minutes for stars. That one brief appearance was a make-or-break opportunity. In their one shot, performers had to win the audience immediately, to hold its attention, to entertain it, and then quickly to get off stage. They had no time to unfold stories, to develop characters, to make mistakes, or to experiment with ad libs. Like sprinters at track meets, vaudevillians had to start at full speed and then maintain the pace for their entire, short stints. “The vaudeville stage makes such demands upon its artists that they are compelled to perfect everything,” critic Gilbert Seldes perceptively observed. “They have to establish an immediate contact, set a current in motion, and exploit it to the last possible degree in the shortest space of time.” The refinement vaudeville demanded was not, Seldes noted, in substance, but in technique. “The materials, they are trivial, yes; but the treatment must be accurate to a hair’s breadth.”

In front of live audiences, the performers continually worked on their acts, studying, adding, honing, and modifying their every movement, word, gesture, and expression. If they improved, they moved up; if not, they remained small-timers. To paraphrase Mae West, it was not so much what they did, but how they did it that determined vaudevillians’ success. With the extensive vaudeville circuits that ensured constantly changing audiences, performers could make entire careers out of one perfectly executed routine. And many did. “You know, all you needed in vaudeville was seventeen good minutes,” George Burns once reminisced. “If you had seventeen good minutes, you could work for seventeen years. There were so many theaters, you wouldn’t come back to the same one for four years and who would remember what you did the last time you were there?” But while they were there, performers had to be good, or they would not get a chance either to move up or to return.

“The great acts in vaudeville are those which could not be perfectly appreciated elsewhere,” observed Gilbert Seldes. “It is an independent act, wholly self-contained, not nearly so appropriate in any other framework, except possibly a one-ring circus.” The vaudeville act stood alone, out of context, with no other part of the show to carry it. It did not need diversity or depth, but it had to have strong initial impact and great short-run appeal. Trained seals would not have made a satisfying evening’s entertainment, but they made a fine, short vaudeville act. For half an hour Houdini absolutely captivated his audiences; Eva Tanguay may have lacked the diversity to hold her audiences for a whole show, but few could match the appeal of twenty minutes of her frenzy. Many vaudevillians easily made the transition to other forms of show business, but some of vaudeville’s most popular performers, some of its superstars, seemed able to reach their full potential as performers only in vaudeville.

Perhaps the most sensational of the unique vaudeville stars was Eva Tanguay, often called “the female Jolson.” “The history of Eva Tanguay,” as one reviewer observed, “is practically a capsule history of vaudeville.” Born in 1878, Tanguay grew up in the years when vaudeville matured into the most popular form of show business. She began performing as a child, and then, like most other entertainers, she spent years playing in small-time shows. Even early in her career when she was still an unknown, she had that indefinable, special quality that emanates from great entertainers. When she earned only $30 a week (she later earned $3500 a week) and played only a supporting role in a second-rate musical, she caught a critic’s eye as someone “sure to
make a name for herself,” someone with truly unusual but mystifying appeal. “Miss Tanguay’s voice contains no more music than a buzz saw,” the Buffalo, New York, reviewer observed, “she has no more repose than a mad dog fleeing before a mob of small boys, and she still has the rudiments of acting to learn.” But audiences loved her. “Miss Tanguay has little to recommend her,” the critic prophetically concluded, “and yet she has the very things that go to make theatrical stars.” But like other performers who were able to hold the public’s affection for a long time, who were not just “shooting stars,” Tanguay had to spend years learning how to entertain in the best possible schools—the nation’s theaters—and with the best possible critics—the public. In the late 1890s, she toured in a number of undistinguished musical and vaudeville shows. As late as 1898, she was still unknown enough so that one burlesque theater spelled her name “Tanqueray.” But her reputation grew as she improved her performance techniques. Soon, no one misspelled her name.

When at the turn of the century Oscar Hammerstein booked her into his Victoria Theatre in New York, she knew she faced a make-or-break point in her career. She confided to a friend that she was so frightened by her important New York opening that she felt like canceling the booking and remaining on the road, fears her first appearance did nothing to dispel. Her opening matinee performance drew little audience applause as the nervous Tanguay could not fully cut loose with her usual uninhibited power. But that night was different. “She gave an exhibition of abandon I never have seen equaled,” a reviewer gasped. “Back and forth across the stage she pranced and hopped . . . displaying a physical strength and endurance which were abnormal.” The audience’s emotional outburst equalled Tanguay’s, and she was on her way.

