the divide between the notions of art and the technical competence of traditional joke-tellers who see their work, not as art, but as a skill that is devoid of the creative spark. The skill of delivering the perfect joke and its timing was of paramount importance to the traditional comedian rather than the meaning or attitude that lay behind it. Steve's allusion to BNP skinhead bands (like Skrewdriver) is a valid one, because these bands may have been competent, perhaps even good musicians but their art was in the service of the far-right and its narrow discourses of national identity. It is difficult to get past this aspect of their work in the same way that it is hard to separate the Italian Futurists' misogyny from their manifesto (Marinetti, 1909; Tisdall and Bozzola, 1977). Manning and his fellow comedians may not have been members of far-right parties and may have even found them repugnant, but they represented an old style of comedy that was informed by post-colonial discourses of difference. Traditional comedians may have deflected criticism of their jokes by attributing it to a lack of a sense of humour on the complainant's part, but this overlooks that the violent symbolism of racist/sexist joke. The playfulness or aloofness with which the racist joke is delivered does not divert from the fact that such jokes reinforce dominant power relations and are produced, not in isolation from society, but subject to its discourses. Racist/sexist comedy reinforced bonds between members of particular white working class fractions, which felt threatened by immigration, women's rights and a growing sense of black consciousness. In this respect the racist and sexist comedy of Manning *et al* functioned as a distorting mirror, reflecting back the thoughts, anxieties and beliefs of their audiences as comically warped representations of minority groups. Anti-racism and anti-sexism were thus the leading edge of alt cab's *countercultural* thrust and were produced by the movement's early associations with left-wing political theatre, RAR and feminism particularly.

The suggestion that alt com, in particular, and as distinct from performance art or street performers, was an art form is contestable. In Britain,

art is viewed with a certain degree of suspicion by many people. I put this question to Stewart Lee (interview) and asked him:

RC So true...ummm...I wanted to ask you about how you see your work; do you see it as art?

SL Um, it's useful for me to see it as art. Um, because I'm not able to compete...um...well, I probably could now actually in the last year have really changed but, you know, you're basically, you basically construct a set of terms so that you'll feel comfortable with, don't you and I think if your goals are to be on mainstream telly, you have to be selling out stadiums and whatever, then you'll always be frustrated but, so you move your goalposts around and my goalposts were, you know, can I'd done so badly when I was with Avalon and I'd done so badly financially out of having co-written the theatrical hit of the decade, that actually I'm...um moved my goalposts to "can I make art and not lose money and make a living"? You know...but if you say in your brain that it's art first and foremost, then you go "oh I've just done a good piece of art and I didn't lose money. Brilliant". You know but if your thing...if your thing is you want to be famous and successful, you're always going to be disappointed.

Even here, Stewart attempts to distance himself from the idea that his work could be construed as art. He reluctantly concedes that it is "useful" for him to see it that way but only as a means of making a distinction. However he also acknowledges a kind of truth that comes with small-scale art production: that if one has a choice to either stick to their artistic principles or produce work for mass consumption or for fame, then taking the latter route may lead to riches but will not be as fulfilling. Yet, his use of the term 'selling out', although related to stadium tours, has a double meaning, for within countercultures and subcultures the act of 'selling out' can be seen not only as an act of betrayal but

it is also the conversion of one's counter*cultural* capital into symbolic cultural capital.

A1.3 Dealing with difference

Alt-cab gave a platform to women and minority performers, who otherwise would have been forced to perform according to a social typography projected onto them by the dominant culture (Fanon, 1966). In the WMCs and commercial cabarets, for example, women comics – rare as they were - were not permitted to refer to menstruation, or use certain swear words. WMCs were gendered spaces where the presence of women was generally unwanted (Double, 1991). The concert rooms were often the only gender-integrated spaces in the clubs where wives and girlfriends were permitted but only if they were accompanied by a male (Double, 1991; Cherrington, 2009).

As an adolescent growing up in the early 1970s, I was aware of only five visible female comics on television: they were the impressionists June Brown and Faith Brown (no relation) and stand-up comics Marti Caine and Victoria Wood and former music hall comic, Hylda Baker. Unlike the United States, which had Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers, women performing purely stand-up comedy were rare in Britain and female comedy performers were usually impressionists or, like Joyce Grenfell, character comedians in the years before Victoria Wood's appearance on *New Faces* (ATV) in 1974. Yet in the 1980s, there were very few women stand-ups on the circuit and although the space was ostensibly non-sexist and non-gendered, there remained residual male attitudes to difference, which manifested itself in the claim that 'women aren't funny'. Julie (interview) says:

I mean, I think a lot of men just haven't got it in them to find women funny or they're not... I don't know what it is. I think, whether you're male or female, when it comes to comedy, looks play a huge part and that... some people won't accept someone who's attractive of being funny, whether they're male or female...

Regardless of whether a woman was viewed as attractive or not, it was a cue for drunken men to shout out “get your kit off” or “get them out for the lads”. Dreenagh Darrell (interview) was an Irish-Australian comic, who began performing in 1985, recalls an incident at Brunel University where she was booked to perform.

...in those days I had this gorgeous... I loved it... um, fake fur...coat that I used to love and so I... I kind of arrived and all these guys as I coming in were saying, “Oh look! The stripper’s arrived”! So it was still that mentality... you know, you’re a female, you’re a bit glam... you must be a stripper, you couldn’t be a comedian”...

Dreenagh also once considered performing WMCs with Jo Brand:

Cos at men’s clubs, women aren’t supposed to swear. Bernard Manning would have hated me.... he would have thought I was awful...

Women were expected to perform to expectations by being ‘lady-like’ and demure and this attitude appeared to cut across class lines. While men may have opened a door, or given up their seat on a crowded train for a woman, there was no sense of equality and ‘women’s lib[eration]’ as it was called, represented a challenge to the dominant culture. Dreenagh challenged the way in which women were perceived as comics through her use of sexually explicit language, mocking of the monarchy and her confrontational persona. Thus, women performers like Dreenagh, who are already marginalised because of their sex, are considered as threats to the male-dominated social order (qv. Fanon, 1966). The idea of a woman talking frankly about sex and peppering her routine with swear words was alien to traditional club-goers, even the notoriously blue traditional comedienne, Marti Caine, was forbidden to swear in the WMCs.

There was an assumption among traditional audiences and the comics that women were sexually passive, but women who initiated sexual contact were regarded as social and sexual aberrations (Double, 1991: 156). Women comics, who worked the WMCs, while they tended to turn some of the jokes around, still conformed to dominant social positions by default. However,

stepping outside the boundaries of gender performativity brought with it a concomitant reaction from some alternative promoters who regarded sex, gender and ethnicity as monoliths. Despite the apparent shift in social attitudes to difference, there remained some residual resistance to change. Towards the end of the 1980s, this was manifested as a reaction against what was perceived as 'political correctness'. Dreenagh again:

I just thought, "I am just naturally quite filthy anyway". I've always been filthy. I've always been rude and I've always been a bitch...so all of that... to be... to be able to say, "You can do what you like with no censorship and no one's gonna say you can't"... I just thought it was brilliant, so I would be trying to push it as much as I could... and I... I... do think though... looking back... I do think, even though you were able and women were coming through... I still think there was a kind of, um... how can I put it? Uh... they have to pigeonhole you as something.

The alt comedian's objective was to speak from a personal-political perspective, thus when Dreenagh tells us that although she was challenging gender normativities and pushing boundaries, there was a concomitant attempt by sections of alt cab's legitimating authorities to pigeonhole her (see Appendix). Judith Butler (2006) argues that gender is performed and says that "(b)ehind the notion of fixed gender is the issue of regulation, which is framed within the terms of heteronormativity" (2006: 185-6). The 'western' configuration of gender is one that accepts only polar opposites of male and female and anything outside of those binaries is seen as aberrant. Terms like 'natural' and 'real' illuminate the binary discourse of gender and sexuality. During the 1980s, notions of heteronormativity were challenged by the New Romantic club culture with varying degrees of success, but there were still pockets of resistance among cabaret audiences, which could still, on occasion be racist and sexist – this was especially the case towards the end of the 1980s and the 1990s, when stag and hen parties were booked in some of the larger clubs. These audiences could be very difficult and were often less accommodating of anything that stepped outside the boundaries of what was deemed acceptable.

I faced a similar problem with my brown skin and American accent. On the one hand, I was seen as 'black' and on the other I was seen as American, meaning some promoters expected me to perform as a Black American. I was also expected to avoid anything that resembled erudition and thinking and was criticised by one promoter for performing political satire. I would argue that such attitudes are informed by the stereotypical images in film and television of black people as victims or slaves, but ultimately, they must be acceptable to white eyes and ears (Hall, 2003: 251-3). Fanon (1966: 82-83) puts it thus: "For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man." This applies to any minority group be they women, gay or disabled: they must perform to the expectations of the dominant culture in order to be recognised lest they be cast out of the field for daring to rebel against the master. Thus, minorities were forced to navigate the field by 'playing the game' and sacrificing their dignity and self-respect for the slimmest chance of fame. This was the case with black performers like Kenny Lynch, Charlie Williams and Lenny Henry, whose visibility on television was contingent on their performativity and, in the case of Williams, sharing the same racist views towards non-black minority groups as their white counterparts.

A1.4 Producing talent and reproducing countercultural capital

In 1982, the embryonic circuit lost many of its major acts to television. These performers were members of the Comic Strip, who had migrated to Channel 4 with *The Comic Strip Presents* and *The Young Ones* (BBC2). Although Ben Elton was not a member of The Comic Strip, he joined the migration when he became one of the writers for *The Young Ones* (Hamilton, 1981; Wilmut, 1989). During the latter part of 1982, cabaret courses were established at The Crown and Castle and Jackson's Lane Community Centre to produce the next generation of performers. These courses self-consciously referred to themselves as 'cabaret' rather than 'comedy' courses, and promised to teach novices "cabaret techniques" (McGillivray, 1990: 165). Jackson's Lane's entry in *The British Alternative Theatre Directory* (1990-91) says:

Beginners can learn cabaret techniques and established acts can try out new material (Booking essential).

(McGillivray, 1990: 165)

The phrase “cabaret techniques” may sound rather ambiguous these days, but in the 1980s ‘cabaret’ was a means of differentiation. Jackson’s Lane remained popular until 1990, when the professionalisation of comedy led to the proliferation of stand-up comedy courses, the biggest of which was Jill Edwards’s comedy course based at City Lit in London, which tended to produce what I disparagingly referred to as ‘identikit comedians’. It became easy to identify comedians that had attended a Jill Edwards course because of the way they presented themselves onstage and the jokes they told about themselves. This reminds us of the art schools’ claim to legitimate art and students within these institutions learnt the same techniques that may have been taught for decades or centuries. Art schools were rejected by political-aesthetes as places that perpetuated the dull, stale and impotent work of the past (Marinetti, 1909; Tisdall and Bozzolla, 1977). Cabaret workshops reproduced *countercultural* values through the inculcation of the space’s ethical framework. Workshop leaders provided informal guidance and allowed a performer to develop his or her own style.

The workshops covered topics like improvisation, writing and compèring over the course of 11 hour-long sessions (Double, 2005). Yet in spite of the use of the word ‘cabaret’ these courses tended to produce comedians of all kinds rather than performance poets, for example. Wendy Lee (questionnaire), Julie Balloo (interview) and Dreenagh Darrell (interview) attended the course at Jackson’s Lane, while Bob Boyton (interview) attended a course run by Jean Nicholson at The Crown and Castle in Dalston a year earlier. For the performers who chose this route to the circuit, these courses also provided them with their first gigs. Cabaret courses such as these were not certificated, and novices were taught by performers who were already working on the circuit (Boyton, Facebook conversation). Therefore, the only qualifications they possessed were their stage experiences, rather than a certificate that demonstrated their pedagogical competence. Instead, workshop tutors were legitimated by their

students who recognised the value of their experience. Some tutors were less enthusiastic about teaching than others as Julie Balloo (interview) explains.

...they had guest teachers in those days and the first teacher was Julian Clary, who was very nervous about teaching because he doesn't like teaching. He's quite shy really ...he just wanted to do his act. So he talked a little bit and then he said "Does anyone want to get up and do anything they've got"? So I just jumped up out of my seat and did my Miss Australia and I didn't realise that would appeal to him and he absolutely loved it and, of course, it immediately appealed to him.

