CHAPTER 9

"Laughter and Liberty Galore": Early Twentieth-Century Dance Halls, Ballrooms, and Cabarets

"The town is dance mad," wrote social worker and journalist Belle Lindner Israels of New York City in the summer of 1909. "Everybody's Doin' It Now," Irving Berlin declared in his 1911 song. The turkey trot, bunny hug, and grizzly bear, Life magazine reported in February of 1912, have "spread up and down and far and wide through our metropolitan society. Little Italians dance them in Harlem, polite cotillions at Sherry's have been diversified by them, and they flourish above, below and between. The dancing set in our town must be half a million strong."

While it might be somewhat of a stretch to characterize the "dance craze" of the early twentieth century as entirely female-driven, there was no doubt among contemporary observers that the "girls" were the carriers of the madness. When Michael Davis undertook his massive amusement survey of New York City in 1911, he found a surprising discrepancy between the boys and girls he interviewed on the question of dancing. While only one-third of the boys admitted to knowing how to dance, 88 percent of the girls said they knew how to dance, and 96 percent said they enjoyed it. Ruth True, the social worker and author of The Neglected Girl, reported that on Manhattan's West Side, young working girls were spending "several nights a week at dance halls where [they] stayed until one or two o'clock," even though they had to get up early for work six days a week. In Chicago, Elias Tobenkin found that Polish and Slavic girls recently arrived in the country preferred "scrubbing in restaurants for five or six dollars a week" to domestic work, because domestic work curtailed "the number of balls and dances" they could attend.

It was not only poor and working girls who had been bitten by the dancing bug. The madness cut across every social division in every city, infecting seamstresses who patronized the nickel dance halls in the poorer neighborhoods and debutantes who spent the early-morning hours in cabarets where only champagne was served. Julian Street, in his 1913 book on New York nightlife, reported that the dancing craze had created "a social mixture such as was never before dreamed of in this country—a hodge-podge of people in which respectable young married and unmarried women, and even debutantes, dance, not only under the same roof, but in the same room with women of the town. Liberte—Egalite—Fraternite."

In its Christmas 1914 issue, Variety claimed that the very landscape of Broadway had been changed by the dance craze. North of Times Square, "both sides of the street are lined with cabarets, Jardins, Gardens, Palais and what not." "At last a New Yorker can look a Parisian in the face," proclaimed Vanity Fair. "No more need he stand by and hear—with mingled emotions of envy, humiliation, and rapture—those old familiar stories of all night life in Paris... Now a New York man can dance until six A.M. ... as a gentlemen [sic] should."

While Vanity Fair celebrated the new night life, social reformers and settlement-house workers complained that the new leisure class was setting a dangerous precedent for the city's working girls. The New York Times in an editorial warned the city's social elites to begin policing their behavior on the dance floor. "Their own daughters may be quite safe from evil influence. Their pretty adaptations of the wiggings and posings of the taverns on the road to Gehenna may be considered quite harmless and too exquisitely droll for words. But their influence is far reaching." The working girls of the city, the Times claimed, had learned the turkey trot and the grizzly bear "from good society.... Because it was noised abroad that at a 'coming out' party of a daughter of good society, the 'slow rag' or the 'tango argentino' were danced, these grotesque posturings must, perforce, be imitated in the Saturday night dances of the poor girls, whose lives are not so well guarded and are ever subject to innumerable temptations."

The reformers were relentless in their attack on "society" for its abnegation of responsibility. In January 1912, the Committee on
Amusements and Vacation Resources for Working Girls announced that it was going to send its dance investigators—who usually visited only the public dance halls—into the Fifth Avenue hotels. The New York Times reported the announcement in a front-page story: “Movement Begins to Bar ‘Turkey Trot’ and ‘Grizzly Bear’ from Fifth Avenue. JUNIOR COTILLION WARNING. Dancers Told There Must Be No ‘Antics’—Plan to Expose the New Dances to All Grades of Society.”

The response was immediate. Social leaders in New York, Philadelphia, and everywhere else, deeply embarrassed by the disclosure that their children were gyrating and embracing on the dance floor with the same abandon as the denizens of “tenderloin” dives and public dance halls, took immediate action. The New York Times announced the very next day, “PHILADELPHIA BANS THE TROT. Grizzly Bear Also to Be Eliminated from Society Dances.” A few weeks later, the president of the International Art Society informed the 200 couples at its annual ball in the Hotel Astor that anyone doing the grizzly bear or the turkey trot or “an exaggerated form of the ‘Boston dip’” would be “escorted from the hall.”

To make sure that the problem did not resurface, the better half took steps to teach itself and its children to dance with the grace and style that the “other half” lacked. “The smartest stratum of New York Society adopted” Englishman Vernon Castle and his demure, well-bred, quintessentially “WASP” wife, Irene, as their special dance instructors, because, as Theatre Magazine explained, they “spiritualized the dances thought to be hopelessly fleshly.”

The Castles and their sponsors modified and renamed the “tough” dances. The turkey trot, grizzly bear, and bunny hug were replaced by the one-step, the long Boston, and the fox trot. New rules were promulgated to govern dancing in the city’s more expensive restaurants, cabarets, and nightclubs—and distinguish it from what went on in the cheap dance halls. “Do not wiggle the shoulders. Do not shake the hips. Do not twist the body. Do not flounce the elbows. Do not pump the arms. Do not hop—glide instead. Avoid low, fantastic and acrobatic dips.”

While the Castles removed the shimmy and the shake from the barnyard dance steps, they did not attempt to slow down or smooth out the syncopated ragtime beat that propelled the couples across the floor. As Vernon himself admitted, “When a good orchestra plays a ‘rag’ one has simply got to move. The One Step is the dance for rag-time music.”

This drawing by John Sloan was published in The Masses in 1914. The caption read, “An Editor: ‘I think that this is a reactionary picture. The tango is all right.’ An Artist: ‘Yes, the tango is all right—this is the orange-tango.’”
The musicians, performers, and publishers who were profiting from the dance craze had to walk a fine line here. If they went too far in cleaning up the dances, they would destroy their appeal. The key to the new dances was ragtime music, and there was no way to disguise the fact that it had come from and was best performed by African-American musicians.

The fashion in dance music, up until about 1910, had been the so-called gypsy orchestras that virtually monopolized the hotel trade. The first “whites” to hire black musicians for their dances were members of New York’s social elite. In August of 1913, society’s favorite African-American conductor, James Reese Europe, played engagements for the Astors and the Vanderbilts at their summer homes. The Castles also “preferred to be accompanied by James Reese Europe’s Negro band with drummer Buddy Gilmore, the admitted source of much of their inspiration.”