Tanguay’s performance style did not change once she broke into the big time. Once she found something that worked, she stayed with it. In this sense, she was a vaudevillian through and through. Her style had three closely related elements: an emotional intensity that stunned audiences with its raw power, a devil-may-care attitude and uninhibited actions and gestures that mocked all the conventions of proper demeanor for a woman, and suggestive material that titillated audiences. Tanguay created an aura of untamed, liberated female sexuality. Facing an
ON WITH THE SHOW

Explosive Eva Tanguay created an image of total abandon, including bare feet and tousled hair. HTC.

audience, she shook her already tousled hair, kicked out her legs, threw back her head, laughed provocatively, and then exploded in songs and movements that fed her image of sexual freedom and abandon. "She is a tornado, a whirlwind, a bouncing bundle of perpetual motion," one writer recorded. "She screams, she shouts, she twists and turns, she is a mad woman, a whirling dervish of grotesquerie. She is unlike any other woman on the stage."

Grasping for ways to describe her performance, critics called her "The Little Cyclone on Legs," "The Queen of Perpetual Motion," a magnet, a dynamo, or "like a bunch of firecrackers in an overheated stove"—images of boundless energy and explosive power. But her appeal went beyond that. When women's rights advocates fought for women's political emancipation, Tanguay proclaimed their sexual freedom. She was no coy seductress, no "giddy girl" playing the old "lady-like" roles in more revealing clothing, as were so many early twentieth-century stage women, including the Ziegfeld Girls. Tanguay was a mature woman who scoffed at convention and openly proclaimed her lusty sexuality. At the end of each wild performance, she always sang her theme song to testify that "I Don't Care, I Don't Care, What They May Think of Me." Her liberated image appealed to women as well as men. "At the stage door wherever she appears," a surprised writer observed, "crowds of women swarm in order to catch a fleeting glimpse of her as she enters her carriage."

When the Salome dance—an updated version of the seductive biblical dance that cost John the Baptist his head—became a rage, Tanguay became the most famous Salome dancer. She threw her veils, like her inhibitions, to the winds, and she promoted herself with a great flair for public relations. She once called a press conference to show reporters her new Salome costume, an enticement that drew a full house. But Tanguay walked in fully clothed, smiled, looked down at her clenched fist, and slowly opened her hand to reveal a few beads and a small piece of gauze as she asked reporters what they thought of the costume. The "media event" yielded her the publicity she wanted as did each of her Salome dances. "What there was of her costume fitted splendidly," one reviewer observed, "but there wasn't much. A few beads sprinkled here and there and a splash of green gauze . . . didn't hamper her in the gyrations which followed." Another critic quipped that
THE VAUDEVILLE SHOW

her “costume can hardly be described at length.” But even after her writhing Salome dance, in which she “danced like one possessed,” her audiences would not let her leave the stage until she sang “I Don’t Care.”

Tanguay fully realized the value of publicity, especially notoriety, and she got it, using calculated stunts like holding her Salome costume in the palm of her hand, claiming that she had lost tens of thousands of dollars worth of jewelry which she somehow always “found,” soaring 5000 feet in the air on a balloon ride, hunting big game, springing into a den of tigers to pose for photographers, and announcing that she was writing a semi-autobiography entitled A Hundred Loves, in which “some people will recognize instances and situations.” To reporters, she insisted with mock righteousness that she was not at all “naughty.” “I never drink,” she teased, and “I never smoke.” She also got unplanned publicity from her frequent temperamental outbursts. She hollered at unresponsive audiences, threw a stagehand down a flight of stairs because he was in her way when she went to take a curtain call, walked out on shows when her billing was too small, andgrabbed a chorus girl by the hair and threw her up against a wall for making wisecracks about Tanguay’s love life. With her attention-getting antics and her crowd-pleasing performances, Tanguay was such a great draw that even the Keith-Albee circuit featured her, the managers making a rare exception to their restrictive censorship when Tanguay cut loose and audiences screamed their approval.