As this extract shows us, the emphasis was on support rather than formal instruction. Students were encouraged to perform material they had written and were given guidance and encouragement. Tutors had no formal training and this is evidenced by the reluctance of Julian Clary to 'perform' the role of cabaret teacher. His role as he saw it was to act as a kind of mentor and provide advice. Cabaret courses like these also reveal the supportive nature of the space and this is something mentioned by many of my participants, who began working in the space before the transitional period began. Double (1997) claims that older comedians have always offered informal advice to novices advice, yet the workshop idea breaks with individual informal guidance and places it in a setting that is not dissimilar to the stand-up comedy course in *Comedians* (Griffiths, 1979). This informal mode of learning reveals how capital is produced and circulated within countercultural spaces: a need arises for the production of particular experts or artists and pedagogies are organically created to cater for this need.

Others, like me, were autodidacts and it is certainly the case that the first wave of performers taught themselves the basics, sometimes with the assistance of others. Steve Gribbin (interview), who started Skint Video with John Ivens in 1983, sought guidance from a non-comedy source before taking to the stage:

...we had no idea what we were doing... em... we fell in with a guy called Michael Belbin, who was... um... uh.. kind of a Media Studies, um...

friend of John's, who tried to give us some sort of ideological background...

Like many performers, Steve was new to comedy and his tactic was to consult someone who understood the ideological positions of the government and the opposition. Therefore Steve understood the doxa of the space at a conscious level but he has also identified a need for political satire. Mike Belbin was a lecturer at Goldsmith's College, where Steve, John and Brian were studying. Yet, this is also an example of De Certeau's (1988) concept of bricolage, in which one makes do with what they have to hand. Given there were no models on which to base themselves, Skint Video needed to create something fresh from scratch and so obtaining information in this way was crucial since the doxa of the space required an understanding of subversive politics and art forms. Here we are reminded that the production of avant-garde art demands some knowledge of the artistic medium in which one is working (Bourdieu, 1993, 2003). In the next section, I discuss the variety of cabaret clubs, which ran the gamut from stand-up comedy to improvisation to new circus.

Appendix 2

Alternative cabaret clubs and political-aesthetic dispositions

A number of tendencies existed within the alt-cab space, which mirror those of the post-punk music space. Some of these were avant-garde, some were stand-up comedy orientated, some were political and others were variety-orientated. These tendencies were the product of the political-aesthetic dispositions of the participants. Individual cabaret clubs were effectively micro-spaces, and each had its own orientation that was determined by the political-aesthetic disposition of the promoter.

I would like to turn to the political-aesthetic dispositions of club promoters. Although Double (1994) touches on this aspect the Appendix of his thesis, I will draw this out a little more. Double (1994) observes the differences between clubs, their organisers and their aims and notices how some clubs are well run and others are either poorly run or located in locations that are neither conducive to both performers and audience. Clubs such as these tend to be run by people with little or no understanding the performer-audience dynamic and how this relates to room layout. Alt-cab shared structural similarities with post-punk in terms of its fragmented nature, its political positioning, critical engagement and the avant-garde tendencies within the movement.

The range of clubs that existed roughly corresponded to the range of performance styles and attitudes. I have identified seven types of alt-cab club: (see Table 2).

Table 2: club types

Club type	Example(s)
Performance art/avant-garde	Cabaret Futura, Third Eye Level Grill Show
Art-cabaret influenced	Cabaret A Go Go (Newcastle)
Poetry dominant	Bradford Alternative Cabaret, Apples and Snakes

Variety	<i>Jongleurs</i> , Tunnel Palladium, CAST presents New Variety
Comedy dominant	<i>Comedy Store</i> , Punchline Comedy Club, Comic Club (Glasgow)
Street performance/new circus dominant	Hat Club, Juggler's Arms, Leeds Alternative Cabaret
Musical origins (usually folk/world music)	Buzz Club (Manchester), Streetwise (Doncaster)
Improvisational	Late at The Gate, London Theatresports

Note: Venues in italics denote clubs that were effectively separated from the rest of the space.

Alt-cab included art-orientated clubs like Cabaret Futura; those that were influenced by art but were variety-orientated like CAGG; variety clubs like *Jongleurs* and The Tunnel Palladium, as well as comedy clubs like The Comedy Store. However, Wilmut (1989) insists that The Store and *Jongleurs* were never really part of the alt-cab circuit because they set themselves apart from it by establishing themselves as commercial venues. In so doing, they effectively created a highly-professionalised cadre of performers that straddled the alternative space and the official world of television and corporate entertainment. CAST had an overlapping circuit but were not part of the alt-cab movement (see next chapter). There were also circus/street performance clubs like The Hat Club. Some, like The Buzz Club in Manchester, began as folk clubs and retained a folk element, while others like Bradford Alternative Cabaret had a distinctly political complexion to them (Double, 1991; Marshall, Toczek questionnaires). I have not included NewsRevue here although it was always included in *TO* and *City Limits'* Cabaret Sections. It started its run at the Canal Cafe Theatre before the opening of The Comedy Store and has featured alternative comedians in performing and writing capacities.

I will provide sketches of two geographically-dispersed clubs, which were founded according to their proprietors' political-aesthetic dispositions and which demonstrates how the field operates as a site of position-taking – even

within the alt-cab field itself and how fields converge to create new fields. The first is an outline of an art-based club and the second deals with a club founded on the basis of spurring people into taking political action.

The Third Eye Level Grill Show (TELGS) was anchored in avant-garde and performance art practices through the habituses of its organisers, Woody Bop Muddy (real name William Wilding) and Chris Cresswell, who used to “hang out [and] write comedy together” (Cresswell personal communication). Wilding (questionnaire) began as a performance poet in the folk clubs of Essex in the mid-1970s. He then studied performance art at the Wimbledon School of Art and ran a monthly show called The Coat Club for art students and lecturers, which developed into a series of nights at the ICA in 1979 (Wilding questionnaire). Cresswell, on the other hand, studied mime and drama at Loughborough University (Cresswell, questionnaire). They began running the TELGS in 1988 at The Bull’s Head pub in Clapham, and specialised in unusual acts like The Iceman and anarchic clown/fool, Chris Lynam (Wilding questionnaire). Wilding had a residency called “Record Graveyard”, in which he played records found in charity shops and asked the audience if they wanted the disc to be ‘saved’ or ‘nailed’. If they chose the latter, the record would be nailed to a lump of wood or sometimes smashed with a golden hammer (Wilding questionnaire). This routine had evolved out of smashing “shite records” for pleasure at home (Wilding questionnaire).

Wilding’s act could be described as a form of post-punk avant-garde performance: it is at once aggressive, violent and humorous with the laughs coming from the destruction of a record that the vast majority of the audience finds bland or ridiculous. The record’s cover would also be ridiculed and the artwork would be savagely deconstructed by Wilding. The use of audience participation also provided a democratising element to his act by breaking the fourth wall and asking for the audience shout out their approval or disapproval. Double’s (2007) discussion of punk’s relationship with popular theatre, notes the theatricality of the Sex Pistols, whose lead singer, Johnny Rotten (John Lydon) referred to the band as “music hall”. Record Graveyard appears to signify a kind of punk music hall, yet it is post-punk because it sets out to achieve laughs and demands the audience’s vote. A punk performer would categorically refuse the audience’s views and smash the record regardless. Wilding is both the hero and the villain in the eyes of different audience members for either destroying the

record or saving it; tastes could be vindicated or savaged in an instant. Record Graveyard became a successful circuit act in its own right and Wilding performed it on the cabaret and comedy circuits as well as festivals (Wilding questionnaire).

Another resident act was 'Baby Warhol', a waspish puppet-doll described as a "puppet guru floating in the void" and operated by Cresswell (personal communication; Twitter page, 2015). Baby Warhol was a surreal but vacuous oracle, dispensing non-sequitirs and cod wisdom to questions posed to him from atop a black sheet that represented space (Cresswell personal communication). Baby Warhol is a form of DIY puppetry, with the doll itself having been rescued from a waste bin because it reminded Cresswell of Andy Warhol (Cresswell personal communication). Thus Baby Warhol provided a link with the world of contemporary art if only tenuously so.

TELGS positioned itself as an art-cabaret against the straight stand-up clubs that were beginning to flourish towards the end of the 1980s and merged the fields of performance art and comic surrealism/absurdism. We also find with TELGS that much of the show was created in DIY fashion (Wilding questionnaire; Cresswell personal communication). This not only reinforces the idea that avant-garde is often created using DIY but also connects TELGS with countercultures. However, D Andrews (2010) reminds us that the link between the two is sketchy and not all avant-garde is oppositional in a political sense. The aim of the avant-garde is to challenge the stuffiness and conservatism of the dominant aesthetic. Yet, in its broadest sense, the adoption of an aesthetic position is also a political one because it takes a position against an established one. The aesthetic practice of TELGS differs greatly from the Bradford Alternative Cabaret, which used experimentation alongside politics.

Bradford Alternative Cabaret was a political cabaret that specialised in performance poetry and music (Double, 1994; Toczek questionnaire, 2013). It was founded in 1986 by performance poet and writer, Nick Toczek and musician Wild Willi Beckett at the Spotted House in Bradford, after Toczek noticed clubs were starting up in London that featured circus, poetry, stand-up comedy and music (McGillivray, 1989, 1990; Double, 1994; Toczek questionnaire). He also noticed the numbers of street performers that were appearing at festivals across the country and wanted to bring them to Bradford (Toczek questionnaire). Toczek was friends with Jeff Nuttall of The People

Show. Nuttall was also an anarchist, writer and journalist and urged Toczek to set up a club (Toczek questionnaire). According to Toczek, the aim was to experiment with music and poetry and be non-profit making, while linking it to a political cause (Toczek questionnaire). This link with politics would include a political speaker who would “raise awareness” and “hand out leaflets” (Toczek questionnaire). Here, we can see the influence of RAR in the inclusion of a political speaker. RAR carnivals would mix music with political speeches and literature would be available for the audience’s perusal (Widgery, 1986). Toczek (questionnaire) states “We felt strongly that if we offered a fun and cheap and innovative night out, people shouldn't simply escape from the issues in the world outside”. This idea of using popular culture to raise the audience’s consciousness is also present in alternative theatre. Toczek and Barrett’s interventionist strategy resembles that of RAR but also recalls the folk clubs for the way in which live entertainment is married with left-wing politics. Before alt-cab, the only spaces in which politics and art overlapped were the folk clubs. It was within the folk clubs that CAST gave their first performances, because they were run by left-leaning people who were often members of the CPGB (Muldoon interview). One such folk club was the Peanuts Club off Liverpool Street, London, which was organised by Jeff Nuttall.

Appendix 3: Cabaret A Go Go

A3.1 Introduction

The story of Cabaret A Go Go (CAGG) is closely bound up with my story as a performer. It was through my instigation that CAGG was transformed from an idea and given concrete form, which was the product of a chain of social relations. I was involved in CAGG from its beginning in 1987 until 1990 when I left Newcastle to pursue my comedy career in London. CAGG was an alt-cab club in Newcastle-upon-Tyne that ran from 1987 to 1991 and was the first club of its kind located north of Leeds-Bradford (McGillivray, 1989, 1990). My colleagues were Clive Lyttle, Bass Jansen and Martine D'Ellard, who lived in student flats at Keelman's Hospital on City Road on the Quayside. Clive, Bass and I were on the BA (Hons) Creative Arts course at Newcastle Polytechnic, while Martine was a drama teacher who worked at the North Shields People's Centre. As a group, we often socialised and held our meetings at the Barley Mow opposite Keelman's Hospital or down the road at the Egypt Cottage, next to Tyne-Tees Television's studios. In Newcastle, unlike the rest of the country, the pubs closed at 10:30pm every night. Nightlife generally revolved around the pubs and the many nightclubs in city centre. There were no alt-cab clubs.