With the imprimatur of the Castles added to that of the Astors and Vanderbilts, black conductors and musicians became an essential component of the dance craze. “Most people felt they had to have a Jim Europe orchestra to play the new dance music for them, and he was only too happy to supply them with musicians.” On the West Coast, the Oakland Western Outlook noted in 1914 that “the white-light districts simply clamor[ed] for colored manipulators of the rag-time muse.”

Ragtime and the new dances were, indeed, so closely associated with African Americans that one of the most popular dance steps was, in ironic tribute, called the “Nigger.” And although “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” which sold more sheet music than any other rag, was written by Irving Berlin, an immigrant Jew from the Lower East Side of Manhattan, the songwriter spent years dispelling rumors that he had stolen the song from an unnamed “Negro.” Few believed that anyone but a “Negro” could have written a successful rag.

Uptown and downtown, the social elites and the city’s working people danced the same steps to the same kinds of music. And the urban reformers who looked after the moral health of future generations worried about them both. While the threat of adverse publicity had prompted the social elites to police their cotillons and “ban the trot,” such tactics did not work with the “other half.” To protect the innocent from animal dances and ragtime music, reformers sought and secured legislation mandating the regulation and licensing of public dance halls.

The caption for this cartoon, published in March 1913, read, “COO-OOD-BYE, RA-A AG-TIME! It seems almost too good to be true that the Rag-Time Fever is dying out, and that these syncopated and hypnotic sentimentalists will shortly return to their barbaric haunts.” (Photographs and Prints Division; Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library; Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.)
halls. Unfortunately, success in the legislatures did not easily translate into mastery of the dance floor.

There was never enough money appropriated to police the public dance floors properly. Nor could there have been. How many inspectors would it have taken to police the 49 dance halls in Kansas City and watch over the shoulders of 16,500 dancers, 80 percent of whom were under 25 years old, who patronized them weekly? Or to supervise the 12,000 to 13,000 dancers who spent Saturday nights in Milwaukee’s dance halls and academies? Or the 86,000 young people, who, according to the Juvenile Protective Association of Chicago, danced nightly in that city’s public halls and dancing academies?14

In Cleveland and Kansas City, where special legislation empowered deputy policemen to moonlight as inspectors, some warnings were given, a few rowdy offenders ejected, and a handful of halls temporarily closed, usually for building-code violations. The vast majority of boys and girls continued, however, to dance as they pleased. When the Cleveland social reformers and inspectors tried to outlaw the tango, which they considered the most sexually explicit of the new dances, even the court ruled against them, declaring that the inspectors had no right to “forbid a certain dance by name.” The tango was promptly reinstated.15

The simple truth was that there was no way of curbing or policing the dance craze short of closing down the cabarets, nightclubs, and dance halls, which no reformer dared suggest—and no politician dared consider. As long as these establishments remained open, the city’s young people would patronize them in large numbers—and dance the steps they wanted to dance.

Outside the public dance halls, there were few spaces in the city where young working men and women could spend time together. As Ruth True reported from Manhattan’s West Side, “The girls’ homes are not very advantageous places for entertainment and fun. They are too cramped and often too forlorn... Visits from gentlemen friends are frowned upon and not desired. The parents, especially of the younger girls, look askance on the boys who come to see them.”16

Going out for dinner or to see a show with a member of the opposite sex with whom you were not engaged—or about to become engaged—was still something of a rarity. Young men and women went to the movies or the vaudeville hall with their same-sex friends and left with them. Occasionally, boys and girls would pair off in the street outside the theater but only with individuals they already knew. The amusement park was a great place to meet boys or girls, but it was a trolley ride away and closed nine or ten months a year. The dance hall alone was within walking distance and open all year long. And it offered opportunities available nowhere else to spend time with the opposite sex. For the women especially, there was safety in the anonymity of the dance floor. They could flirt, hug, even hold hands, if they chose, without parents, teachers, employers, or family friends looking over their shoulders.17

The best information we have on the dance halls comes from investigators paid by vice commissions and reformer agencies. Although they were hired to look for and find “dirt,” in their unedited reports, they reveal a great deal about the ways the city’s young men and women interacted in the dance halls. Mr. and Mrs. Hastings, investigators for the New York Committee of Fourteen, in the report of their September 1911 visit to the Terrace Garden described how the dancers paired off on the dance floor. “We observed that a large majority of the girls came by themselves and the young men by themselves, each finding partners at the hall. Few introductions were seen; two girls dance together and two young men whose fancy they suit pick them out and dance with them. Some fellows chat with them after the dance, and some do not. The crush around the edge of the floor when a dance starts is very great, the young men crowding half way into the middle of the floor to pick out partners... The girls generally speaking, were bright and happy fun-loving girls, judging from their appearance. They did not seem to care, however, what manner of young men they met.”18

If the partners enjoyed one another’s company—and dancing—they might stay together for the evening. If they did not, they parted at the end of the number, and the entire process began again with the next dance. The girls who had come together to the hall kept a careful watch on each other, even after they had been “picked up.” At the end of the evening, most left with their girlfriends. A smaller number went off with boys, some to walk home, others to nearby hotel rooms or illicit rendezvous.19

The reformers were, of course, more interested in the minority of boys and girls who left the dance halls together than in the majority who went home by themselves or with their same-sex friends. In almost pornographic detail, published reports such as those of Chicago’s Juvenile Protective Association recounted the stories of
young girls (and occasionally boys) led astray by vicious men and liquor. “In one case the investigator saw a young girl held while four boys poured whiskey from a flask down her throat, she protesting half-laughingly all the time that she had never had anything to drink before. A half hour later, her resistance gone, she was seen sitting on a boy’s lap.” In another case, “a young boy, evidently new to the city, was seen looking for a [dancing] partner. He found one, a prostitute, who, after drinking with him all the evening, persuaded him to give up his job. At the end of a week she induced him to go with her to St. Louis to act as cadet for a disorderly house.”

The testimony presented here is highly dramatic, but suspect. Why didn’t the investigators who witnessed these events intervene to save the innocent? Why didn’t they warn the young girl not to drink so much from the flask or tell the “young boy, evidently new to the city,” that his dancing partner was a prostitute? Either the published stories were fictions invented by the reformers or the investigators were instructed to act as scientific observers and not intervene in the affairs of those they observed.