But even when she stood at the very pinnacle of American show business, Tanguay suffered deep personal doubts and anguish. She confided to a friend that she felt that her success was “just luck. People speak of my personality,” she observed, “I don’t know what that personality is. I don’t even know what they are talking about.” Like many other performers who carried on highly emotional love affairs with their audiences—like Al Jolson, Bert Williams, Judy Garland, and Janis Joplin—Eva Tanguay was plagued by insecurity and the insatiable need for love, affection, and acceptance. Finally she was left with nothing. Tanguay lost her fortune in the stockmarket crash of 1929. By that time, she was fifty years old, past the age when she could excite audiences with her raw, vital sexuality, and past the golden age of vaudeville.

Tanguay was certainly not the only woman to star in vaudeville. But many other female headliners, including Lillian Russell, Elsie Janis, Gertrude Hoffman, Nora Bayes, Marilyn Miller, and Irene Franklin, tended to be rather conventional female singers or dancers, carrying on the traditional, fragile, lady-like images. Yet, Sophie Tucker belted out her earthy songs; Mae West camped and vamped her way through her numbers; and Fanny Brice clownedy her way into audiences’ favor. There were all sorts of women in vaudeville, as there were all sorts of acts of every kind. Innumerable song-and-dance teams crooned, soft-shoed, and pattered their ways through their parts of the bills with catchy popular songs and light jokes. Comic farces, many dating back to minstrel shows, convulsed audiences with laughter. These and other music and comedy features were show-business staples, rather than uniquely vaudeville phenomena. But two show-business specialties—trained animals and magic acts—enjoyed far greater popularity during vaudeville’s golden age than at any other time, an unusual popularity that demands explanation. Both were particularly well suited to vaudeville’s structure and format, but so were other “dumb acts” like acrobats and trapeze artists which
Tanguay was one of the most imitated stars, a fact she turned into a hit song. HTC.
never achieved the vaudeville prominence that animal acts, magicians, and escape artists attained. They had something that was right for the time as well as for the vaudeville show.

Animal acts were, of course, nothing new, and neither was their popularity, as the long history of menageries and circuses clearly demonstrated. But there was something new, something different, about the vaudeville animal act. Circuses featured exhibitions of animals as exotic, natural curiosities and of the ritual of the courageous lion-tamer heroically subduing nature's most ferocious, savage beasts. But vaudeville presented far different rituals. Its animals, for the most part, were small and friendly—dogs, birds, seals, and monkeys—and they played at being human. They skated, rode bicycles, talked, danced, ate with forks, lit and smoked cigarettes, drank beer, and staggered like drunks. Vaudeville's primarily urban audiences had no need to see the repeated re-enactment of the ritual of man dominating nature. They were far from the frontier in every way. Instead, they seemed to want to see man as a model of what all living things aspired to be—not man as king of the beasts. They wanted to see animals raised to the level of man, not man reduced to the level of animals. They also wanted light, frivolous entertainment, images of happiness and
fun—not of fear and danger. The twentieth-century threats to people and civilization came not from animals and nature, but from machines and science. Taming nature no longer reassured common people that they could control their lives. For modern city dwellers, animals were playthings—not challenges. The challenges came from the twentieth-century sorcery—science and technology.

Magicians of all sorts proved greater drawing cards in the golden age of vaudeville than at any other time in American history. There were, of course, many reasons magicians were so popular. Their acts had an inherent fascination. People knew that they were being fooled, but they could not see how it was being done. But that attraction in magic is universal. The unusual early-twentieth-century popularity of magicians in vaudeville had more to it than that. Making live animals appear and disappear, reading people’s minds, suspending bodies in the air, hypnotizing customers, and sawing people in half, magicians seemed to defy nature laws, just as science seemed to do in the age of horseless carriages, telephones, radios, and flying machines. Both magicians and scientists mystified the public with their “tricks,” and both informed the public that there were reasonable explanations for everything they did. Scientists would reveal their secrets, but they did it in terms few laymen could understand, highly technical terms that left many people puzzled, bewildered, and intimidated. Magicians would not reveal their secrets, but they in effect made their magic, and by connection the new magic of science, less threatening. At the end of their tricks, magicians showed the audience that everything was all right, that no harm had been done. The hypnotized regained control of their minds; the floating bodies got their feet back on the ground and walked away; and the two halves of the woman were rejoined as beautifully as ever. Stage magic reassured the public that people could control the mysterious powers over mind and matter and could use them for harmless fun.