In terms of live entertainment, the nearest approximation to an alt-cab club was a monthly topical sketch show hosted by Wire-less Wireless, which ran at The Red House pub on Newcastle's Quayside, and featured guests from inside and outside the city. Wire-less Wireless initially had four members but a split in their ranks in 1988 left Paul Sneddon and Gez Casey, two former students of the BA (Hons) Creative Arts course at Newcastle Polytechnic, to continue as a duo (Sneddon interview). Like many former Creative Arts students who remained in Newcastle, Sneddon and Casey were also involved in community theatre (Sneddon interview). The same course also produced a street-performing double-act called The Big Fun Club, which consisted of Rob Walton and Steve Drayton, who also played pubs and festivals around Tyneside. Drayton and Walton were a year above us and were in the same year group as Brianna Corrigan, who became the lead singer of pop band, The Beautiful South. Before finding fame with pop band, The Beautiful South,

Corrigan was a singer with The Anthill Runaways, a country band that regularly played CAGG shows.

Although it was roughly similar to any alt-cab club that could be found in London before 1991, CAGG was different because there was a strong emphasis on visual art, as well as comedy, poetry and what came to be called new circus⁵¹. In this respect, CAGG was like many of the clubs that opened in the regions, which tended to be diverse in terms of staging, bills and ethos compared to the London club (Double, 1994). However, CAGG was different because it was informed by historical continental cabarets. We often had themed evenings and discussed putting on Dada nights, but these never materialised because none of us could agree how to stage such a show⁵². CAGG was also a community arts group and we ran performing arts workshops in a variety of locations like the Jarrow Arts Centre, The Peoples' Centre in North Shields and The Buddle Arts Centre in Wallsend.

My undergraduate dissertation was titled "Cabaret A Go Go: comedy in theory and in practice" and was a discussion of comedy that focussed on the tension between alt-com and mainstream comedy and is this project's forerunner. My dissertation included a discussion of the characteristics of each style of comedy, combined with an analysis of the cabaret form drawn from Lisa Appignanesi's (1976) *The Cabaret*. The dissertation was the written element of my final year project, which I had cleverly tied to my work with CAGG, since it occurred to me early as January 1988 that I could use CAGG as the subject of my third year project as. I discussed the possibility of sharing CAGG as a joint academic but, albeit work-related, project with Clive and Bass who both concurred with me. CAGG was therefore as much an academic project as it was a cabaret club.

A3.2 Origins

CAGG's origins lie in my brief performance at the BA (Hons) Creative Arts Christmas party in December 1986. I was asked to perform a short stand-

⁵¹ The phrase "new circus" was coined in the 1980s to establish a distance between a more ethical form of circus that rejected the use of animals and traditional circuses like Billy Smart's Circus and others, which continued to use animals. The use of animals was seen as cruel by many people and new circus concentrated on human skills like juggling, stilt-walking, fire-eating and so on.

⁵² Hugo Ball of the original Cabaret Voltaire graced our first poster and was often regarded as our 'patron saint'

up routine on the basis that I was 'funny'. When I first performed stand-up comedy, I thought that the best approach would be to use whatever knowledge I had of the form. I had no experience of performing stand-up because it was still my intention, even at that stage, to become a serious actor. Yet, the roles on offer to people of colour were small in number and were often limited to playing to type: the gang leader, the drug dealer; the pimp. I realised that, as an actor, I would find myself spending much of my career either working in jobs that I hated or claiming benefits. Therefore, to construct my set, I had to draw from whatever cultural capital I possessed and create a short set using the bricolage of my knowledge of stand-up comedy and my extant performance skills. I knew that I did not want to be like the traditional comics from *The Comedians*, and emulated the American stand-up comedians that I had listened to, while not trying to imitate them or use their material. Writing one's own material was what set the alternative performer apart from the traditional comedians and stealing material was frowned upon.

I had greatly admired George Carlin for his use of word play, and the track "Some werds" on his album, *Toledo Windowbox* (1974), influenced my material about the foibles of the English language: "Disgruntled? You never meet anyone who is grunted". My memory of the first gig is hazy, but I remember finding the experience exhilarating and thinking that I would like to do it again. I had been bitten by the comedy bug but there were no cabaret clubs in Newcastle where I could try out my material. In order for me to perform I would need to establish a cabaret club. However, I realised early on that I would need to find other likeminded people to help make it happen. I shelved my idea until I could find the right moment and the right people. I did not perform stand-up comedy for another year.

The moment came in October 1987 during the Newcastle Fringe Festival, which took place from 7 to 24 October 1987 (see Appendix) in which Clive, Martine and I were involved various capacities. Prior to the festival, I had gone to see some alt-cab shows in London during my Christmas and summer breaks and I wondered why there were no such clubs in Newcastle, so when I was asked to take part in the Fringe Club, I seized the opportunity with both hands. The club was located at the Live Theatre in Newcastle's Quayside quarter and it was while I was watching one of the many shows that I began to entertain serious ideas about setting up a cabaret club like those I had seen in

London. The Live Theatre is a converted warehouse that is home to the theatre company of the same name. It had cabaret-style seating and no proscenium arch; it was the ideal space for my purposes. However, as a cabaret novice, the cost of hiring the Live Theatre (over £100 a night) was beyond my means as a cash-strapped student. The Fringe Club featured names like Ian Saville, the socialist magician; poet, Attila the Stockbroker and Wire-less Wireless, who acted as hosts in the final week of the festival. When the festival ended, it seemed to me that there a vacuum had been left behind. It seemed to me that the time was right to set up a more regular cabaret club.

A3.3 The show goes on

With the Newcastle Fringe now over, I was interested in setting up an alt-cab club as quickly as I could. The moment came when I bumped into Clive, while I was having a pint at The Barley Mow and I decided to put the idea to him. Once he came onboard, it was just a question of finding the right venue. I had two pubs in mind: The Bridge Hotel near the Quayside was more central and located near Newcastle Central Station and The Broken Doll to the West of the City Centre, which was in a rather seedy part of town that bordered Elswick. Both pubs were on the city's music circuit; The Bridge programmed jazz and folk music, while The Broken Doll (known simply as "The Doll") offered a mix of metal, punk and 'indie' bands. I had been to both pubs before, so I knew them both fairly well. Sometime in late October, Clive and I went to look at each pub in turn. The Bridge's function room was located in the basement and the Doll's, by contrast, was smaller, was located upstairs and had its own bar. I liked the room at The Bridge because it was larger and could hold more people (around 100). A greater room capacity meant potentially bigger earnings, but there were two major drawbacks: the sightlines were poor in places, because of the number of supporting pillars and the ceiling was rather low which precluded the possibility of including jugglers on the bill. Clive and I understood the basic concept of alt-cab as a variety form and were interested in including all kinds of performers. We decided against The Bridge on those grounds and settled on The Doll, because the landlord was very supportive of the idea and also because the size of the room (it seated around 50 people) suited our immediate needs and, importantly, it had its own bar. We decided that when the time came

to move to a larger venue, we would take the opportunity. We negotiated a fee of £20 for the hire of the rooms and arranged to hold a cabaret club every other Thursday, starting from December (Lyttle interview).

In early November 1987 Clive, Martine, Bass and I formed The Fun Committee to oversee the running of the club. We may have called ourselves a committee but it was a fairly loose arrangement with no single person in charge. All decisions were taken collectively by the members of the group but clear divisions of labour emerged because of the individual skills each of us brought to the table. It would be fair to argue that roles were never apportioned in an official manner but more or less assumed out of necessity, talent or through the exchange of social capital. Clive and Martine were primarily involved in the booking of acts because they possessed the necessary social capital in the form of useful contacts. Clive had organised shows and worked as a guitarist in his native Southeast London, and Martine was a drama teacher working at a community theatre project at the People's Centre in North Shields. Most importantly, they both had connections to Simon Palmer (through his sister, Jo, who was on the same course) of The Rub a Dub Club in Sydenham, South London. Initially it was through The Rub a Dub that we booked some of our headline acts (Lyttle interview). Bass was in charge of art direction, which included poster design and the production of stage flats and backdrops, but also the sound and lighting. I assumed the role of compère and typist, because I had the fastest typing speed. The name, "Cabaret A Go Go" was suggested by fellow student, Miles, who happened to be present for the first committee meeting but who was not yet officially part of the project. We all agreed on his suggestion for want of a better name while not fully appreciating the connotations of the suffix "Go Go" when it was applied to the word "cabaret"⁵³. The nearest alt-cab clubs to us were in Leeds and Bradford and there were no regular alt-cab venues in Scotland, although the *BATD* (McGillivray, 1989, 1990) lists The Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, this cannot be considered a regular venue because shows there were intermittent. The first alt-cab club to open in Scotland would be the Comic Club in Glasgow and this venue opened in March 1989 and was specifically a comedy club (McGillivray, 1990: 172).

⁵³ Sometimes businessmen would arrive at the club in the mistaken belief that it was a strip club or go-go bar. Later the locals told us that there had been a music venue in Newcastle called 'Club A'GoGo' (sic), which had closed years before our arrival.

We set the door price at £1.50 with £1.00 concessions for students, nurses and the unemployed. We based our pricing structure on the average admission price for other shows around Newcastle. Life membership was an extra £1 and was included in the initial admission price, making it £2.50 and £2.00. We found that by including life membership as part of the initial door price we provided people with an incentive to return to the club. We did not aim to appeal specifically to a student audience – even though Newcastle had a large student population because of the combined numbers from the University of Newcastle and the Polytechnic. We wanted a club for local people who were not associated with either the university or poly⁵⁴ and we sought to distance ourselves from both institutions. In the early days it is true that we were regarded, much to our annoyance, by many locals as another student outfit. The bill for the first show on December 4, 1987 was Johnny London, a Geordie poet who was living in London; Clive performing his “Indian shirt trick”, which was borrowed from Marcel Steiner and taught to him by Arnold Kuenzler-byrt, and sang some of his songs under his stage name of “Evil C” and I was compère (Lyttle questionnaire). The first night attracted a mere six people and the money taken on the door was barely enough to cover the expenses.

I had gone south for Christmas, so I was not present for the second show on 18 December, which had Geordie comic Mickey Hutton as headliner. Unfortunately, I do not recall who else was on the bill. There was a gap of a few weeks for the Christmas and New Year break and the club returned in the middle of January 1988. For the first couple of months, audience numbers were low and it was not until late February or early March 1988 that we managed to get anything like a full house. We desperately needed acts and Nick Toczek of the Bradford Alternative suggested that we could obtain funding from the National Poetry Society (sometimes called The National Poetry Secretariat [NPS]), which was running the Apples and Snakes performance poetry club in Covent Garden. We applied for and received our first grant from the NPS in March and were finally able to pay headline acts a guaranteed fee. Other performers were paid from a split of the door takings.

I have always used aliases and my choice of stage name is tied to an idea of living a different life onstage to the one that I live offstage. Many

⁵⁴ Newcastle was rather unusual for the fact that University and Polytechnic students enjoyed cordial relations and often collaborated on a number of projects outside of study.

comedians often say that the person onstage is either unlike them in real life or an exaggerated version of themselves. History is full of examples of people who chose to a name other than their own for professional reasons. For example, Issur Danielovitch does not sound as impressive as Kirk Douglas. My real name did not seem to reflect what I wanted to be as a performer and so I adopted stage names. Before settling on a permanent stage name I went through a number of name changes. When I began performing in December 1986, I called myself “Johnny Boiler”, I have no idea why I chose this name and it would appear that I did this for no other reason than to use something other than my real name. In January 1987, I changed my name to “Ray Burns” and then realised that this was the name of The Damned’s bassist, Captain Sensible, and I decided to drop it on that basis alone. A month or so later, while walking down a street in Newcastle City Centre, I can remember looking at the sign above Alfred Marks, the employment agency, and thought that if I deleted the first three letters from the first name, I could call myself ‘Red Marks’. It seemed to suit my politics and as a stage name. However, I only used it once, because it seemed too obvious. Then, one Sunday lunchtime in late March 1987, while I was watching a local band play downstairs in The Broken Doll, my mind began to wander and I began to ask myself what happened to Richard Hell of New York punk band, The Voidoids and for reasons that I am unable to explain, I also thought of Buddy Guy, the American blues musician. Then it occurred to me that if I joined the latter’s first name with the former’s surname, I had “Buddy Hell”. It was a pun on the expletive “bloody hell” and, at the same time, it was a punk-sounding name. Like many people of my generation, I had been affected by the shockwave of punk, so the name was a natural choice.