Reading the unedited reports of the individual inspectors, one is led to the conclusion that the reports published by the reformers were as much fiction as fact. Though the investigators, for example, tried their best, they were seldom able to interest the women they approached in leaving the hall with them, or in even dancing with them.* Although wherever they traveled, they inquired about “rooms” to take girls after the dance, they rarely found the “vicious situations” they were searching for. The vice commissioners and reformers who reported to the public on the city’s dance halls were less interested in what actually occurred than in what might or could have happened. Even though there was little evidence that innocent young girls were being regularly seduced in the dance halls, the danger remained ever present in the license offered young people to act out their own rituals of interaction without the instruction or intervention of responsible adults.

It is easy to poke fun at the dance-hall reformers, investigators, and police. But it is wrong to dismiss their concerns as frivolous. While they certainly underestimated the strengths of local mores and the boys’ and girls’ capacity to resist sexual harassment, they identified a danger that was implicit in the changing rules and rituals of heterosexual socializing.

Traditional courting rituals were breaking down with nothing to take their place. By the mid-1920s, certainly by the 1930s, the institution of “dating” would begin to structure the relationships of unmarried young people by limiting the range of acquaintances they might “go out” with, reducing the possibilities of indiscriminate assemblies, and, theoretically, providing parents with the opportunity to regulate or at least comment on the suitability of particular “dates.” In the early years of the new century, however, “dating” was not yet institutionalized, certainly not for working youths who had left school.23

Week after week, working-class and immigrant youths came to the dance halls, some to dance with boys or girls from the neighborhood, others to throw themselves into the arms of strangers neither they nor their friends or families knew anything about. The new dance steps encouraged, almost mandated, physical intimacy with dancing partners. The dancers did not hold one another at arm’s length as they had in the waltz or the polka, but pivoted and spun around the room, arms and legs entwined. In the turkey trot, the ladies’ arms were placed around their partner’s necks, not on their shoulders; their lower bodies, from waist to knee, were enclosed within the men’s extended legs. In the grizzly bear, the partners wrapped their arms around one another, with the man embracing the woman as the grizzly bear embraced his mate or foe. In the bunny hug, couples hugged like bunnies. The Harvard Lampoon in 1912 had jokingly explained the raison d’être of the new dances:

HE: Shall we bunny?
SHE: No: let us just sit down and hug.24

Most dance-hall operators not only allowed but encouraged such behavior by permitting the free flow of liquor inside their establishments. Dancers, overheated on the dance floor, sought refuge and refreshment in the barrooms. Had water or soft drinks been available, customers might have opted for them. But in the commercial dance halls, as in many of the cabarets and nightclubs, it was usually easier, often cheaper, and always more stylish to drink alcoholic beverages. At the Terrace Garden, according to the investigator for the New York

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*See, for example, the report from the Pittsburgh investigator who visited a dance hall, where he claimed “intermingling was quite promiscuous” but admitted that he was “repeatedly turned down and succeeded in dancing only one dance other than those with Miss X,” his co-investigator.21
Committee of Fourteen, "soda" cost ten cents, while beer cost only five. While many of the young women were probably acquainted with the deleterious effects of alcoholic beverages after strenuous physical activity, some were not. Investigators in San Francisco reported that "the warmth caused by dancing and the close atmosphere of the hall induce them to accept invitations to drink. They see other girls drinking beer and whiskey, and they are ashamed to order anything else."  

The dangers of accepting drinks from strange men were twofold. Young women might get drunk and be taken advantage of sexually. Or, more commonly, as Kathy Peiss has written, lacking the money to buy the men drinks in return, they would have to instead offer "sexual favors of varying degrees. Most commonly, capitalizing on their attractiveness and personality, women volunteered only flirtatious companionship. . . . Not all working-class women simply played the coquette, however." Those the vice commissions called "charity girls" were prepared to "go the 'Limit'" with men who paid their way through an evening of dancing and refreshments.  

While the "public" nature of the dancing protected women from most uninvited intimacies on the dance floor, there was no such protection off the floor. Many of the cabarets and after-hour lobster palaces had private rooms where businessmen and sporting men could entertain and be entertained by their lady friends. In the public dance halls, there were balconies or galleries above the dance floor and open rooftops, backyards, courtyards, and lodging houses nearby. Off the dance floor and away from the uniformed guards and the glare of the "public," the boys, reinforced by the camaraderie and competition of their peers, felt no compunction about acting rough with the girls who accompanied them to the balconies. Still, while date and gang rapes were probably not uncommon, there was surprisingly little record of them in the investigators' reports. Most of the sexual activity they reported was consensual.  

The reformers wanted to desexualize the dance halls, to remove the liquor, the spaces for sexual liaisons, the prostitutes and sporting men who were not there to dance, and the steps that they believed were little more than excuses for simulated sex. What they refused to understand was that it was impossible to remove sex from the dance halls and the dance steps. One of the pleasures of dancing was dipping, gliding, swirling, hugging, and wrapping your arms around your partner. Young men and women came to the halls not only to dance but also to flirt, to hold their partners close, perhaps even to kiss and embrace.  

While young "whites" danced happily in the dance halls and nightclubs to ragtime played, composed, or adapted from African-American musicians, that was the full extent of racial integration. As long as the blacks performed on the bandstand or in the front of the hall or cabaret, geographically separated from the dancers, they were welcome. They were not, however, permitted to cross the invisible line that divided audience and performers any more than the black vaudeville stars could have stepped off the stage to sit with their white audiences.  

The "dangers" of interracial socialization were compounded by the physical contact and sexual nature of the dancing. Not only could blacks and whites not dance together in couples, but also it was impermissible for black couples to dance alongside white couples. In the posh cabarets, neighborhood dance halls, even in the municipal parks, wherever whites gathered to dance in public, blacks were barred from the dance floor. In Chicago, according to the Commission on Race Relations established after the 1919 riots, African Americans, while permitted to use every other facility at the Municipal Pier, were strongly discouraged (though not legally prohibited) from entering the dance floor. "One of the floor managers . . . speaks courteously to the couple. He expresses regret that he must mention the matter of their dancing to them, but that they are not dancing properly, and he invites them to come to a corner of the dance floor where he will instruct them in the proper way to dance. This usually occupies the remainder of the particular dance, and results in the Negroes not coming on the floor again."  