The most famous of the vaudeville magicians (using the word in the broad sense), Harry Houdini, underscored these points about magic acts providing a comforting new ritual for the scientific-technological age that tended to dwarf and threatened to engulf average citizens. Originally named Erich Weiss, Houdini took his name from Robert Houdin, one of the European magicians who stopped claiming special spiritual powers for his profession. Harry Houdini not only told his audiences that he had no special powers, but he also exposed spiritualists and mediums that he considered frauds and charlatans. “There is nothing mysterious about me or my work,” he typically lectured a New York audience during a 1906 performance. “I’m a New Yorker, was born in Harlem, where I still live. I began my stage career as a magician some fifteen years ago, and gradually worked into this branch of work [escape artistry]. I have made a study of locks for years, and I can usually tell at a glance at a lock just what mechanism it is. Of course I have a secret method of picking locks. That’s my business.” Houdini claimed only to be a knowledgeable businessman with his own professional method. His business was entertaining people by doing what seemed to be the impossible.

Houdini was an excellent performer with a great flair for the dramatic, so even as he argued for rational scientific explanations for everything he played up the theatrical aspects of his act. Houdini began as a dime-museum magician doing card tricks, and he remained a collector of magic stunts and books throughout his career, but he gained fame as an es-
cape artist. To make his escape acts credible, Houdini had to establish that he was really trapped; to succeed in show business, he had to attract attention.

Early in his career, Houdini, with the flair of a P. T. Barnum, brilliantly arranged a stunt that met both of these requirements. He had himself locked into a New York prison cell. He even stripped himself naked so jailers could search him thoroughly before “throwing away the key.” Almost as soon as the door clanked shut behind him, he triumphantly emerged. Such dramatic escapes earned Houdini the credibility and recognition he needed to make himself a top drawing card. Over the years, he had himself handcuffed and manacled by members of police departments; he was tied, bound, and locked up by experts of all sorts, including being straitjacketed by attendants from mental asylums. These stunts caught the public’s imagination, and crowds flocked to see Houdini’s miraculous escapes. Whenever interest in his act waned, he carried off a new publicity stunt, like being bound, locked up, nailed into a coffin, and thrown into the East River. In 1912 he immersed himself in a milk can filled with water. The can and the case it was in were then padlocked, and Houdini had to escape or drown. Fighting to breathe, Houdini was out of the can and the case in about a minute. Part of Houdini’s appeal was that he risked death in some of these famous stunts. But there was much more to his appeal than defying death. For his dangerous tricks, he always had assistants standing by to rescue him in case he was not out in time, and he made no secret of this.

Houdini’s basic appeal was that he got out of the most restricted, most confining human predicaments. Like Pearl White, who in *The Perils of Pauline* escaped from buzz saws, railroad trains, and other mechanical “demons,” Houdini demonstrated that the individual could master the gadgets that had been designed to imprison him—the locks, handcuffs, manacles, strait-jackets, and jail cells. Nothing could restrain or intimidate Houdini. And he continually reminded his audiences that he had no special talents or “gifts.” He preached that people had to be informed to control technology, but the image he conveyed was one of the untamable, indomitable individual. As the mythic frontiersmen conquered the frontier and the lion-tamer controlled beasts, the magicians and escape artists manipulated mysterious forces and restrictive gadgets in the age of intimidating science and menacing technology.

Vaudeville’s greatest attraction was an old, not a new ritual—laughter. The average
show was about half-comedy, a far larger proportion of the bill than was devoted to any other type of entertainment. Comedy dominated vaudeville because its audiences needed to laugh in an age of great tension. But American comedy flowered in vaudeville because the format and structure of the show proved virtually a perfect school for comedians, especially comedians who relied on jokes, slapstick, or easily recognized caricatures. On the other hand comic actors and many other entertainers, who needed time to develop their characterizations or who needed the continuity, supporting cast, or the repeated appearances of full-length productions, made their reputations and perfected their talents in other forms of show business and then appeared in vaudeville doing “bits” of their nor-
mal material. Vaudeville's short time slots and single appearance gave comics enough time to be effective but not enough time to go stale, teaching them to concentrate their best material in one short act that had perfect timing and delivery. With the audience's undivided attention focused on them, which did not happen in most plays or musicals, comedians could capitalize fully on the infectious quality of laughter, quickly getting audiences laughing, keeping them laughing, and leaving them laughing. Vaudeville, in short, forced comics to perfect the skills that brought them success in other entertainment forms. It is no surprise that many of America's most beloved comedians emerged out of vaudeville, stars like W. C. Fields, Will Rogers, Fred Allen, Milton Berle, Jack Benny, and George Burns and Gracie Allen.