We had set out from the very beginning to present ourselves as ‘non-political’. We did not mind if others had or shared our left-wing views but it was not our intention to have shows that preached to the converted or anyone else. Our shows featured performers who may have been involved in political activities and we, ourselves, were involved in political activities, our aim was to provide entertainment that was non-racist and non-sexist. Yet, the Fun Committee and others in the movement were adopting a political and countercultural position simultaneously. Double (1991: 367) says of Newcastle and CAGG:

In Newcastle, there are several venues, notably Cabaret a Go Go. The scene there is quite Left Wing: my anti-Thatcher jokes went down noticeably better there, and Roger (Monkhouse) was disliked, his act being considered sexist.

Double is right to say that the Newcastle scene was left-wing and this is due in part to North-East's distance from other cities like Manchester, Leeds and London, where audiences could be varied, but also because of its heavy industries and the trade union movement. In some respects, our audiences could be as sensitive to sexism and racism as CAST's audiences. Sometimes, this acute sensitivity could lead to an overly censorious atmosphere. On one such an occasion, clown Chris Lynam, got a rough time at the hands of some rather strident feminists, one of whom had brought a young child to the show, who began to cry during Lynam's set. Perhaps out of frustration or perhaps because it was part of his outrageous stage persona (he had also been a member of The Greatest Show on Legs), Lynam pointed a toy pistol at the youngster in a vain effort to get him to stop crying (Lyttle interview). This was met with uproar. However, bringing a child to a show intended for adults was evidently inadvisable and the mother was irresponsible. I can remember expressing some discomfort over this, because front of house should have refused entry. In any case, this kind of thing was never repeated.

The backlash against left-wing culture had begun in the media at the beginning of the Thatcher administration and had reached fever pitch by 1987, with the government-supporting newspapers printing stories on a near-daily basis about 'loony left-wing councils' doling out taxpayers' money to dangerous subversives and unworthy minority groups. Legitimacy, in this case, was conferred only on those arts groups that met the press's criteria for consecration. In this respect we can see how the Conservative-supporting press acted to preserve the cultural hegemony of the dominant group by attacking those cultural producers who were seen variously as 'subversive' or 'loony left-wingers'. The Fun Committee has its own encounter with the press and at some point during the Spring of 1988, just after we won our first National Poetry Society (NPS) grant, *The Newcastle Evening Chronicle* printed a story with the title "Left-wing arts group receives funding for anarchist poet". The poet in

question was Eric the Anarchist (real name Mick Parkin, who *was* an anarchist), the first headline act to be subsidised by the NPS. In all likelihood, *The Chronicle* had seen our poster and had seized on Eric's name and used it as evidence of supposed profligacy. To them we were another 'loony left group' that was using state money to promote a radical left agenda, but the *Chronicle's* efforts failed and it is possible that it actually helped our cause, because by this point audience numbers were on the rise. We were of the belief that any publicity was good publicity. On stage, I mocked *The Chronicle* for its cheap sensationalism and had even intended to create a character based on a composite of hack journalists that I had met over the years but this never materialised, partly because of time constraints and partly because I could never find anything funny to insert into the mouth of this character⁵⁵.

While London's alt-cab clubs were beginning to see a shift in terms of the kinds of audience they attracted (yuppies), as well as focusing increasingly on stand up comedy. Northern clubs, like ours, were still offering poetry and variety. Our audiences and many of our performers – particularly those who came from in and around the North-East - remained determinedly anti-Thatcher. The reason for this can be attributed to the fact that the North was still reeling from the Thatcher government's destruction of the region's traditional industries like coalmining and shipbuilding. CAGG gave a platform to acts that had come from economically depressed communities like Byker, Walker and North Shields, where unemployment was high. People were angry and they made their feelings known – even if, at times, their humour was couched in streams of surrealist and absurdist flights of fancy.

CAGG had specially-themed shows and from the beginning, I had wanted to parody the television variety format, which seemed to me to be ripe for satirical treatment. I took an existing bill that had been programmed by either Clive or Martine and simply framed the evening as the 'Alternative Seaside Special'. The title itself reveals my embodied cultural capital because, for me, television variety was epitomised by programmes like the BBC's *Seaside Special*, which I often sat and watched with my parents. I will admit that I had no concept of variety theatre, which had ended before I was born. However, I found *Seaside Special*, like many programmes of its kind, formulaic and rather

⁵⁵ Instead I used the name 'Mac the Hack' as a *nom de plume* when I wrote articles for local magazines *Paint It Red* and *The Crack*.

nostalgic in style and content. There were two 'Alternative Seaside Specials': one in April 1988 and another in July 1989. For this show, I created the character 'Les Bogroll' to be its host. Les was the epitome of a *failed* Northern WMC comedian. The name was created from taking the first name from Les Dawson, a comedian that I actually admired and combining it with the words 'bog roll', a colloquialism for toilet tissue, thus implying he was a failed comedian because he was 'shit'. I chose a voice for Les that was not too dissimilar to Bernard Manning, principally because he had hosted *The Wheeltappers' and Shunters Social Club* (Granada), a variety show that was set in a fictional WMC in, apparently Manchester, in the 1970s. To complete the character, I wore dinner suit and bow-tie as sartorial signifiers. Les did not tell pre-packaged jokes; rather I wrote a series of anti-jokes for him that subverted the joke formula and put these into his mouth instead. These were either two-line or three-line jokes, the set-up of which would begin by listing a number of stereotypes walking into a bar, for example. The pay-off would not result in a punchline but with an anti-climactic line that would comment on the inanity of the pre-packaged joke. Sadly, I am unable to recall any of these jokes. The stage was dressed to resemble the seaside and I created a temporary piece of art that consisted of a drinks tray covered in builder's sand (that I had 'liberated' from a local building site) into which I planted cocktail umbrellas, bits of detritus and some water to represent a beach. In doing this I was making a comment on the state of British beaches, many of which had been declared dirty and had lost their blue flag certification. This was the seaside that *Seaside Special* never talked about.

For Clive, Bass and I, 1988 was our second year on the course and we were required to undertake some form of community arts project in fulfilment of the practical element of our degrees. To finance the project, we made a successful application to Newcastle City Council for funding. We then set up a series of arts workshops at the Jarrow Community Centre in advance of the Jarrow Festival, which was to take place in July 1988. Jarrow is best known for the Jarrow March (or Jarrow Crusade) for Jobs in 1936. The march from Jarrow to London is etched on working class and trade union memories, and although it attracted a great deal of press attention, it was unsuccessful in terms of bringing jobs to the area. Jarrow had seen a massive decline in its traditional industries: coal and shipbuilding since the 1930s and the Thatcher years were particularly

cruel to the people of Jarrow. We worked closely with the Jarrow Community Centre to provide workshops in performance, art and music for local people. These workshops would culminate in a cabaret evening at the community centre in which the participants would show what they had learned during the workshops. There was a great deal of interest in these workshops and we believe that the participants gained something from them but, as is the case with such things, there appears to have been no attempt made on the part of the community centre to keep the momentum going. CAGG could not keep these workshops running because our funding was for a limited number of workshops and the final performance.

By Autumn 1988, I assumed the role of marketing director, because I noticed that if I left the job of putting up posters to Clive and Martine, they would only venture as far as The Barley Mow and the Egypt Cottage. I had deduced that in order to get the biggest possible audience, it would be necessary to cover as much ground as possible. For me, this meant covering all of Tyne and Wear as well as Durham City with posters and flyers, and sending press releases to the local media (by 1989, I also included the national press, which were, at this time London-centric and I had to press this point with the *Guardian's* listings editor to include us and he acceded to my request). My efforts paid off and in Spring 1989, we were getting regular full houses and were frequently having to turn people away. Alex, who had joined the Fun Committee a year earlier, renegotiated the terms for the room with The Doll's landlord: the £20 charge was waived and we received a percentage of the bar takings, which allowed us greater economic freedom than before, which also pleased Northern Arts, who wanted us to demonstrate that we were a financially sound prospect, even though this would mean a cut to our funding. We also persuaded the Doll's landlord to apply to the magistrates for a late license that would allow us to continue till 11pm. Once we had the late bar in place, we made a point of announcing it on the posters.

It was around this time that I created a street act called "Onemanandabox" in which I juggled cigar boxes and scarves and made a series of puns based around cardboard boxes. I was feeling limited by stand-up comedy, a word-based form, and wanted to try something different. I had seen New Variety shows during my holidays and saw jugglers like Mr Adams and Mr Dandridge as well as the silly magician, Otiz Cannelloni (real name John Korn).

Cigar box juggling or manipulation, which was popularised by WC Fields, consists of holding a rectangular box in each hand and tossing or flipping the third box between them. This trick and plate-spinning was taught to me by Alex, who, with his girlfriend, Sian, performed *The Ugly Jugglers* and often played CAGG shows. Juggling scarves are used to train jugglers before they graduate to balls and other objects. I liked creating effects with them, one of which was me pretending to be inside a washing machine. I occasionally performed as *Onemanandabox* until I left for London and while the act itself was never revived, I incorporated the scarf juggling element into my stand-up routine throughout the 1990s.

We began our monthly shows at the Live Theatre in September 1989. For me, this was the realisation of a dream. I booked the acts for the first show (the first time I had done this) and chose *Attila the Stockbroker* as the headline act. However, I was criticised for agreeing to pay him £150 for the evening; a considerable amount of money for the time. My rationale for agreeing to this fee was because I wanted a big name for the opening night at the Live Theatre that would bring in a crowd. It was a gamble, but I worked hard to publicise the show. In the end, we got a full house and broke even. Subsequent shows at The Live made a small profit, but I had greater ambitions and wanted to move out of the Doll altogether to the Bistro Bar in the Tyne Theatre on Westgate Road. This room seated around 200 people and was used by Beat Dis, the jazz club offshoot of CAGG, which involved Clive, Miles, Bass and Tony T. When I put this idea to the group, they opposed me, complaining that the stage was at the “wrong end of the room”. I disagreed and pointed out the stage could be moved to the middle of the room, but this failed to convince them. Ironically, Cheeky Chappies Comedy Café, which opened there in 1991, adopted the very same room layout that I had proposed and was, by all accounts, a success.

Six months after CAGG moved to the Live Theatre, I returned to the Broken Doll to start a new monthly club called The Big Grin in March 1990, which would act as a vehicle for my other projects but, moreover, I wanted to have total artistic control over a club of my own. I had also felt that Newcastle and Tyneside, more specifically, needed more cabaret clubs. The Big Grin was a short-lived club that lasted for three shows before it folded in June 1990. June is always a difficult month for indoor events and shows are often poorly attended, because people would rather be outdoors taking advantage of the

increased hours of daylight and the warm weather, and this is one reason the club was short-lived. The other reason, if I am honest, was my impatience. I wanted quick results and did not get them. Moreover, I felt like a member of a rock band who decided to record a couple of solo albums as side projects. I was becoming disenchanted with CAGG but I did not tell anyone how I was feeling and was in all probability a bad idea to keep things to myself. But there were other tensions within the group with Clive and Martine splitting up. Within a matter of months, the Fun Committee would be no more.

In July 1990 CAGG was invited to run the cabaret club during the First Wave Festival. For this we obtained funding from Newcastle City Council, which had hitherto only provided funding for our community work. The First Wave Festival happened a month before the Edinburgh Fringe and was a sort of trial run for, what would be, our last show together as The Fun Committee. What is interesting about this festival is the number of persons of colour on the bills: Lemn Sissay, Miles Crawford, Ian Edwards – who later moved to the US - Mike Allain (who appeared on the same Black Comedy bill as me earlier in the year) and I. There were more high-profile acts like John Hegley and Two Girls Wot Sing. There were many local acts, some of them musical, others comic. For the Fringe we would collaborate with Arnold Kuenzler-byrt (billed variously as 'Arnold the Tragi-Comic', 'Just Arnold' or 'Arnold the Wonder Horse') who booked and compéred The Salamander Club at various locations around London.