Though excluded from the cabarets, nightclubs, and neighborhood dance halls patronized by whites, African Americans who wanted to dance or listen to ragtime music had plenty of places to do it. There were dozens of dancing-saloons, honky-tonks, and night spots in or adjacent to the vice districts coterminous with black neighborhoods. Through the 1920s, these "joints" expanded in number and prosperity, in part because during Prohibition it was easier to operate a "drinking" establishment beyond the regular theater district than within it. In Harlem in New York City, on South State Street in Chicago, on the Barbary Coast in San Francisco, on Decatur Street in Atlanta, on Beale Street in Memphis, along the Sixth Street corridor in Cincinnati, and in
most other cities with sizable African-American populations, the streets after dark were transformed into carnivals of nightlife.\footnote{30}

Many of the smaller tenderloin establishments were patronized only by blacks, but the more expensive ones also catered to adventurous whites. While blacks were barred from white establishments, white "slummers" were welcomed in the black joints, clubs, and cabarets. The slummers, in fact, constituted such a sizable—and prosperous—audience that some club owners resegregated their establishments to make their white customers feel more at home. As the sociologist Katrina Hazzard-Gordon has written, in Cleveland's "black and tan" club, Cedar Gardens, located "on the outer edges of the still-burgeoning black community...reservation signs were routinely placed on all tables from Thursday through Saturday to restrict African Americans from the cabaret section of the club." Neighborhood residents were, however, allowed to sit wherever they wanted for Sunday matinees and Monday through Wednesday evenings. In Harlem, according to the jazz historians Samuel Charters and Leonard Kunstadt, such exclusive resorts as the Cotton Club, which opened in 1922, stationed "guards at the door [who] restricted admission to white patrons." After sustained protests from the Harlem community, the club agreed to "admit colored patrons" but raised prices so high few neighborhood residents could afford to attend.\footnote{31}

Except for the notorious "black and tan" resorts where blacks and whites socialized, drank, and danced together, segregation on the dance floor was an essential constituent of the entertainment experience. The African-American music on the bandstand combined with the exclusion of black dancers from the floor to accentuate and celebrate the "whiteness" of the audience. In dancing to animal dances accompanied by ragtime music, the white audience was ritually acting out its "whiteness" by playing black. When the music stopped, the play-acting also did.

As in other public amusement sites, the crowd in the dance halls was as essential an ingredient in the entertainment experience as the music. One "went out" not simply to dance but to dance "in public," surrounded by strangers. Businessmen, many already invested in the amusement industry, capitalized on what social worker and investigator Maria Lambin referred to as the "gregarious instinct" of urban pleasure seekers by building "spacious and handsome" dance palaces in the 1920s and filling them with "bright lights, jazz music, and continuous novelty [to] attract the thousands young people who [were] seeking relief from monotony."\footnote{32}

Admission charges of fifty cents to a dollar attracted a wide range of dancers. A 1924 article in Survey magazine reported that while the patrons of the Broadway dance palaces were "in general, lower in social rank than the patrons of good cabarets and restaurants...one finds a rather high type of business man and business woman there [as well as] youngsters, out for a lark...the sightseer, alone or in parties, [and an] occasional prostitute]. The typical patron, however, is a factory or clerical worker...who craves a little diversion from the tragic narrowness of the daily routine." A Pittsburgh survey from 1924 found the same mixed clientele in that city's dance halls. "The patrons generally represent all sections of the city" and almost every variety of wage earner: "mill and factory workers, clerks, mechanics, tailors, stenographers, domestics and so on."\footnote{33}

The public of pleasure seekers was not restricted to those who danced in the city's palaces and ballrooms. By the middle 1920s, no social group in the city was untouched by the dance "madness" that had surfaced ten years earlier. When, in 1924, investigators for the Women's City Club and the City Recreation Committee surveyed the dance scene in New York City, they visited "a benefit dance by a Hebrew relief society of the lower East Side"; "a costume ball by a group of young East Siders"; "a respectable lodge party where everyone is in formal evening clothes"; "the annual ball of one of the political parties"; "a Bohemian benefit dance to raise money for one of the numerous Bohemian charities"; "the annual ball of the Pullman porters"; "a society [ball] of negro cigar makers from the West Indies"; "the annual ball of a big Catholic society"; "Spanish, Italian, Ukrainian dances—and many more." What was even more remarkable than the variety of groups dancing was the uniformity of styles and music. The same music was being played and the same steps danced uptown and downtown. "Once in a while we see native folk-dance steps, but as a rule the dancing is the same as that found in the Broadway dance palaces, which seem to set the pace for all."\footnote{34}

Even in ethnically segregated immigrant neighborhoods, such as those in Chicago's stockyard district, the jazz and jazz dancing popular in the downtown nightclubs and ballrooms had displaced the once popular "Polish hop." As settlement-house founder Mary McDowell noted with evident distaste, within only a few years of their arrival in Chicago,
young immigrants had abandoned “their old country dances and folk songs. . . . All was changed—American shoes, American clothes, American jazz with its saxophone were the rage. The Polish accordion with its folk music, folk dances and folk clothing had been completely displaced by what our young neighbors called ‘American dances and music.’ When I urged for the old-country dances I was told haughtily by these modernized young people, as I fancy their old-fashioned parents were told, ‘Why, Miss McDowell, nobody dances those dances any more.’ With a superior gesture and a look of 100% American they ordered the saxophone ‘On with the jazz!’ This type of Americanization by the dance hall and the movies goes on apace.”

In Pittsburgh, when investigators for the Girls’ Conference visited a neighborhood hall “in hopes of seeing some of the Russian native dances,” they found instead “a four piece, unharmonious, squeaking orchestra whin[ing] out what was supposed to be the latest American jazz while a few couples bounced over a rough floor à l’américain.”

Social dancing had, in Maria Lambin’s phrase, become “as standardized as a patent breakfast food or a Ford automobile.” What the devotees of the barnyard dances in the nightclubs, the downtown palaces, and the rented neighborhood halls appeared to share in common was their desire to distance themselves, if only temporarily on a Saturday night, from class and ethnic cultural forms. It was not only the Polish immigrants in Chicago or the Russians in Pittsburgh who in adopting the new dances abandoned the old ones. The debutantes and “smart set” in New York and Philadelphia also forswore their traditional waltzes, polkas, lancers, quadrilles, and the two-step for barnyard steps and jazz.

The dance halls and palaces provided their patrons with the sense that they were part of a larger social whole, a new public of pleasure seekers that cut across all social divisions. In traveling downtown to the larger dance halls and palaces, to Roseland and the Grand Central Palace in New York City or the Aragon, the Trianon, Dreamland, and the White City Ballroom in Chicago, dancers left behind their particular neighborhood and ethnic communities to join a new “American” public dancing to a new “American” music, jazz.