Burlesque shows also proved excellent training grounds for comedians. But when burlesque comedians got a chance to move up to vaudeville, most of them seized it. Burlesque lacked vaudeville's respectability and status. But even more importantly, burlesque, with its focus on sexuality, limited the range of comedians' repertoires as well as the attention they got from the audiences. Many great comedians began their careers in burlesque, including Bud Abbott and Lou Costello, Fanny Brice, Red Buttons, Phil Silvers, and Bert Lahr. But most of them matured in vaudeville or other entertainment forms. Bert Lahr, for example, learned many of his physical, mugging comic techniques during the five years from 1916 to 1921 that he spent on the burlesque circuits competing with sexy women for attention and with experienced comedians for laughs. But once established, he moved on to vaudeville, musical comedies, and film.

Vaudeville audiences wanted to have fun and to laugh, so the flexible show provided them with comedy of every conceivable sort, from slapstick to animal acts, from song-and-dance teams to jugglers, from monologues to skits. Many of the comedy trends that began in minstrel shows continued and matured in vaudeville. In 1920 as in 1850, Americans loved word play. One comedian claimed to be an oculist because he took eyes out of potatoes. Another said he bought two fish, but when he unwrapped the package he found three—two fish and one smelt. A deaf character rejoiced in being arrested because he was going to get his hearing. A crook told a judge he was a blacksmith because he forged names. Heat traveled faster than cold because people could catch cold. Men were like dough because women needed them. A tennis player
was arrested for “raising a racket” but looked forward to a private invitation to the court.

Audiences also continued to laugh at the funny interplay between knowledgeable straight men and ignorant comedians, just as they had at jibing between minstrel interlocutors and endmen. When a comedian claiming to know geography said that the world was oblong in shape, the straight man told him that the world was the same shape as his father’s cufflinks. “They’re square,” the comic beamed with a simpleton’s delight. His tutor patiently explained that he meant the ones he wore on Sunday, not on the weekdays. “Oh,” the comic shouted, “The Sunday ones, they’re round.” All right then, the straight man asked expectantly, what is the shape of the world? “Square on weekdays and round on Sundays.”

The urban influence that had begun in minstrel shows increased in vaudeville, as stage humor, like the vaudeville show itself, took on the pace and tone of the city. Some comedians still used long-winded, slowly developing, richly textured anecdotes and stump speeches, but vaudeville comedy generally tended more toward short, punchy jokes. When, for example, a boss chastised his employee for going to a baseball game when he said he wanted to go to his mother-in-law’s funeral, the worker did not respond with a long, involved excuse. He simply shot back: “I did want to, but she isn’t dead yet.”

Another reflection of the growing urban influence on vaudeville comedy was the broadening of the range and the importance of ethnic characters. Minstrels had added Irish and Germans to their cast of caricatures, but minstrelsy was so wedded to blackface that it could not carry the change to its logical conclusion when immigrants swarmed into America in unprecedented numbers. By the early twentieth century, vaudeville reflected the ethnic diversity of the nation, which included minstrelsy’s black caricatures but featured the new immigrant groups. To differentiate their Irish, German, Italian, and Jewish characters (blackface clearly set off the Negro characters), comics emphasized each group’s unusual traits and exaggerated their dialects, which made the immigrants seem more alien, more “foreign” than they actually were. Like many people in the audiences, vaudeville’s ethnic characters had to cope with the complexities of urban life, with the bewildering variety of different peoples, and with trying to communicate effectively. “Waita one minooot,” a typical Italian character called out to his companion, “I no can walka fast. My uncle isa sick.” His friend could not understand why a sick uncle would slow anyone down, until the frustrated character finally screamed “my uncle! my uncle!” and pointed to his ankle. The same confused Italian character thought that the mayor was a horse (a mare), that a diploma was the plumber, and that a pallbearer was a polar bear. Another prominent facet of this ethnic humor, as of urban life, was intergroup conflict. When Mike, a typical Irish character, learned that a frightful explosion had killed forty “Eyetileians” and one Irishman, Mike simply said: “the poor man.”