We arrived in Edinburgh a week before the beginning of the Fringe. Our venue was a city centre dive called The Phoenix Bar, which sat between two other similarly rough dive-bars and was located on Cowgate beneath The George IV Bridge in the Old Town. All three bars had a bad reputation with the locals who saw them as seedy and violent, but The Phoenix Bar, in particular, had the most violent reputation and the week before our 'get-in', there had been a stabbing there (there were still spots of blood on the gent's floor when we arrived). Arnold had chosen this bar as our venue for reasons best known to himself, and it would be fair to argue that his Salamander Club was never well-attended and when I played its central London venue earlier in the year, it only attracted around 10 people. This did not bode well for our first Edinburgh appearance.

The core bill for the club was Steve Bowditch, Austin Lawler, and Arnold with me as compère. There were other performers who came to the Fringe for a day or two and then returned home and Clive and Martine also performed occasionally. For all our efforts, we never had full houses and the shows were often attended by some of the unsavoury characters from the downstairs bar. Given the competition from the comedy agencies like Avalon and Off the Kerb, attracting a decent-sized audience was difficult. Publicising the show was equally as hard because as soon as we put up a poster, there was someone from one of the big agencies behind us waiting to put up their poster, which they would paste over ours. Handing out flyers was equally as frustrating because most of them wound up on the street or in the bin. I managed to get an appearance on the BBC Radio 2's *The Arts Programme* to publicise the show, which resulted in a few more punters for a couple of days. By the second week of the Fringe, the tensions between us were beginning to surface. There were rows between Clive and Martine, who had stopped living together and between Clive and I, and I recall having a shouting match with him on Cowgate that almost came to blows. Once the Fringe was over, Bass and I moved to London, while Clive and Martine continued running CAGG for another year before closing the club for good. The space that CAGG left behind was filled by Dave Johns' Cheeky Chappies Comedy Café, which had corporate sponsorship. Smaller venues opened around Newcastle and on Tyneside, one of which, at the Cumberland Arms (often associated with the local Bruvvers Theatre Company), below Byker Bridge became a venue for comedy improvisation (or improv). However, the era of post-punk avant-garde cabaret was over in Newcastle.

CAGG pioneered the alt-cab genre in the North East. Indeed, it is arguable that if it was not for us, there would not have been a live comedy scene in the region. The cabaret scene was very different outside of London and according to Double (1994), one could still find pockets of innovation and experimentation. London, by contrast, had become "bland". The word that I would add to this is 'recuperation'. The scene outside of London had not yet been recuperated by the dominant cultural industries and, although there had been attempts to appropriate alt-cab as a format, it was largely unsuccessful. For example, in 1989, Tyne-Tees television copied our format wholesale and invited performers from outside the region to appear on their programme, while

ignoring us. After drinking heavily in The Egypt Cottage, we invited ourselves to their show, got even drunker on their free beer, berated the producers and were ejected from the studios (Lyttle interview). We were angry that they had taken our format and not bothered to consult us. As far as we were concerned this was a blatant act of plagiarism that was rather typical of the mainstream media. Admittedly, our behaviour was rather post-punk in the sense that we rejected commercialism and we ridiculed the establishment to the extent that we occasionally shot ourselves in the collective foot, but this was the subversive position that we took on the entertainment field. The Tyne-Tees programme was not a success and only lasted for a couple of shows before it was cancelled.

However, the seeds of our destruction were sown early on because of most of our decisions were taken as a committee. This meant that there was no leader; a person who could direct our activities. I instigated CAGG and without that spark, it may never have happened. I also wanted to expand our activities to include an artists' agency like CAST had done and my time at the Hackney Empire had given me some fresh ideas and insights that were not always appreciated.

A3.4 Cabaret A Go Go: Fun Committee members and associates

Below is a table that gives details of all those involved in the Fun Committee and those who were associates.

Core members				
Name	Dates	Background	Political tendencies	Responsibilities
Ray Campbell	1987 to 1990	Student at Newcastle Poly, actor	Libertarian socialist	Compère, publicity, programmer, poster design, instigator, talent scout

Clive Lyttle	1987 to 1990	Student at Newcastle Poly, musician	Libertarian socialist, former member of CPGB	Music, sound, compère, programmer, house band member (guitar)
Martine D'Ellard	1987 to 1991	Drama teacher, contemporary of French & Saunders at Central School of Speech & Drama	Libertarian socialist	Programmer, poster design, front of house and member of The Small Tits
Sebastian (Bass) Jansen	1987 to 1990	Student at Newcastle Poly, visual artist. Charlie Gillett was a family friend	Labour left	Poster design, visual artist, art direction, sound, lights
Associates				
Mrinal Kundu	1989 to 1991	Local artist and musician	Not specified	Visual artist, house band member (trumpet)
Susannah Roland	1988 to 1990	Student at Newcastle Poly, actor, poet	Anarchist	Front of house and member of The Small Tits
Anna Wallbank	1988 to 1990	Student at Newcastle Poly, actor, poet	Labour left	Front of house and member of The Small Tits

Tony 'T' Thomas	1988 to 1991	Student at Newcastle Poly. Former corporal in the Royal Green Jackets. Musician	Anarchist	House band member (saxophone)
Miles Danso	1987 to 1990	Student at Newcastle Poly, musician	Labour left	House band member (bass), devised the name 'Cabaret a Go Go'
Alex Marshall	1988 to 1990	New circus performer, Australian ex- pat	Anarchist	Front of house, performer with The Ugly Jugglers, publicity, talent scout

Our individual backgrounds here indicate, for the most part, a good deal of countercultural capital that had been pooled together to create a direction for an alt-cab club. We took the position of being part of an ongoing underground movement and while this kind of thing was becoming increasingly rare in London, many northern clubs tended to be rather political. Our nearest neighbour was the Bradford Alternative Cabaret, which was run by Nick Toczek and Wild Willy Beckett (Toczek, 2013) and was run along similar lines to CAGG but with political speakers.

A3.5 The art of Cabaret A Go Go

The posters were an integral part of CAGG and were considered by us to be an act in their own right. Indeed, many people would compliment us on our posters and tell us how they looked forward seeing the new poster. As arts

practitioners, we were aware of continental cabaret and had them in mind when we created CAGG. Clive (interview) told me:

...we were referring back to the rise of cabaret in the 20s and 30s and that's why we referenced the Dada stuff and, um, the Black Cat and, um, you know, the Weimar Republic, um, er, comedy and variety...

Although Clive's timeframe is anachronistic (The Black Cat was an 1880s Paris cabaret), he references three different kinds of continental cabarets: the cabaret-artistique of 1880s Paris, Dada and Weimar kabarets. This awareness of cabaret went beyond the superficial attempts to replicate the manufactured seediness of Bob Fosse's film *Cabaret* and sought to forge a cultural-historical link with a form of entertainment that was generally alien to Britain. If we were going to call ourselves a cabaret club, then we needed to anchor our work in art cabaret traditions. As Segel (1977) reminds us, cabaret never freely crossed boundaries and the physical barrier of the English Channel (*La Manche*) seems to have prevented continental cabaret from spreading to Britain. According to Dave Russell (2013) there was an English form of cabaret in the 1960s that featured theatre and jazz musicians. These shows were pitched to working class and lower middle class audiences and offered something a little classier to the entertainment on offer in the WMCs. Cabaret shows like these were decidedly middle-of-the-road and highly commercial. They often featured highly-paid artistes like Louis Armstrong and Dusty Springfield, thus they were a top down form of entertainment that was created from above rather than below as the continental cabarets had been. There was also an absence of visual art and no direct reference to continental Europe, although the name of the Hull cabaret club referenced the continent, it was little more than a sign that had been emptied of its meaning.

Historically, cabaret was a distinctly continental form of entertainment that was organised by artists for other artists and we should not confuse it with the Anglophone version of cabaret, which was devoid of political engagement but which was also sentimental and rather seedy (Appignanesi, 1976) or, alternatively, highly commercial (Russell, 2013). We were conscious that we were living in a time of political and social upheaval and the cabarets that went before us were established during similar times. The cabaret-artistique of Paris

emerged at a time of increased tensions between royalists and republicans, while the Weimar kabarets were established in the midst of economic depression and the rise of the Nazi Party. At CAGG, we felt that we, too, were engaged in a cultural struggle against the commodity-fetishistic nature of the Thatcher government's policy towards art and culture. We were thus tacitly left-wing and conscious of the role of art and culture in society. After all, this was a central component of the BA (Hons) Creative Arts course and we were encouraged to cross artistic boundaries by collaborating with other artists from other disciplines. CAGG thus straddled all forms of popular cultural practices: music, comedy, poetry, circus and visual art. In this, we differed from the many of the cabaret clubs in London and those in the North of England because of our strong emphasis on art and our desire to include all forms of performing arts.

Continental cabaret codes were often embedded into our posters and other visuals. For example, our third poster (now lost) featured an image of Dadaist, Hugo Ball, of Cabaret Voltaire, whom we adopted as our 'patron saint'. The posters, the backdrops and the stage panels were as much part of the show as the performers. For the first two years, a separate poster was designed and produced for each show and each one was created to resemble a fortnightly magazine. Bass volunteered to produce the first five posters and he told me how they were produced:

In the mid 1980s no one had computers so producing clear text that could be reproduced was not as easy as today. My approach to creating posters was to use photo-montage techniques to create juxtapositions between images and text that could be easily reproduced using a black and white photocopier. Once I had created the main layout I passed the artwork to Martine who would handwrite additional details for each poster.

(Bass Jansen, questionnaire)

Bass (questionnaire) comments on how his ideas for posters came about:

In creating these first posters I had to produce artwork that could only be reproduced in black and white. In choosing images I tried to create juxtapositions that were funny or satirical or just interesting. A main source of images was a book on the history of early horror and sci-fi films that contained many high quality production stills.

In addition I drew inspiration for layouts from early soviet propaganda posters and photographs of Dadaists. The anti-fascist John Heartfield images of the mid 1930s were also an important influence.

Below is an image of one of Heartfield's well-known posters, which uses photomontage. His graphic style is heavily influenced by Dada's photomontage techniques.



Figure 11; John Heartfield poster

However, Bass's posters never offered much information and as an artist, he was probably more concerned with the poster's aesthetics than the importance of conveying the details of the show. All of our early posters were in monochrome; colour reproduction was, and still is, more expensive than two-colour printing and photocopying (Jansen, 2013). The first poster (Fig 3) was created using photomontage and set the style for the early series of posters (1987 – 88).



Figure 12

This particular poster was constructed from images and scraps of text from various magazines and featured a picture of a young Ronald Reagan. There is a strap that reads, “I didn’t stay honest”. This juxtaposition of image and text creates the overall message of a dishonest Reagan, who was seen as a figure of fun, thanks to *Spitting Image*, despite being a dangerous Cold War president. Above this were the words “Cabaret A Go Go” in white lettering on a black background, in the style of a magazine masthead; this was constructed using Letraset. Other details like the time, date and door prices were handwritten onto the master poster and the masthead was recycled and remounted onto every poster until we adopted desktop publishing in the middle of 1988. The masthead logo was part of Bass’s aim to create a visual magazine as well as a poster. Below is an example of a poster from Le Mirliton, a Parisian cabaret organised by Aristide Bruant. Note how the poster’s style resembles that of a newspaper. Moreover, the poster references itself through the figure in the top hat gazing at a Le Mirliton poster.



Figure 13

The second CAGG poster (Fig) has the image of a broken doll that had been possibly run over by a car. This poster drew a great deal of criticism from people for its use of a damaged doll and it appeared that those who found it distasteful had likely read the image as a representation of a battered child. In fact, the image of the doll was a clever reference to the name of the pub, which itself had a sign with the image of a broken doll - though it was not as damaged as our doll! Without a doubt the image and the entire poster was punk in tone. Again, it features the familiar “Stranger than fiction” strapline on the left-hand side.



Figure 14

Bass's photomontage style proved incredibly popular and influential. In this poster in Fig 6, I had taken an image from a magazine and, using a photocopier, I scaled down a CAGG membership card and carefully pasted both sides into the man's hand in the bottom right-hand corner of the image. The effect is similar to the dollar bills pasted into the businessman's hand in the Heartfield poster.



Figure 15

By this stage, I began to include transport details and was an idea that I had taken from The Hackney Empire's posters. The names on the bill and the bill matter, like the transport details were hand written. I had obtained the Broken Doll's logo from one of the pub's posters and cut and pasted this into the left-hand corner. In the bottom right-hand corner, I pasted Northern Arts' logo, which I was obliged to do as this show we were now being subsidised by them.

