

# A Curator's Primer on American Vaudeville 1880-1930

— A guide to booking the illustrated lecture, performance, & exhibition —

**Red-Hot Jazz & Ragtime** **A Vaudeville Retrospective** **Fascinating Context**  
**Riveting Arcana** **R.W. BACON** —WITH— **"The Last Living Vaudevillian"** **Dazzling Juggling**

## What was Vaudeville, anyway?

Our understanding of history is riddled with myths and misconceptions, and the study of early 20th-century popular culture is no different. The TV history buff will note that many early 1950s stars like Milton Berle and Bob Hope were known to have "started out in Vaudeville" in some dim theatrical past. Although Berle and Hope became TV icons, they do not fully define the 1880-1930 Vaudeville genre. Vaudeville was much more than the stereotypical comic desperate for a laugh.

**Taking a fresh look back, Vaudeville was a simple concept:** a respectable general audience variety show consisting of a dozen "acts" – singers, dancers, acrobats, lecturers – unconnected by plot. Yet it grew into a dominant form of leisure, a coast-to-coast industry that flourished for 50 years, 1880-1930. Today it is difficult to fathom just how enormous the institution of Vaudeville was on the cultural landscape of the early 20th century. At its peak there were over 2000 Vaudeville theatres in the U.S., plus 2000 other venues, with up to 50,000 performers – plus thousands in related businesses. Large cities had numerous well-appointed theatres, while rural folk got their Vaudeville at a Grange hall or showboat.

## A rationale for Vaudeville studies

**Why study Vaudeville?** If the idea of Vaudeville is so distorted, if the old acts are so out of fashion, and if the Vaudevillians are long-gone, then why introduce Vaudeville as a topic of study?

**The answer?** Once the Vaudeville "industry" is accurately defined in the context of its time, it becomes evident that the topic serves as an illuminating prism through which the issues facing American society in the late 19th- and early 20th century come into view: race, gender, class, immigration, big business, technology, transportation, communication, population shift, and urbanization. Further, the influence of Vaudeville is still with us today in popular culture, music, and entertainment. Taking a broad view, the study of Vaudeville serves to illustrate the intertwined relationship of the arts, sciences, and commerce throughout the grand parade of human history.



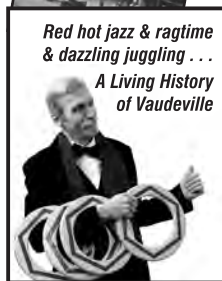
R.W. Bacon as . . .  
"The Last Vaudevillian"



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## The Program – A Vaudeville Retrospective

**A Vaudeville Retrospective** is a 2-hour program with intermission. An abbreviated one-hour program is available. The presentation is an illustrated lecture – with digitally-projected graphics and audio/video clips – interspersed with live performance segments by **R.W. Bacon** as **“The Last Living Vaudevillian.”**

**(1) Introduction: What was Vaudeville? How did it get so BIG?** Vaudeville defined; current misconceptions; survivors to the TV era; a typical show; and Vaudeville theatres, big-time & small-time.

**(2) Setting the Scene: 19th Century Beginnings** Early 19th-century circus & variety, the mid-19th-century “concert saloon,” and late-19th-century entrepreneurs. Industrialization, urbanization, immigration, technological advances – and a middle-class backlash against aristocratic cultural tastemakers.

**(3) The Peak Years: The Growth of an Industry** Competing masterminds, moguls, and monopolists build a nationwide industry: Over 2000 theatres, 2000 miscellaneous venues, 30,000-50,000 performers. Talent aiming to please – tycoons aiming to profit. Vaudeville prospered in tandem with the popular music industry – and the new motion picture business.

**(4) People of Vaudeville: The Famous & the Forgotten** Human stories of big-timers and small-timers. Forgotten perhaps, but their influence is with us today, sometimes in unlikely places!

**(5) The Decline of Vaudeville: Internal & External Forces** The novelty of sound movies drew audiences from Vaudeville, but it does not tell the whole story – internal forces also played a role. Surprising twists illustrate that things are often not as they seem!

**(6) Then What Happened? To people, places, ideas, influences?** The better Vaudevillians moved into nightclub, revue, film, or radio work, while lesser talents moved to “small-time” work or left showbusiness. Post-WWII nightclub variety, 1950s-60s TV variety, and late 20th-century “New Vaudeville.”

**(7) 21st Century Manifestations – The Spirit Remains** A new amalgam of circus, cabaret, “new burlesque,” and the growth of Las Vegas as a show capital provides new venues for today’s variety acts. The presentation and “packaging” may have changed, but today’s variety performers carry on.

**Program notes.** Attendees receive informative program notes that include a bibliography and resources useful for further study.

**Related Programs.** The following presentations are available as complementary or follow-up programs to *A Vaudeville Retrospective*. Complete information is at [www.VarietyArtsEnterprises.com](http://www.VarietyArtsEnterprises.com).