Vaudeville’s simplified, ethnic stage characters were at their best only partially accurate distortions of reality. But they made immigrants seem understandable to the general public and to each other. They also gave people—immigrants and non-immigrants—an ego-boasting chance to feel superior to the

Bert Lahr, one of many great comedians who apprenticed in burlesque. NYLC.
"dummies" they laughed at on stage. But vaudeville’s ethnic humor was often shaped and performed by members of the group portrayed, as Edward Harrigan had crafted his Irish characters from his own experience. This meant that despite the exaggerated dialects, the twisted language, the strange costumes, and the odd behavior, vaudeville’s ethnic humor often contained strong doses of humanity that reminded audiences that immigrants were people. Vaudeville’s dialect comedy also in effect taught immigrants and especially children of immigrants, who were caught between strange Old World customs and strange New World customs, about how to get along in America.

The masters of the two-man dialect-comedy act, Joe Weber and Lew Fields, like a great many other twentieth-century show business greats, emerged out of the Jewish ghetto in the Lower East Side of New York. As boyhood friends, Weber and Fields, like many other children, escaped from their dismal lives into the glamorous world of show business, first as customers and then as performers. The two boys visited the Bowery Theatre whenever they could, while also trying to help out their impoverished families by earning money selling cakes, soda water, and cigarettes. But the boys dreamed of show-business careers. At age nine, they got a chance to entertain at an Elks Club social, and they flopped. Soon after that, the persistent boys got a booking in a cheap dime-museum variety show, the type of museum that B. F. Keith later ran in Boston. "We were blackface comedians then," Weber recalled of their start in the 1870s, the heyday of the minstrel show when most comedians did wear blackface. Like many other comedians, they were "determined all the time that we would both become great tragedians. Whenever we could save a few pennies we went to see [Edwin] Booth," Weber reminisced, "and the other great actors of those days." But they quickly realized that they had to make their livings as comedians—and as ethnic comedians. If they were to remain in show business, they had to entertain and to portray common people.

“We used to hang around a saloon in our neighborhood, not to drink,” Weber explained, “but to hear the talk of the Germans who frequented it and in that way we got a good many new lines.” From their observations, they, like Edward Harrigan, George M. Cohan, and Bert Williams, gathered their material, and, like so many other popular entertainers, they hammered it into solid routines by shaping it to please their audiences. “We never wrote out our parts,” Fields recalled; “we used to work the acts up as we went along. Lines that got a laugh we kept, others we dropped.” While still in their teens in the early 1880s they toured as typical small-timers, continually collecting material and honing their ethnic-comedy act. By 1895, they were successful enough to open their own Music Hall, where for nine years they combined burlesques of stage hits with variety acts and their own distinctive comedy, which strongly influenced vaudeville’s developing ethnic comedy. Out of one of their visits to a saloon grew perhaps their greatest routine. "Suddenly we heard a fight going on at one of the pool tables in the rear of the room... Cues and balls began flying, so did a stream of broken English," Fields recollected. "Then and there ‘Web’ and I decided we had a scheme for a new act.”

Weber and Fields’ Pool Room Sketch, which became a vaudeville classic, typified the two-man ethnic-comedy act at its best. To begin with, the pair looked funny. The tall, skinny Fields sharply contrasted to the short,
portly Weber, with his bulging, padded belly. Fields played Meyer, an aggressive hustler who bullied the mild, trusting Weber, Mike. And they sounded funny. Both men used their own German-Jewish-English dialect. “I don’t know dis pool business,” Mike begins. “Vat-ever I don’t know, I teach you,” Meyer assures him. That exchange opens the long hilarious series of verbal misunderstandings, some unintentional, some part of Meyer’s plan to victimize Mike. Since Mike is new at the game, Meyer generously announces that he will give Mike “otts,” which means Meyer puts up five dollars to Mike’s ten and puts the wagers up on a high shelf that only he can reach, announcing “der one dot gets de money vins the game.” Mike has a little trouble understanding that he has to “hust dem [the balls] before I break dem,” but the game gets going anyway, Meyer making up the rules as he needs them. When Meyer “scratches” by driving the cue ball into a corner pocket, for example, he triumphantly claims four balls credit because “only best players can dodge all der other balls und get in der hole.” When Meyer insists that Mike name the ball he is shooting at, even though Meyer calls out only “der round one” or “der colored one,” Mike names his target “Rudolph.” When Mike fires the cue ball into a side pocket, he whoops excitedly about the four balls that feat entitles him to. But the quick-thinking Meyer immediately explains that while hitting the cue ball into a corner pocket is a “scratch,” hitting it into a side
Lew Fields and Joe Weber in one of their classic comedy bits.