On the dance floor, there was no reminder of the mundane world left behind. Dancing was pure pleasure, an activity indulged in because it was fun and might be a prelude to romance or sexual intimacy. In other amusement centers, most clearly at the world’s fair and on the lyceum circuit, but in the theaters and amusement parks as well, an
CHAPTER 10

Talking and Singing Machines, Parlors, and Peep Shows

The first of the automatic amusement machines, the phonograph or “talking machine,” was patented by Thomas Alva Edison in 1877. Edison, who early in his career had determined “not to undertake inventions unless there was a definite market demand for them,” believed that his phonograph could have multiple uses as a business machine. It would, he predicted in an 1878 article for the North American Review, be the perfect dictation machine and record-keeper. It could also be used to record phonographic books for blind people; teach elocution; record the “last words” of aged family members; preserve dying languages; teach rote lessons to schoolchildren; transmit and preserve “permanent and invaluable” business records; and, when perfected, “be liberally devoted to music” and used in “music boxes, toys,” and talking dolls.¹

Although the first machines were quite primitive and able to record and play back less than a minute of barely audible sounds, Edison was impatient to see a return on his investment. His plant produced about 500 phonographs that were exhibited by trained lecturers on the lyceum circuit to whet the public’s appetite and attract investors and capital. When, after only a few months, the novelty of hearing thirty seconds of scratchy sound wore off for audiences and investors alike, Edison turned his attention to inventions with more practical and immediate applications, like the incandescent light bulb.²

In 1886, Edison returned to his phonograph. Alexander Graham Bell, who with associates had been working on his own dictating machine cleverly named the graphophone (reversing the syllables of Edison’s machine), suggested that the two inventors combine their talents and organizations. Edison, angered by what he considered to be Bell’s theft of his invention but stimulated by the competition (Bell’s machine apparently worked better than his), turned down the offer and returned to the laboratory to improve his phonograph.³

By the spring of 1888, Edison and his assistants were ready to display their new dictating machine to investors and the public. When the initial demonstrations, however, failed to attract investment capital, Edison, again short of funds, sold the rights to market his machine to Jesse Lippincott, a venture capitalist who had already bought the rights to Bell’s graphophone. With Edison’s imprimatur, Lippincott enlisted investors across the country to buy state franchises to exploit the Wizard’s latest discovery. The first phonographs and graphophones were designed as business instruments for taking dictation. Unfortunately, the machines were too complicated to run without extensive training and did not talk at all, but produced instead what one user described as “but a parody of the human voice.” Court reporters, a potentially lucrative market, found the machines unworkable, stenographers lobbied against them, and the business firms that had been expected to lease them were discouraged by the poor sound reproduction and the constant maintenance required.⁴

Only as it became obvious that the phonograph was a failure as a “talking” machine did a few adventurous (and probably desperate) investors begin to reconfigure it as a “singing” machine. Louis Glass of San Francisco sounded one of the only bright notes at the 1890 inaugural convention of the phonograph company executives when, on the last day of the meeting, he addressed the group on the subject of “public exhibitions.” Glass began his talk with the simple, yet powerful, statement that “all the money” the San Francisco company had “made in the phonograph business” came from what he called “the-nickel-in-the-slot machine.” He explained how he had fitted his phonographs with four listening tubes attached to four slots for coins and placed them in local saloons. Customers deposited nickels in the slots to start the machines, put the tubes to their ears, and heard the muffled but recognizable sound of music accompanied by scratches, clicks, and strange whirring noises. Glass’s company had, he claimed, already made almost $2,000 from the two machines it had placed in the Palais Royal Saloon in San Francisco.
MR. CHADBournE: Two machines in the same saloon?
MR. GLASS: Yes.
MR. CHADBournE: Did they do as well?
MR. GLASS: Yes, and I will state right here, that we seem to have the same patrons all the time. We change the cylinders every two days, and if a man puts a nickel in one and hears a piece of band music, he almost invariably goes over and hears a second one.

Additional machines had been placed in the waiting room of the Oakland–San Francisco ferry and in other saloons—and all, Glass asserted, had made money. “We have fifteen machines out. . . . We have taken in altogether from those machines, eight of which were placed in April and May $4,019.00; figure out the details yourself.”

The executives from the other companies questioned Glass about patents, operating expenses, and where and for how much they could purchase the rights to coin-operated phonographs. Although all appeared to be astonished by the amount of money the San Francisco company was taking in, none was completely surprised by the ease with which the business instrument had been turned into an entertainment machine. Each local company had already had some experience with what the director of the Georgia and Florida companies called “the social uses and amusement part of the instruments.” Edison, always the wizard at attracting publicity for his inventions, had recorded a number of musical cylinders to demonstrate how the phonograph worked. For a modest price, local companies bought copies of these demonstration cylinders with opera singers, classical musicians (including the piano prodigy Josef Hoffman), brass bands, and “dardy” songs whistled by a man Edison claimed to have met on a ferry ride into New York City, but who was in fact, George W. Johnson, a fairly well-known African-American minstrel.

Everywhere they were played, the demonstration musical cylinders attracted crowds. In Atlanta, Georgia, the director of the local company found that the demonstration phonographs were “daily amusing great numbers of people, the majority of whom never had an idea of using the instrument practically or otherwise.” The same thing had happened in Texas, where dozens of businessmen had visited the phonograph company offices not to lease dictating machines but to listen to “a very nice musical exhibition.”

Instead of capitalizing on the phonograph’s ability to amuse customers by singing, as Glass had in San Francisco, most company execu-
tives banned the demonstration cylinders from their offices, fearful that customers, having been entertained by the machines, would regard them as toys instead of serious business tools. As the opening editorial in the *Phonogram*, the industry’s trade journal, warned company executives, “The exhibition of the phonograph for amusement purposes [is] liable to create a wrong impression in the minds of the public as to its actual merits for other purposes.”

The advocates of the phonograph as a business machine were fighting a losing battle. Before their first business year was out, most of the phonograph companies had bowed to the inevitable and converted their dictating machines into nickel-in-the-slot amusement machines. The Texas Phonograph Company opened a separate office in Dallas where customers who wanted to hear recorded music could do so—for a fee. The Spokane company abandoned its attempt to lease business machines and concentrated entirely on placing nickel-in-the-slot phonographs “in the most popular resorts in the city.”

Salesmen on commission and independent exhibitors carried their phonographs into public spaces looking for crowds of passersby in a festive mood. The New England company put out machines at “all the summer resorts and beaches” in the Boston area. The New York Phonograph Company “placed a large number of these instruments at Saratoga.” Machines were also exhibited at state, county, and world’s fairs.

Wherever the phonographs were displayed—on fair midways, in train stations, in hotel lobbies, and at summer resorts—they were greeted with enthusiasm by first-time users who thrilled to the novelty of hearing machines sing or play music. Recorded music appealed, as a *Phonogram* writer insisted in late 1891, “to all classes and conditions of the human race, from the millionaire in his opera box to the bootblack with his grimy hands and his harmonica—all love music.”