- **Coast Defenders: Vaudeville & Vaudevillians in New England**
- **Vaudeville and the New England Trolley Park Era**
- **Tracking Your Vaudeville & Circus Ancestors**

For comprehensive information visit

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## The Exhibition – *American Vaudeville 1880-1930*

The companion lobby exhibition, *American Vaudeville 1880-1930* is available for display in conjunction with the presentation of *A Vaudeville Retrospective* or its related programs. The portable exhibition amplifies on program content, and is comprised of (1) five hinged panels, each 7' high x 2' wide, and (2) a large upright theatrical trunk (18"x22"x44" closed) stocked with props, wardrobe items, and reproduction period ephemera for hands-on inspection. Bolted solidly to the side of the trunk is a chain-driven 6'-tall giraffe unicycle. Contact the presenter directly to discuss how the exhibition can work in your venue.

### About the Presenter

**R.W. Bacon** is an all-but-retired acrobatic juggler, comic dancer, and jazz banjoist/vocalist – and a nowhere-near-retired historian and museum professional. A graduate of Syracuse University and the Harvard Museum Studies program, Bacon was a journalist/editor and publication designer before embarking on a 30-year career to tour nationally with his wife, L.J. Newton, in their now-retired theatrical shows. Decades of shows at theatres, colleges, museums, & special events were spiced with performances for circuses, revues, TV, & film. R.W. Bacon's father was a 1940s nightclub sleight-of-hand artist; his grandmother a silent moviehouse pianist. Early in his career Bacon had the good fortune to encounter other valuable – and legendary – mentors that forged a strong link to authentic Vaudeville styles. Since then his study of variety & circus has contributed to the development of a repertoire of stage specialties rarely seen today. *A Vaudeville Retrospective* is a culmination of the presenter's careers in performance, research, & museum interpretation – all driven by the firm belief that public understanding of “big picture” history enhances the quality of our lives. Further information is available at [www.VarietyArtsEnterprises.com](http://www.VarietyArtsEnterprises.com).

### Venues & Audience

***A Vaudeville Retrospective*** was conceived expressly for presentation at museums, historical societies, college theatre departments, and libraries.

**A program for adult audiences.** While the typical 1880-1930 Vaudeville *show* aimed squarely at a general family audience, this *historical program* aims squarely at an adult audience. *A Vaudeville Retrospective* is undeniably lively, full of musical effervescence and high-energy physical feats appealing to all, but it is also context-rich and information-packed, full of social, economic, and technological connections that will likely tax the attention span of most young children. Therefore any publicity can use the upbeat descriptive phrase: “literate, informative, and fun for adults,” or in certain mutually-agreed circumstances, “suitable for age 10-and-up.”

### Vaudeville Studies

**A good starting point** for the curator/librarian looking to learn more about the topic is the “Vaudeville Studies” page at [www.VarietyArtsEnterprises.com](http://www.VarietyArtsEnterprises.com). (Clicking on “Presentations & Exhibitions” will reveal the link to the “Vaudeville Studies” page.) This page includes a bibliography, audio & video links, links to other Vaudeville history sites, and links to brick-and-mortar repositories of original source material.

**Need just one book?** If you don't wish to wade through all the resources, don't want to do more post-graduate study, and want a one-book introduction, look for a copy of *No Applause – Just Throw Money: The Book That Made Vaudeville Famous*, by Trav S.D. (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), a breezy-but-authoritative overview.

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## Technical Requirements

**A Vaudeville Retrospective is a self-contained presentation** with sound system, digital projection system, extensions, power strips, backdrop or screen (if needed), and all tables, stools, stands, podium, and prop cases.

**Minimum presentation/performance area:** 12' deep x 16' wide; a stage is desirable but not absolutely necessary.

**Optimum presentation/performance area:** 20' deep x 24' wide; a stage is desirable but not absolutely necessary.

**Ceiling height:** 10'-plus is ideal; 8' is possible.

**Lighting:** General full stage wash; no spotlight please.

**Access to electricity:** 110v AC outlet.

**Arrival, Load-in, Set-up:** Arrival, load-in, set-up, tune-up, & warm-up at least three (3) hours prior to doors opening. Please arrange for adjacent parking/loading space & access to ramps & elevator.

**Lobby Exhibition Requirements.** 10'-long display space along one wall – or angled at a corner; access to 110v electricity (for optional audio); general lighting; security. (Contact the presenter to discuss how the exhibition can work in your specific space.)

## Booking Information

**Program Fees & Contracts.** Once you decide that *A Vaudeville Retrospective* is just the right program for your museum, exhibition, or audience, contact the presenter directly for a confidential discussion of logistics and fees based on your specific programming needs. One all-inclusive fee will be quoted that includes travel expenses. Upon approval, a contract will be sent that will serve as a helpful reminder of the modest technical needs.

**Insurance.** *A Vaudeville Retrospective* carries full general liability insurance for both the presentation and completed operations. Certificates are available.

**Press Releases & Publicity Materials.** *A Vaudeville Retrospective* aims to be an active partner in promoting the presentation at your venue. Press releases, photos, and posters are provided. PDF files are available for download at [www.VarietyArtsEnterprises.com](http://www.VarietyArtsEnterprises.com).

## Contact Information

**Contact your presenter, R.W. Bacon, directly** – no middlemen or agents – by phone, e-mail, snail-mail ... or even meet in person!

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