...communicating in English, his seeking friends and companions in social centers like pool halls, and his problems dealing with America’s highly competitive, often exploitive games. But it also showed the humanity of characters like Mike and Meyer. Despite the combative relationship between them, Mike would periodically blurt out: “I luff you, Meyer,” crudely expressing the affection that underlay their continual sparring, the affection that many American “hard-guys” found so difficult to express. For fifty years, Weber and Fields worked their comedy magic, humanizing the old caricatures as they delighted audiences.

Vaudeville taught its lesson about immigrants with laughter, but it taught the lessons nonetheless. For a great many Americans, vaudeville was a major, if not the only, source of information about ethnic groups. Few if any patrons or performers consciously realized that vaudeville played such an important role in shaping public images of ethnic minorities, of course. But that is precisely why humor could work in this way. No one had to take it seriously, not even acknowledge that it said anything important. On the surface, audiences were just having fun, and comedians were just making careers for themselves by making people laugh. But it was no accident that the subjects of comedy changed as public issues and problems changed, no accident that at the height of immigration, the decades between 1890 and 1920, ethnic comedians enjoyed their greatest popularity.

By the time vaudeville died, a death that can be symbolically dated in 1932 when movies took over the Palace Theatre, America had already sharply restricted immigration and had at least superficially “Americanized” immigrants. There was no longer a great need for caricatures of European immigrants in American humor. The new comedians who...
served only their apprenticeships in vaudeville—in contrast to performers who spent most of their careers there—did little ethnic humor, though many of them were members of minority groups. It was these second-generation vaudeville comedians, people like Burns and Allen, W. C. Fields, Will Rogers, Jack Benny, Milton Berle, Fred Allen, and the Marx Brothers, who successfully made the transition to the new mass media. Some, like Chico Marx, with his “Italian” dialect, continued the old immigrant caricatures, but they were exceptions. These new comics carried vaudeville’s techniques, though not its ethnic stereotypes, to the center of America’s mass culture. Stereotypes of Negroes persisted, reaching incredible popularity in radio’s and television’s Amos ‘n Andy. But such material had been a central feature of American popular culture since its inception.

The Golden Age of Vaudeville and The Golden Age of Comedy coincided. But they were certainly not synonymous. The Golden Age of Comedy referred to motion picture, not stage, comedy, indicating that the new mass medium was capturing the public’s fancy, which should have served as serious warning to producers of live show business. But vaudeville managers consistently underestimated the threat of motion pictures, a threat that by the 1930s had severely crippled live entertainment, especially vaudeville, which relied on the common people’s patronage. Some vaudeville bookers, in fact, even used early biograph films as chasers to empty out their theaters. As movies got better, vaudeville simply incorporated them as it did other appealing novelties. In 1917, four vaudeville theaters, for example, featured “Mr. Thomas A. Edison’s latest invention . . . the Kinetophone, which promises to be familiarly known throughout the country in a short time as the ‘talkies.’” A typical reviewer did not see a great future for the new feature, though he admitted that “as a novelty the talkies were a success to judge by the enthusiasm of the various audiences.” In the short run, the critic was right. The Kinetophone, which tried to synchronize motion pictures with phonograph records, was so ineffective that it got more unplanned laughs than planned ones.

Until the late 1920s, the new mass media—movies and radio—though growing in popularity, had not seriously challenged show business. Movies brought the sight of great stars; radio brought their sounds to every corner of the nation. Only show business brought both. But then, in 1927, Al Jolson, “Mr. Show Business,” “The World’s Greatest Entertainer,” starred in a show that changed the course of popular entertainment. In The Jazz Singer, Jolson did nothing that he had not been doing for years. But he did it in a motion picture. When Jolson looked out at the nation’s movie audiences with a twinkle in his eyes and a smile on his face and delivered his famous line: “You ain’t heard nuthin’ yet,” his voice boomed from the screen, testifying to the final arrival of talking motion pictures and sounding the death knell of vaudeville and other live show business as the most popular entertainment forms in the country.