My other posters sometimes emulated variety block on the one hand, or the cut and paste 'ransom note' style that was redolent of punk art, sometimes it was a combination of the two. The variety block poster was inspired by my work placement at the Hackney Empire. It is, for the most part, hand drawn and I filled in the white spaces with black marker pen. I had neglected to include Northern Arts logo, which we were required to do under the terms of our grant. It is entirely possible that this show was not subsidised.



Figure 16

Below (Figure 8) is an example of my ransom note posters. This show is unusual for being on a Tuesday rather than a Thursday and I can only assume this was because the room was unavailable on 18 May.



Figure 17

When desktop publishing was introduced, I based a poster on *The Sun's* infamous "Gotcha" headline of May 1983. For this poster I used a black and white photograph of Steve Coogan, who was the headline act but because of the quality of photocopier imaging, the picture was darker than I had hoped for. The headline was not *The Sun's* house font, since this is closely protected by the newspaper and italicised Arial was the closest I could get to the original. I used "Gotcha" because we were fortunate to book Coogan, who was on the cusp of becoming famous, but this was also a sly reference to *The Sun's* infamous front page banner headline that celebrated the sinking of the Argentinean warship, the General Belgrano on 4 May, 1983.

Many alt-cab clubs had a simple banner bearing the name of the club that is placed as a backdrop to the stage; this is a practice that continues to this day. Bass proposed that he would make a set of four batik panels to complement the black and white stage banner. Batik is a traditional Javanese

style of textile dying that makes use of wax resist technique, which involves applying wax to the cloth before it is dyed. We agreed on this and the panels were ready in three months. The panels were light and were therefore easy to transport. In 1989 we commissioned a new set of panels from Mrinal (Mrin) Kundu, who had been an art student at Newcastle University. These panels were larger and painted onto canvas rather than dyed and were made specifically for the shows at the Live Theatre and were also used for the First Wave Festival. Below are some black and white images of the Big Fun Club performing at the Live Theatre (Figure 9). The backdrops and panels can be clearly seen.



Figure 18

Here is another image of the same backdrops and panels, this time with a mime company performing in front of them (Figure 10).

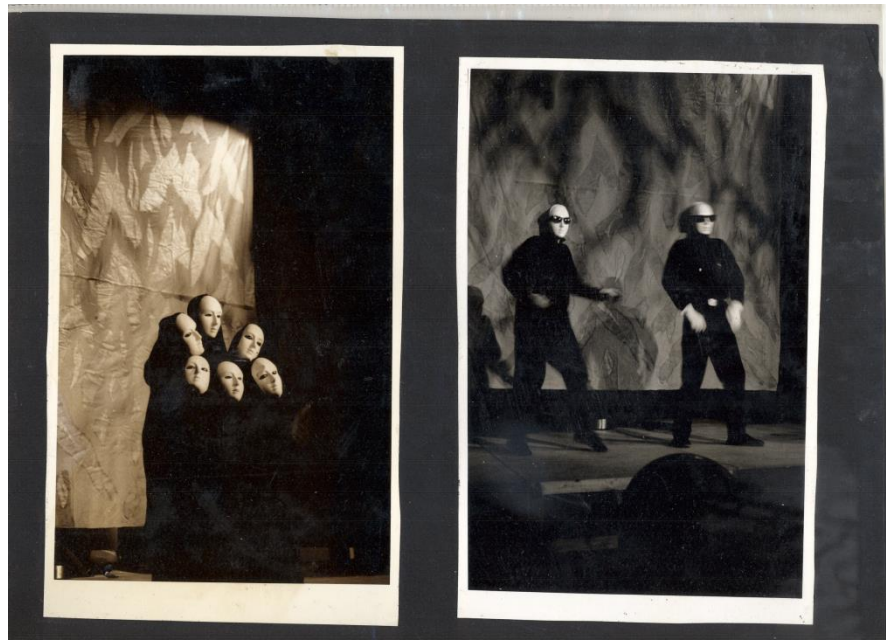


Figure 39

A3.6 Conclusions

At CAGG, we created an entirely new cultural event by using the bricolage of Newcastle's extant arts and cultural scene and added our own elements to it (De Certeau, 1988). In doing this, we carved out a new space out of an existing space – in this case, a popular music venue and staked out new territory on the local entertainment scene that had hitherto been dominated by music and legitimate and fringe theatre. CAGG was also the product of a pooling together of cultural, social and countercultural capital and it was sustained by a series of social relations: promoters, press and audience. Social capital was at the heart of the project and without it, there would have been no CAGG and no alt-cab scene in Newcastle (see Table 4). The local independent press, *Paint It Red* and *The Crack*, supported us from the beginning, whereas the legitimate local paper, *The Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, sought to discredit us by painting us as irresponsible left-wingers wasting taxpayers' money.

We were a cabaret club, not a comedy club. Our collective political-aesthetic disposition was produced by our embodied cultural and countercultural capital, or our knowledge of the cabaret-artistique, Dadaism, the Weimar kabarettts and our participation in left-wing political action. This was evident from the visual aspects of our shows – especially the posters but also in

our understanding of, and consent to, the field's *doxa*. To this end, art was central and posters, backdrops and flats were as important to CAGG as the performers who appeared on our stages. Therefore, unlike the alt-cab clubs in London, which were becoming increasingly more stand-up comedy orientated, our bills were variety-orientated. We always closed the evening with music and in this aspect we were similar to CAST presents New Variety. Our presence as a cabaret club within the historical field of live entertainment militates against the false memory of a scene dominated by ranting stand-up comedians on what has been mainly referred to as the 'alt-com circuit'.

CAGG was unlike any other alt-cab promoter and we generated other projects, some which overlapped our main activities. There was the pirate radio station, STS Radio (again on my instigation); jazz club, Beat Dis; Clive's bands, Liquid Laughter and Rebel Sounds; The Big Grin, and workshops at the People's Centre. We also launched the careers of Huffty (who appeared on Channel 4's *The Word*), Anvil Springstien and I. In a short space of time, CAGG went from being on the fringe of Newcastle's nightlife to being an important part of it.

A3.7 Supporters, performers and offshoots: CAGG's social capital

Name	Style or line of business	Relationship
Friends of Harry	Folk-pop band	On BA (Hons) Creative Arts course
Anthill Runaways	Country band	On BA (Hons) Creative Arts course
Big Fun Club	Street performers	On BA (Hons) Creative Arts course
Old Rope String Band	Street band/comedy folk band	Often appeared at the same events around Newcastle. Went to Red Herring vegetarian cafe in Fenham

Brendan Cleary	Poet	Morden Tower, Newcastle Fringe Festival. Close associate of CAGG and an early champion.
The Human Anvil	Street performers	Discovered by Ray
Tony Mendoza	Stand-up comic	People's Centre, North Shields. Knew Martine
Wire-Less Wireless	Sketch troupe	On BA (Hons) Creative Arts course (former students)
The Small Tits	Poetry collective	On BA (Hons) Creative Arts course. Martine D'Ellard, Susannah Roland and Anna Wallbank
Anvil Springstien	Stand-up comic, formerly of The Human Anvil	Housemate of Ray and Clive
Jinski	Folk musician	Recommended by Brendan Cleary?
Tim Dalling	Accordionist	Discovered. Later a member of the Old Rope String Band
The Lurv	Indie band	Friends of The Small Tits. Provided musical backing
Huffty	Stand-up comic	Performed an open spot at CAGG. Friend of other performers
Mish Loraine	Stand-up comic	Performed open spot at CAGG. Friend of Heather Goodhand of The Lurv

Sonny and Cher Noble	Song parodists	Formed of Graeme Kennedy, formerly of the Human Anvil, and Ray.
Heartbreak Soup	Restaurant	Associates of Clive and Martine. We ran a few shows here in 1989. There was also some connection between Gary Clail's On U sound system and Adrian Sherwood. Sponsors.
Paint It Red	Listings magazine	Supplied print and graphics facilities. Early supporters of CAGG. I wrote reviews for them.
The Crack	Fanzine	Socialised with its editor, Marshall, whose girlfriend, Heather, lived in Keelman's Hospital. Very supportive of CAGG.
Red Herring	Vegetarian Cafe	Social. Many of us went there to eat. Sponsors
The Riverside	Music venue	Supplied early copying facilities. There were sometimes crossover gigs between CAGG and The Riverside.
Friends of Harry	Pop-folk band formed from Pop, Dick & Harry and The Bats	Bassist, Phyll Scammel was a fellow student at Newcastle Polytechnic
Timeslip	Comic shop	Clive and Martine were comic buffs. Martine

		had a story published in <i>Crisis</i> , which sold at the shop. Timeslip became sponsors.
Onemanandabox	Street act	Ray's alternative act that involved juggling scarves and cigar boxes/
Beat Dis	Jazz club	Offshoot of CAGG, formed by Clive, Miles and Tony T.
STS Radio	Pirate radio station	Offshoot of CAGG. Started at Ray's instigation.

Table 3

Appendix 4: Mini-biographies of the participants

Tony Allen has been described by the press as the “Godfather of alt-com”. Allen, a clown and stand-up comedian started Alternative Cabaret with Alexei Sayle at the Elgin pub in November 1979, while they were still regulars at the Comedy Store. Allen is an anarchist and a squatting activist who continues to speak at Hyde Park Corner.

Julie Balloo is a former stand-up comedian from Australia. Julie is a trained dancer and used dance in her comedy performances. She currently works as a story-teller and playwright.

Bob Boyton is a former comedian from Southend. He is bisexual and was one of the few genuinely working class comedians on the circuit. Uncompromisingly left-wing and hard-hitting, he was once a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Boyton was active between 1983 and 1995 and was an original member of the Comedy Store’s Cutting Edge team. Boyton has since moved into storytelling.

Otiz Cannelloni (real name John Korn) is a comedy magician and silly showman, who occasionally performs with John Hegley in the Brown Paper Bag Brothers.

Simon Clayton is one half the improvising double act The Crisis Twins. He went solo in 1995 and performs regularly at The Comedy Store. Clayton is also the only other ‘mixed race’ comedian on the circuit.

Chris Cresswell was co-promoter of The Third Eye Level Grill Show with Woody Bop Muddy. Chris operated Baby Warhol, a waspish puppet-doll that dispensed cod wisdom from the void of space.

Dreenagh Darrell is a former Australian feminist comedian. Darrell’s was described in *The British Alternative Theatre Directory* (1990) as being “Less offensive than Jimmy Tarbuck, but so disgusting she makes Joan Rivers look like the Virgin Mary”. Darrell performed stand-up comedy from between 1985

and 1997 and was a regular *paid* open spot at Malcolm Hardee's notorious Tunnel Club.

Ivor Dembina has been a comedy promoter for over twenty years. He is also a stand-up comedian and compère. Dembina ran the long-running Red Rose Club in Finsbury Park at the North London Labour Club. He now runs Hampstead Comedy Club and is involved in the Edinburgh Free Fringe.

Ronnie Golden (real name Tony De Meur) is a singer/songwriter/guitarist and comedian. Golden formed The Fabulous Poodles in 1975 and toured the US and Europe. When the band split up in 1980, Golden auditioned for The Comic Strip and performed with them until it was wound up months later. Golden formed a band, The Rex, which had residences at The Comedy Store and then at Downstairs at the Kings Head in Crouch End. Golden also writes and performs in a comedy partnership with veteran comedy writer, Barry Cryer.

John Gordillo is one half of the improvising double act The Crisis Twins. He went solo in 1995 and performs regularly at The Comedy Store. John also directs solo shows by other comedians.

Steve Gribbin: was one half of musical comedy double act, **Skint Video**. They performed politically satirical songs and song parodies and appeared at countless benefits as well as *Saturday Live* and *Cabaret at Jongleurs*. Gribbin continues to perform solo at venues like at The Comedy Store (he is part of the Cutting Edge team), Jongleurs and Highlights.

Mark Hurst is a punk poet from Sheffield who was formerly known as **Mark Miwurdz**. He performed regularly on Channel 4's youth programme *The Tube* in the 1980s and appeared regularly on television. He migrated to stand-up comedy in the late 1980s. Mark no longer performs due to Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and labyrinthitis making it difficult for him to stand for long periods of time.