The demand of exhibitors for new recordings pushed the phonograph companies to expand their inventories. Because band music was popular with almost every type of audience, the larger companies entered into exclusive recording contracts with the better-known bands. The New York Phonograph Company recorded and distributed cylinders of Cappa’s Seventh Regiment Band; the Columbia Phonograph Company entered into an exclusive contract with the United States Marine Band, which it proudly advertised as “in many respects, the most celebrated band in the world. It can play, without notes, more than five hundred different selections.” (Exhibitors who chose to pur-
chase Marine Band cylinders were given display photographs of “the band in full uniform, as it appears when playing for the President of the United States at the White House, on state occasions, or in the grounds of the White House in pleasant weather.”) Next in popularity to the bands were an assorted group of musicians, including artistic whistlers, the most famous of which was Mr. John Y. AtLee of Washington, D.C., cornet and clarinet soloists, and singers accompanied by orchestra in “Sentimental,” “Topical,” “Comic,” “Negro,” and “Irish” renditions. An increasing number of talking records, recitations, and humorous monologues, many in dialect, were also being produced.  

Although most of the cylinders were distributed by the larger firms, the local companies continued to record, exhibit, and sell their own versions of the big hits of the day, such as “After the Ball” and “Daisy Bell.” The Ohio company made money with cylinders of Dan Kelly, who recited mock Irish vaudeville monologues in the name of Pat Brady. In New York City, an independent record producer, Gianni Betti, produced and marketed classical music, including many of the best-known opera stars of the 1890s.  

Strangely enough given the fact that one of Edison’s first musical cylinders had been of black performer George W. Johnson, African Americans were kept out of the early recording studios, although they were, as we have seen, featured performers in vaudeville, musical comedy, and on the world’s fair midways. The “darker” cylinders that were produced and widely circulated in the early 1890s were, for the most part, recorded by white impersonators. Before World War I, the Edison, Victor, and Columbia companies put out hundreds of “coon” songs and parodies. The Ohio company boasted in 1891 that it had made up to $4.75 a day, more than it got from “some of the Marine Band” cylinders by hiring “a gentleman from an adjoining territory to sing a number of banjo songs” and advertising his cylinder as “an-old-time-before-the-war banjo song sung by a plantation darkey.” The Louisiana Phonograph Company produced an entire “line of negro specialties . . . consisting of old plantation songs, darkey melodies, etc. Probably the most successful specialty is the work of ‘Brudder Rasmus,’ whose sermons, such as ‘Charity ob de Heart,’ ‘Adam and Eve and de Winter Apple,’ ‘Sinners, Chicken Stealers, Etc.,’ and ‘De Lottrey,’ with the characteristic participation of his congregation are wonderfully realistic and attractive.”  

In addition to these officially recorded cylinders, there was a developing underground market for cylinders that indulged the amusement fantasies of the rougher elements of the male-only sporting crowd. To the dismay of phonograph company executives, “unscrupulous” exhibitors had begun to record, collect, and exchange recordings of “jim-jam songs,” profanities, vulgar conversations, and simulated sexual encounters. “A lively trade developed . . . in pornographic and obscene material, as for example the purportedly secret recording of a husband’s dalliances with the maid.” One exhibitor made a small fortune with such recordings at a Rhode Island state fair until a competing “lady exhibitor” who had “heretofore . . . always done an excellent business” with “clean” material complained about the unfair competition and had the scoundrel run “out of town.”  

While the traveling exhibitors were exhibiting phonographs during the warm weather on fair midways, at summer resorts, and in hotel lobbies, the parent companies had stumbled on what appeared to be an ideal—
and permanent—exhibition site in the central business districts. They had found that by grouping several machines together in a downtown “parlor,” with full-time attendants to service the machines and make change, they could attract large numbers of customers from the streams of pedestrians who passed by day and night.

These first phonograph parlors were unlike any other amusement sites or exhibition spaces. From the outside, they looked like retail stores, except for their full-size show windows that were lit and decorated not with items for sale but with framed posters and photographs of Edison, the current program of selections, and a sign inviting passersby to “walk in,” admission free. Inside, the decor was somewhere between that of a fancy saloon and a hotel or theater lobby, with potted palms, ceiling fans, and quasi-Oriental rugs. The lighting was theatrical, with a separate “incandescent electric light [over each machine] bringing out plainly the likeness of Edison and the name of the selection to be heard.” The phonographs themselves were encased in “handsome oak automatic cabinets.” As the Ohio Phonograph Company explained, “a magnificent piece of mechanism like the phonograph deserves a fine setting.” More to the point, the oak cabinets, “specimens of the finest woodwork that can be secured,” upgraded the image of what were still slot machines only recently transported from barrooms and ferry terminals.\(^{16}\)

The show windows and lighting within signaled that these were establishments with nothing to hide. No one could be intimidated or frightened by the setting. No reputations would be risked by entering. Those who could not afford even a nickel or two of music were invited to “go partners” and share a listening tube with a friend. Those for whom money was no object could bring the whole family or spend a dollar or more listening once or twice to the selections on a dozen different machines. The parlors appealed, in particular, as the Phonogram suggested, to the large “number of travelers and visitors [who] come and go on business and pleasure” in the “great manufacturing and commercial centers.” Customers did not have to plan in advance to visit the phonograph parlor. They merely “dropped in” on the way to or from lunch or appointments, or on their way home or to the theater.\(^{17}\)

Because the stream of pedestrians from whom the parlors drew their customers included a wide range of city folk, the parlor managers had to provide something for almost every taste: popular songs and perennial classics, military bands and comic whistles, monologues such as “Brady’s Election Speech,” and special effects recordings such as “Night Alarm,” a band record descriptive of a fire, with calls of the firemen, ringing of the bells, the clattering of horses’ hoofs and the unwinding of the hose carriage reel.” Mr. Ott of the Kansas company, asked to describe his parlor at the fourth annual convention of the phonograph companies, emphasized the need to “keep a general assortment of good music” on hand. “All of them are more or less called for. There are some people who call for the talks, [like Shakespeare’s] ‘Seven Ages of Man’... and others call for sentimental songs, but I believe that the greatest number of calls... is for such songs as ‘After the Ball,’ or ‘After the Fair.’... They don’t last like ‘Down on the Farm,’ or ‘Home, Sweet Home,’ but for the time that they are popular they are extremely so, and our experience has been that that class of songs has made the most money per cylinder for the exhibitor.”\(^{18}\)