Noel James is a Welsh comedian who joined the circuit in the late 1980s. His comedy style uses absurdism, surrealism and one-liners. James is also a physical comedian who performs off-beat impressions.

Mark Kelly originally performed as one half of double act “Cheap and Nasty”. When his stage partner left to accept an acting job, he performed solo under the name “Mr Nasty”. Kelly was brought up in a Communist family in Birkenhead. He describes his own politics as communist-anarchist. Kelly performed until the mid-Nineties to concentrate on other activities, which included writing material for Jo Brand.

Jenny Landreth was the co-founder of the Black Comedy club along with David Bryan. Landreth also worked in television and was a talent booker for the later series of *Spitting image*.

Stewart Lee is a stand-up comedian and was one half of the television double-act Lee and [Richard] Herring, who presented shows as *Lee and Herring's Fist of Fun* and *This Morning with Richard Not Judy*. Lee wrote the libretto for the controversial comedy-opera, *Jerry Springer: the Opera*.

Wendy Lee (no relation) is a former stand-up comedian and writer. She was part of the second wave of alt-com/alt-cab. She stopped performing in 1990 and then returned briefly in 1992 only to give it up again. Lee's act was unusual in the sense that she was a political comedian; many women on the circuit tended to avoid any talk of politics.

Clive Lyttle was one of the co-organisers of Cabaret A Go Go, an occasional compère and guitarist with Liquid Laughter and Rebel Sounds. Clive also co-promoted Beat Dis, the jazz club offshoot of Cabaret A Go Go.

John Marshall (also known as 'Agraman') is the promoter of the Buzz Club in Manchester. The Buzz was originally conceived as a folk club in Altrincham. The Buzz moved to The Southern in Chorlton, where it remained until the late 1990s. Marshall continues to organise comedy-cabarets in the North.

Roland Muldoon: Co-founder of Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre or CAST, a political fringe theatre group formed in 1965. Muldoon and his wife Claire created New Variety in the early 1980s. Roland eventually went on to be the artistic director of The Hackney Empire from 1985 to 2005. Claire ran the New Variety Performers Agency to manage the fledgling careers of household names like Harry Enfield, Jo Brand and Julian Clary and she also ran the day-to-day business of the Hackney Empire.

Randolph the Remarkable (real name Phil Herbert) was a fire-eater and silly stuntman who was once a circuit regular. Originally an actor, he took up fire-eating for a job that was advertised in Southampton and discovered he had a talent for it. He was a regular performer at Covent Garden and migrated indoors in the early 1980s. Randolph has retired from performing.

Steve Rawlings is a juggler, who began performing at the beginning of the second wave. An in-demand comedy juggler, Rawlings performed at venues on the circuit and at festivals around the country. He currently works on cruise ships and on the continent.

Nick Revell is a stand-up comedian, author and former broadcaster. He joined the circuit during the first wave. Revell has appeared in solo shows at the Edinburgh Fringe and continues to work regularly on the current comedy circuit.

Ian Saville is better known as the **Socialist Magician** and was an early performer on the New Variety circuit. Ian was also once a member of Broadside Mobile Workers Theatre, a rival company to CAST. He is currently a lecturer at Middlesex University and performs occasionally.

Andy Smart was one half of the knockabout improvisational double act, **The Vicious Boys** with Angelo Abello. When this act split up in the late 1980s, Smart became a solo stand-up comedian and continues to perform at venues around the world.

Martin Soan was one third of the **Greatest Show on Legs**, who later performed solo under the name **Two Fingers Cabaret**. He continues to perform and organises the Pull The Other One cabaret nights in Nunhead, South London. Martin is also an accomplished prop-maker who has supplied many performers with props.

Anvil Springstien (real name Paul Ward) is a Liverpudlian stand-up comedian who started performing on Tyneside as a street act called The Human Anvil. When injury forced him to quit this act, he became a stand-up comedian. Anvil mainly worked in the north of England and Scotland and made occasional visits to London. He has recently retired from comedy.

Dave Thompson (formerly Igor Thompson) is a comedian, clown and former promoter of The Alley Club and Cabaret at the Square in Harlow. Dave began performing in 1985 after working as a drama therapist. He is also better known as the actor who played “Tinky Winky” in the BBC’s *Teletubbies*.

Nick Toczek is a writer and poet who ran Bradford Alternative with Wild Willi Beckett. Nick gave CAGG a great deal of support when our club was starting. Nick also played CAGG on a number of occasions.

Woody Bop Muddy (real name William Wilding) is a performance artist, promoter and former speciality act. Woody co-promoted the Third Eye Level Grill Show in Clapham with Chris Cresswell. Third Eye Level Grill Show was a sort of performance art based cabaret from 1988 to 1992. Part of this cabaret would feature an act called “Record Graveyard” in which he would play an extract of a record and ask the audience whether it should be ‘nailed’ to a piece of wood or ‘saved’ from destruction. When his club closed, he performed this act on the circuit as “Woody Bop Muddy’s Record Graveyard”.

Appendix 5

Alt-cab timeline

	Political	Social	Cultural	Alternative space
1976 - 1979	<p>Harold Wilson resigns. James Callaghan is elected leader and becomes Prime Minister (1976). Callaghan is immediately confronted with the Sterling Crisis and is convinced by his Chancellor to apply to the IMF for a loan</p> <p>Increase in far-right activity on Britain's streets</p>	<p>The Grunwick dispute begins in 1976 and lasts until 1978. This sets the tone for the strikebreaking that would become a recurrent theme during later strikes.</p>	<p>Punk rock appears in August, 1976</p> <p>Rock Against Racism founded in September 1977</p> <p>RAR Carnival in Victoria Park, April 1978</p>	<p>21st Century Coyote appears at Band on the Wall in Manchester (1976).</p> <p>The Greatest Show on Legs appears at seaside towns in Southern England (1976 – 1979).</p> <p>The Foundation opens at The Tramshed in Woolwich (1976)</p> <p>CAST produces receives its first Arts Council grant (1976)</p>
1979				
January	The so-called 'Winter of			

	Discontent precipitates the collapse of the Labour government.			
March	Airey Neave MP killed by car bomb planted by the INLA			
April	James Callaghan loses motion of no confidence and calls a General Election	Death of Blair Peach in Southall at the hands of the Special Patrol Group		<u>CAST's</u> show, <i>Confessions of a Socialist</i> at Star and Garter pub in Putney. Billed as "an evening of variety"
May	Thatcher government elected against a backdrop of social unrest and a looming economic recession.		Tubeway Army's <i>Are Friends Electric</i> is Number One	<u>Comedy Store</u> opens at Nell Gwyn pub in Soho. <u>Tony Allen</u> performs 40 minute stand up set at The Oval Theatre in Kennington
June				<u>Alexei Sayle</u> chosen as

				Store's resident MC. Gong show introduced
July			The Special AKA (The Specials) single <i>Gangsters</i> is released	
August	Lord Mountbatten killed by IRA bomb			
September			The Gang of Four release <i>Entertainment!</i>	
			The Second Science Fiction Music Festival takes place in Leeds over 8 and 9 September and features bands that would figure prominently in the electro/New Romantic movement.	
October	Government's comprehensive spending review: further public spending		<i>Not the Nine O'Clock News</i> begins its first	Alexei Sayle and Tony Allen open <u>Alternative Kabaret</u> (sic)

	cuts are announced as well as an increase in prescription charges		series on BBC2	at The Elgin pub on Ladbroke Grove.
November			The Blitz Club opens marking the first appearance of the New Romantics	
December	MORI poll puts Labour Party 24% ahead of the Conservatives Government announces Right to Buy scheme		The Clash release <i>London Calling!</i> Sugarhill Gang's <i>Rappers Delight</i> is Number 3 in the UK Singles Chart	<u>Alternative Cabaret</u> sets up loose circuit of gigs around London; in arts centres and colleges.
1980				
January	Steelworkers strike First press attacks on Labour's Militant Tendency			The Earth Exchange opens in a vegetarian restaurant in Highgate. It claims to be the first alt-cab club

				(McGillivray, 1989).
February	Zimbabwe General Elections confirm ZANU-PF as victors. Robert Mugabe becomes president			
March	Thatcher announces cut to benefits for striking workers		Radio Caroline ship the <i>MV Mi Amigo</i> runs aground and sinks off the Essex coast.	
April	Steelworkers strike ends			
May	British Aerospace is privatised		Joy Division's lead singer and frontman, Ian Curtis, commits suicide	
June	Defence Secretary, Francis Pym announces that US Cruise Missiles will be sited at RAF			

September	<p>Greenham Common in Berkshire and RAF Molesworth in Cambridgeshire</p> <p>Women's Peace Camp at Greenham Common is established.</p>		Kate Bush becomes the first British female solo artist to top the charts.	
October	<p>First Irish Republican Hunger Strike begins at the renamed Maze Prison (formerly Long Kesh)</p> <p>Thatcher makes "The lady's not for turning speech"</p> <p>Right To Buy comes into effect</p> <p>James Callaghan resigns as Labour leader</p>			<p><i>Boom Boom... Out Go The Lights</i> shown on BBC2. Comedy showcase that features Keith Allen, Tony Allen, Rik Mayall, Nigel Planer, Pauline Melville, Alexei Sayle, Paul Jones and the Blues Band</p> <p><u>The Comic Strip</u> opens in Boulevard Theatre above the Raymond Revue Bar in Soho</p>
November	Michael Foot elected Labour Party leader			

<p>December</p> <p>1981</p>	<p>Ronald Reagan elected President of the United States</p> <p>First Irish Republican hunger strike ends</p>		<p>John Lennon shot dead outside his apartment block in New York City</p> <p>Led Zeppelin splits after their drummer John Bonham is found dead from an overdose</p>	
<p>January</p> <p>March</p>	<p>Gang of Four's (Jenkins, Williams, Rodgers, Owen) Limehouse Declaration</p> <p>Ronald Reagan is inaugurated as US President.</p> <p>Formation of SDP announced</p>	<p>New Cross fire kills 10 young black people and injures many more. The fire is blamed on local far right activity.</p>		

	<p>Second Irish Hunger Strike begins</p> <p>364 academic economists criticise Thatcher's economic policies in a letter published in <i>The Times</i></p>			
April	<p>Bobby Sands elected MP in Fermanagh & South Tyrone by-election</p> <p>Home Secretary, William Whitelaw announces an inquiry into the inner city riots</p>	Brixton riots		
May	<p>Ken Livingstone becomes leader of the GLC</p>			<p>Second edition of <i>Boom Boom... Out Go The Lights</i>. Features Keith Allen, Tony Allen, Rik Mayall, Nigel Planer, Alexei Sayle, Pauline Melville, Andy de la Tour and Ruby Wax, Paul Jones and the Blues</p>

June			'Ghost Town' by The Specials is released	Band provide music and title song
July	British Telecom privatisation announced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Toxteth riots (Liverpool) • Chapeltown riots (Leeds) • Handsworth riots (Birmingham) • Moss Side riots (Manchester) 		
1982				
January	Official statistics show there are 3 million unemployed in Britain		<i>O.T.T.</i> begins its short run on Central Television (networked). Show features Alexei Sayle in regular stand-up spot	CAST presents New Variety opens its first venue at The White Horse pub in Brixton. Other venues follow and these are principally in Wood Green, Cricklewood, Brunel University, and Willesden Green

February				
March				<p>Mary Whitehouse's legal action against Howard Brenton's play <i>The Romans in Britain</i> on the grounds of obscenity is ended after the intervention of the Attorney General. This provides the inspiration for The Greatest Show on Legs naked balloon dance.</p>
April	<p>Falkland Islands invaded by Argentina.</p> <p>Britain sends task force to recover the territory</p>			
June	<p>Falklands War ends</p>			
July	<p>Roy Jenkins elected SDP</p>			

August	leader. Party forms an electoral alliance with David Steel's Liberal Party			CAST presents New Variety at the Edinburgh Fringe
September October November	Michael Foot's appearance at the Remembrance Day service is attacked by the Tory press, who accuse him of wearing a 'donkey jacket'		<p>Culture Club's <i>Do You Really Want To Hurt Me?</i> Is Number 1 for 3 weeks</p> <p>Channel 4 and S4C begin broadcasting</p> <p><i>The Young Ones</i> begins its first series on BBC2</p> <p><i>The Comic Strip Presents...</i> debuts on Channel 4 (<i>Five Go Mad In Dorset</i>)</p>	

December				First Comedy Store closes. Rik Mayall headlines last bill
1983				
February				Jongleurs opens in a former roller rink above The Cornet bar in Clapham Junction
March	Ian McGregor becomes National Coal Board chairman			<u>Comedy Store</u> reopens in a former gay club called The Subway on Leicester Square. This will be its home for the next 10 years
April			Spandau Ballet's <i>True</i> is UK Number 1 single	
May			The Smiths first single 'Hand in Glove' released. It fails to chart.	
June	Gerald Kaufman refers to his party's election manifesto as "The longest			

	suicide note in history”			
	Thatcher elected for second term by a landslide			
September	Maze Prison (formerly known as Long Kesh) breakout			
October	Neil Kinnock becomes Labour Party leader			
	US Forces invade Grenada, a British Overseas Territory. Reagan does not consult Thatcher.			
November			The Smiths release ‘This Charming Man’	<u>Banana Cabaret</u> opens at The Bedford pub in Balham
December				
1984				
January	Geoffrey Howe announces ban on trade unions at GCHQ			Malcolm Hardee opens the Tunnel Palladium at The Mitre pub, North Greenwich

February			<i>Spitting Image</i> begins its first run on London Weekend Television (networked)	
March	Government announces pit closures Miners begin year-long strike.			Mecca offers <u>The Hackney Empire</u> to CAST
April	Liverpool City Council defies the government and refuses to set its rates			
May	Miner's Strike: Battle of Orgreave Colliery			
July	BT fully privatised			
September 1985	IRA carries out The Brighton Bombing.			I join the Anti-apartheid Movement
January			<i>Saturday Live</i> begins its first run on Channel 4	
February				

March	Miner's Strike ends			
April				
May				
June	The Battle of the Beanfield: a violent confrontation between the Peace Convoy and other travellers (police attacked travellers in a field outside Stonehenge exclusion zone) Wiltshire Police accused of brutality. Events compared to Miners' Strike.			
July			Live Aid Concerts in London and Philadelphia	
August				
September		Second Handsworth riots		
October	Kinnock's speech to the Labour Party Conference in which he attacks the Militant Tendency-led Liverpool City Council.	Broadwater Farm riots Second Toxteth riot Peckham riots		Comedy Store Players improvisational troupe is formed

	Veteran left-winger, Eric Heffer, walks out in disgust			
November	Anglo-Irish Agreement This still fails to halt IRA/INLA attacks		Red Wedge launched by Billy Bragg and Paul Weller	
1986				
January	Michael Heseltine resigns over the Westland Affair		<i>Blackadder II</i> begins on BBC2	
February				CAST takes over <u>The Hackney Empire</u>
April	Local Government Act (1985) abolishes the metropolitan counties (the GLC etc) but ironically establishes the ILEA			
May			The first series of <i>The Cabaret Upstairs</i> begins on BBC Radio 4	
June		Anti-apartheid rally and concert at Clapham Common. Gil		

		Scott-Heron headlines		
July				
August	Iran-Contra Affair becomes public			
September				<u>Bradford Alternative Cabaret</u> opens at various pubs around the city
October	The 'Big Bang' deregulates financial markets			Bracknell's <u>Friday Alternative</u> opens
December	British Gas privatised. The 'Tell Sid' campaign is launched to attract would be investors.			My first performance
1987				
January			<i>Filthy, Rich and Catflap</i> begins a run of six episodes on BBC2.	Newcastle Fringe Festival brings together Martine, Clive and I.
			Public Enemy's <i>Yo!</i>	

February	British Airways is privatised		<i>Bum Rush the Show</i> released	
March				
April	<p>Public Order Act 1986 comes into effect. This gives police powers to break up convoys of 12 motor vehicles or more. Rioting was also defined more rigorously in the act.</p> <p>Proposal for Community Charge (Poll Tax) included in Conservative election manifesto</p>	Second Chapeltown riots	<i>Saturday Live</i> is cancelled.	
May				
June				
July				
August				
September			<i>The New Statesman</i> begins its run on London Weekend Television	

			(networked). Sit-com is a vehicle for Rik Mayall	
October	Black Monday precipitates stock market crash			Plans are drawn up to bring alt-cab to Newcastle
November				
December				<u>Cabaret A Go Go (CAGG)</u> opens at The Broken Doll pub in Newcastle
1988				
January				
February			<i>Friday Night Live</i> begins its brief run on London Weekend Television (networked)	<u>CAGG</u> programs club at Surfers Bar in Tynemouth
			<i>Cabaret at The Jongleurs</i> begins a 7 week run on BBC2	
			First Red Nose Day for Comic Relief	
March	6 suspected IRA members are			

	shot dead in Gibraltar by the SAS. These extra-judicial killings become the subject of a controversial documentary called <i>Death on the Rock</i> .			
April	Poll tax introduced in Scotland			
May	Local Government Act (1988) which contains the repressive Section 28 is enacted			
July	Education Reform Act (1988) receives Royal Assent		Second Summer of Love begins and continues until the following year. Acid House underground scene begins.	
August				Jeremy Hardy wins the coveted Perrier Award
September	Education Reform Act is enacted			

October	Home Secretary, Douglas Hurd announces broadcast ban on the spoken words of groups that supported terrorism. The words of leaders of such groups on television would be dubbed by the voices of actors			The <u>Screaming Blue Murder</u> chain opens at The Rose & Crown pub in Hampton Wick. Eddie Izzard is resident compère. Other venues would open at Kingston, Wimbledon and Streatham.
November				
December				Most cabaret clubs are closed over Xmas for what are apparently unexplained reasons
1989				
January				<u>Banana Cabaret</u> expands to The Kings Head in Acton and the Bull's Head Arts Centre in Barnet. <u>The Buzz</u> opens at The Southern Hotel,

				Chorlton, Manchester
February			Sky TV begins broadcasting .	<u>The Earth Exchange</u> closes. Booker/compe re, Kim Wells leaves the restaurant
March				<u>CAGG</u> receives its first Arts Council grant
April			94 football supporters are killed in a crush at Hillsborough stadium in Sheffield during the FA Cup semi-final between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest. Two more supporters would later die from their injuries. <i>The Sun</i> newspaper prints the front page headline 'The Truth' enraging Liverpudlian s and leading to a	My first gig outside of Tyneside. Gig is at Sheffield University. I die. <u>The Earth Exchange</u> reopens with Doon MacKichan as compère. It closes a month later My work placement at the <u>Hackney Empire</u>

May			boycott of the paper on Merseyside	CAGG receives funding from Newcastle City Council for its outreach work
June				
July				CAGG involved in a series of performance workshops at Jarrow Community Centre
August		Betteshanger Colliery closes. It was the last coalmine in Kent.		Simon Fanshawe wins the coveted Perrier Award
September				<u>Cabaret A Go Go</u> begins monthly shows at The Live Theatre, Newcastle. The headline act is Attila the Stockbroker. I am compère.
October				
November	All Britain Anti-Poll Tax Federation set up			Eddie Izzard opens <u>Raging Bull</u> at the Boulevard Theatre, once the home of

				the Comic Strip
December	Thatcher is challenged by 'stalking horse' candidate Sir Anthony Meyer for leadership of the party			
1990				
January	Poll Tax introduced in England and Wales			
February		Nelson Mandela released from prison		<u>Comedy Store</u> starts Cutting Edge nights on Tuesdays
March		Poll Tax riots in Central London		I begin my first series of gigs in London
April	Poll Tax is introduced in England and Wales	Strangeways Prison riot	Public Enemy release <i>Fear of a Black Planet</i>	I appear on BBC2's <i>The Late Show</i> as part of a segment about Black Comedy
May				I open short-lived club called <u>The Big Grin</u> at The Broken Doll pub
July	Ian Gow MP killed by bomb planted under			

	his car by the IRA.			
August	Iraq invades Kuwait. Preparations for Gulf War I begin			My first Edinburgh Fringe is a collaboration between CAGG and <u>The Salamander Club</u> . I am 'discovered' by Malcolm Hardee Sean Hughes wins the Perrier Award
September	Labour establishes a 14% lead over the Tories			I leave Newcastle for London
October				Compère at <u>Rub a Dub Club</u> at Amersham Arms in New Cross. Headline act is Punt & Dennis. Harry Hill is the open spot
November	Geoffrey Howe resigns as Chancellor, which precipitates the resignation of Thatcher.			Compère at <u>Rub a Dub Club</u> at Amersham Arms in New Cross.

	<p>Michael Heseltine announces leadership challenge</p> <p>Thatcher resigns as leader of the Conservatives and as PM. John Major is elected leader</p>			
December 1991				
January	Gulf War I begins with aerial bombardment of Iraq			
February	Student loans introduced; grants abolished			
March			<i>Paramount City</i> begins run on BBC1. Arthur Smith hosts	
April				
May				
June				
July				

August				Frank Skinner wins the Perrier Award
September				
October				
November				<i>Time Out's</i> Cabaret section is renamed, thus reflecting the space's transformation into a comedy circuit
December				

Appendix 6

Interview questions (The Muldoons)

1. Tell me a little about CAST and what your intentions were.
2. How was CAST different from other agit-prop theatre groups like Red Ladder?
3. I know you've been heavily influenced by Music Hall but did European art-cabaret ever play a part in your early thinking?
4. Is it possible that what you produced with New Variety in the 80's was a marriage of Music Hall and cabaret?
5. Did you ever see yourselves as counter-hegemonic?
6. How do you see clubs like Jongleurs and The Comedy Store?
7. When you took over the Hackney Empire in the 80's, you told me that you were like a "group of south sea pirates boarding a ship". Tell me more about this.

8. You ran a series of New Variety shows around London, all of which were subsidised by local authorities. Would it be fair to say that the Poll Tax killed these off?

9. New Variety shows were noted for having a mix of entertainment styles, what are your thoughts about the future of variety?

10. How important is it to create art that is free of commercial influences?

11. How important was it to retain a political edge to the shows?

12. Until recently you ran The Ship in Kilburn and put on variety shows there. What happened?

13. It could be argued that the comedy industry is dominated by middle class producers who only employ their own class and this is often reflected in political satire programming on the BBC. What would you say to that?

Appendix 7

Question frame for interviews

The period prior to 1979, what was happening?

Tell me about the early circuit

Did you call yourself a comedian or a cabaret artist?

How do you see your art?

What inspires you?

What are the challenges you face as an artist?

Are you involved in any other activities outside of stand up?

Tell me about television/radio; what are the challenges here?

How do you see your audiences?

Have you ever faced censorship or been banned from a comedy club?

Why do you think this was?

How did you cope with censorship?

Is originality important to you?

Why is it important to write your own material as opposed to having others write it for you?

What is your understanding of class and how has it affected you as a performer?

Appendix 8

Pilot questionnaire

1. What were you doing before going into comedy/cabaret? Did you have performance experience before going into comedy/cabaret?
2. Were you at all influenced by punk or new wave/post-punk?
3. How would you describe the counterculture?
4. Did the counterculture have any effect on you and if so, in what way did it affect you?
5. Would you describe alternative cabaret as countercultural?
6. What year did you start on the cabaret circuit?
7. What was your first gig like?
8. Tell me about the early circuit; it's often described as a bit like the Wild West. Was it?

9. What are your thoughts on the terms “alternative cabaret” and “alternative comedy”? Are they useful?
 10. What kind of things inspired you?
 11. Who are your favourite historical comedians/people?
 12. How would you describe your act?
 13. How did you go about writing material?
 14. Tell me about the audiences, how did they respond to you?
 15. Still thinking about audiences. Did you ever come across any who held questionable views? I know The Tunnel’s punters could be really challenging, were there any others that you can remember?
 16. Were there any gigs you really hated? This can include poorly laid-out rooms and so forth.
 17. Were there any gigs you really enjoyed doing?
 18. (If you are no longer performing) When did you stop performing and why? Do you miss performing?
- OR (If you are still performing) What changes have you witnessed since you began performing? Have things changed for the better or worse?

19. Is there anything else you would like to add?