To bolster their receipts, the parlor owners surrounded their graphophones and phonographs with other “automatic” amusement novelties, machines that dispensed gum, candy, fruit, and miracle medicinals such as “Roy’s Positive Remedy Curing Headache and Neuralgia in 15 Minutes—10¢ Per Package,” and X-ray machines and fluoroscopes that displayed the bones in your hands and were all the rage until experimenters, including one of Edison’s assistants, discovered that repeated exposure caused flesh to ulcerate, hair to fall out, and eventual death. The automatic dispensing machine industry had, the Phonogram reported in January of 1892, become “so valuable that companies are forming all over the country to cultivate it... ‘A penny in the slot.’ This doesn’t look like a heavy investment, but its earning capacity is great... Few people realize the result of an accumulation of pennies or nickels.”\(^{19}\)

The parlor owners were turning a profit by exhibiting the new amusement machines to a larger, more “respectable” slice of the urban population than had encountered them in the saloons or on the fair midways. Outside the larger cities, another group of amusement entrepreneurs were attempting to assemble similar audiences of “respectable” folk in small-town lecture halls and church auditoria. By the 1890s, the lecture-hall—or lyceum—circuit had grown in size and profitability until it had become a viable alternative to the vaudeville
and live theater circuits. In almost every city and town with a vaudeville theater, there were church and school auditoria, libraries, lecture rooms, and rented halls where local religious, civic, charitable, educational, and fraternal associations sponsored special evening events for those who continued to regard the theater and commercial amusements as sinful at worst, indecent at best.  

The phonograph, properly exhibited, was an ideal “attraction” on the lecture-hall circuit because it was as entertaining as it was educational. Lyman Howe, the most prominent and successful of the phonograph exhibitors to travel the circuit, had in the 1880s, made his living exhibiting a model coal mine, complete with a coal breaker, as an “educational” exhibit in small towns and cities in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Ohio. In 1890, he exchanged his coal mine for a phonograph. The phonograph not only was easier to transport from town to town but also had much greater drawing power.  

Howe billed his new attraction as Edison’s latest scientific marvel, “the miracle of the nineteenth century,” a photographer of sound that could break through the barriers of time and space, bring back the dead, and convey messages from thousands of miles away. While other traveling exhibitors ballyhooed their machines like sideshow barkers introducing dog-faced boys, Howe adopted the persona of the “professor” or “lecturer.” As he explained in his advertising, “his entertainment would be ‘Clean, Scientific, Amusing and Elevating—nothing like the Ordinary Phonograph that is seen on the Streets, in Hotels and at the Fairs.’” Howe mixed popular songs by quartets with banjo and cornet solos, comic parodies, recitations, sounds of babies crying, and lots of band music. His concerts also included demonstrations of music recorded live on stage and then played back for the audience. In large part as a result of Howe’s commentary and his live demonstrations, audiences left his “concerts” entertained but feeling that they had learned something about science and mechanics as well.  

Although Howe was the first and most successful, he was not the only exhibitor on the lyceum circuit to offer his audiences full-length phonograph “concerts.” Technical improvements, including huge new “concert horns” several feet in diameter, had by early 1893 liberated the singing machine from its coin-slots and listening tubes. A remaining problem was solved in the middle 1890s when phonographs with spring motors instead of cumbersome, leaky batteries appeared on the market, meeting—in the words of the D. E. Boswell catalog—“the long expressed demand for a single, light, inexpensive, compact, portable, talking machine for exhibition.” With the new traveling kits, lecturers and showmen could put together their own entertainments, skillfully combining brief talks on the “science” of the phonograph, live demonstrations, and musical selections. The most successful “concerts” were those that presented a wide variety of recordings. “As to selections,” a Phonogram article advised, “a mixture of both serious and humorous should be made, the latter predominating, as the phonograph adapts itself to the humorous more readily than to the serious... Monotony is the bugbear of the phonograph. In order to escape it, tact must be exercised, and all the inventive powers of which the exhibitor is possessed should be used to vary the selections as they follow one another. The entire exhibition should be an animated, shifting kaleidoscope, presenting new features at every turn.”  

Arrayed in tastefully decorated parlors or presented in lecture halls with “concert horn” attachments, the phonograph’s chief attraction remained its novelty. Exhibitors such as Howe, who traveled from city
to city, seldom appearing in the same place more than once a year, had
less trouble with this than the parlor owners who were tied to fixed
locations. When, in the middle 1890s, word came out of Menlo Park
that the Wizard was experimenting with a device that would record
visual images as the phonograph had sound, parlor owners across the
country lined up to secure these machines for their storefronts.

Thomas Lombard, the president of the North American Phonog-
raph Company, was in early 1893 among the first civilians admitted to
a private exhibition of the new moving-picture machine, the kineto-
scope.* Through a peephole, he saw tiny, yet distinct, moving pictures
of John Ott, one of Edison’s assistants, doing an impromptu "skirt
dance" and "going through all the phases of a prolonged sneeze."
Entrained by the commercial possibilities of the peephole machines,
Lombard formed a syndicate to exhibit them at the upcoming Chicago
World’s Fair, where he had already arranged to exhibit his phono-
graphs.²¹

In April of 1894, over a year late, the first shipment of kinetoscopes
was delivered to Lombard’s syndicate, which, the world’s fair having
long since closed, installed them in a vacated shoe store remodeled as
an amusement parlor on 27th Street and Broadway in the heart of New
York’s entertainment district.²⁶

The first kinetoscope parlor looked and functioned much like the
phonograph parlors, with one important exception. In the phonograph
parlors, admission had been free and the minimum price of entertain-
ment had been five cents for two minutes of song. In the kinetoscope
parlors, customers were required to buy twenty-five-cent tickets at the
door, which entitled them to peer into the peepholes of five different
machines. For a second twenty-five cents they could see five more
films in the remaining five kinetoscopes.²⁷

In setting the minimum price at a quarter rather than a nickel, the
owners signaled their intention to attract a comparatively upscale audi-
ience, one that could afford to spend fifty cents for two and half min-
utes of flickering images. An early drawing of the parlor shows a room
tastefully decorated with potted palms on the perimeter, incandescent
lamps shaped like dragons on either side, a life-size bronzed bust of

*Edison, borrowing from the Greek terms kinein or κίνητο for "movement," graph for "writ-
ing," and scopus for "watching," named his camera the kinetograph and his peep-show
machine the kinetoscope.²⁴

Edison in front, carpets and waxed floors, and the type of audience the
owners hoped to attract: three elegantly dressed ladies and three men,
one of whom was obviously a “gentleman” outfitted in top hat and
cane.²⁵

The Phonoscope, the voice of the new industry, reproduced this
drawing in its first issue as it offered advice to prospective parlor own-
ers. “In all exhibitions, the neater and the more attractive the show, the
greater is also the financial success. . . . The above cut represents an
exhibition parlor which, it would be well to study in order to use it as a
model, wherever practicable. . . . Nobody would ever hesitate to enter
such a parlor; it invites and attracts all.”²⁹

Almost all of the early kinetoscope parlors were situated in down-
town locations (State Street and Wabash Avenue in Chicago, Canal
Street in New Orleans, Market Street in San Francisco, Tremont Street
in Boston), where the business and entertainment districts intersected.
In Chicago, a parlor was opened "in the Masonic Temple building,
then Chicago’s prided skyscraper.” In San Francisco, Peter Bacigalupi,
one of the more successful owner/operators of phonograph parlors,
opened a kinetoscope parlor in the Chronicle Building on Market
Street.³⁰

Everywhere they were exhibited, the kinetoscopes drew crowds at
once—and did so without much advertising. Edison’s name and word
of mouth were sufficient to lure customers inside. By the summer of
1895, new kinetoscope parlors had been opened in the nation’s larger
cities and in smaller cities—from Binghamton, New York, and Rivers-
side, Rhode Island, in the Northeast, to Nashville, Tennessee, and
Augusta, Georgia, in the South, to Olympia, Washington, and Cyrene,
Wyoming, in the West. The new amusement machines appeared to
have so much commercial potential that the New York Security and
Trust Company in January of 1896 issued $200,000 in mortgage bonds
to an upstate New York company to manufacture and sell an improved
version of the moving-picture camera and peep-show machine. The
only security the company offered in return for the bonds were the
patent rights to its machines.*³¹

*The new company, the American Mutoscope Company, which included W. K. L. Dickson,
Edison’s former assistant among its principals, would within a few years be producing a suc-
cessful peep-show machine and a marketable camera and projector. Under the Biograph
corporate name, it would become one of the more successful early production companies.
large portion of their customers from the sporting crowd. The parlor owners’ decision to concentrate on cultivating a male-only crowd was reinforced by the invention and marketing of the mutoscope by the Biograph Company in 1897. Like the first automatic amusement machine, the phonograph, the mutoscope had been designed as a business machine for traveling salesmen to exhibit their wares. It was reconfigured as an amusement machine when company executives recognized that by substituting moving pictures of “Little Egypt” for pictures of loom-weaving machines, they could increase sales and profits. “Little Egypt . . . the first Mutoscope success . . . was followed by Serpentine Dancers, How Girls Go to Bed, How Girls Undress, and similar tidbits,” including the first commercial film to exhibit partial nudity, “The Birth of the Pearl, showing a girl in white tights and bare arms crouching in an oversized oyster shell.”

What made the mutoscope the perfect instrument for viewing such subjects was its mechanical crank. Unlike the kinetoscope that ran automatically when the switch was turned on or a coin dropped in the slot, the mutoscope was operated by hand. As an 1897 advertising brochure explained, “In the operation of the Mutoscope, the spectator has the performance entirely under his own control by the turning of the crank. He may make the operation as quick or as slow as fancy dictates . . . and if he so elects, the entertainment can be stopped by him at any point in the series and each separate picture inspected at leisure; thus every step, motion, act or expression can be analyzed, presenting effects at once instructive, interesting, attractive, amusing and startling.”

By the time the mutoscopes reached the market in 1897, most of the phonograph and kinetoscope parlors had closed their doors and sold their machines secondhand to “tenderloin” arcades and shooting galleries. Although their rise and fall had been telescoped into only a few years, the parlors had opened a new phase in the history of urban amusements. Located in the heart of the city’s business districts and offering entertainment in compact packages measured in minutes, not hours, they stretched the map of the entertainment world in new directions. They entertained customers—if only for a few minutes at a time—in drugstores, theater lobbies, railway and ferry terminals, department and general stores, resort hotels, boardwalks and midways, tents erected on vacant lots, small-town and city lecture halls, and par-
lors in the central business districts. Everywhere they were exhibited, they attracted an enthusiastic crowd of onlookers and customers willing to take a chance and buy a concert ticket or deposit a nickel in the slot for a few minutes of automatic entertainment.

Part of the attraction of the machines was their newness. They entered the public arena without a knowable past. They belonged neither to Fifth Avenue nor to the Bowery. They could present opera singers, vaudeville clowns, ballet dancers, or prize fighters. They were large enough to accommodate every taste and appeal to every audience.

The show businessmen were so enchanted by the amusement machines’ potentially universal drawing power that they began to articulate their own psychology of amusements. Human beings, they were now convinced, were born with an inherent, inalienable need to be amused. As Billboard magazine explained in the spring of 1895, “Everybody knows that there is always an aching longing for diversion in the human heart. The public must, and will be amused.” Or as the Phonoscope proclaimed in its inaugural editorial in 1896, “There is one great desire which animates all mankind, from the cradle to the grave, encompassing all—the desire for amusement and entertainment.”

While individual projects might fail and fail again, the show businessman’s faith was ever renewed by the crowds each machine attracted before the novelty wore off. The public had demonstrated its hunger for cheap amusements. The showmen would find a way to satisfy it, even if it meant carrying the new amusement machines on their backs from place to place.

CHAPTER 11

“The Surest Immediate Money-Maker Ever Known”

As we saw in Chapter 10, the arrival of Edison’s kinetoscopes had boosted business in the amusement parlors, but not enough to guarantee their long-term commercial viability. Like the coin-in-the-slot phonograph, the peep-show machine had proved to be just another “novelty” entertainment with an abbreviated life span.

That neither his talking nor his peep-show machine had made much of a profit did not discourage Edison from assigning an assistant to work on an improved moving-picture machine that would take the images out of their cabinet and project them onto a screen. The search for such a machine had been going on since the 1880s. Now, in the mid-1890s, Edison, his associates, and independent inventors, mechanics, and showmen on two continents, their enthusiasm kindled by the crowds drawn to the kinetoscope exhibitions, reapplied themselves to the task.

In the spring of 1895, the Latham brothers, the proprietors of a kinetoscope parlor in New York City, announced that they had succeeded in devising a screen machine to exhibit boxing films. Edison claimed that the Lathams’ projector was a poor copy of his kinetoscope (which it was), that he would sue them if they tried to market it (which he did), and that he would soon have a superior screen machine.

Within a year, “Edison’s vitascope” was ready for exhibition, but