“He Could Tell A Joke; He Could Dance; He Could Grin And Be Goofy”.
Lonnie Donegan, Teenage Idol And Comedy Singer

Mats Greiff

On 13 July 1954, Chris Barber’s Jazz Band recorded in Decca’s studio in northwestern London. During a break in the session, band member Tony (later Lonnie) Donegan took the microphone and performed the Leadbelly song Rock Island Line in his own particular style with a much simpler accompaniment than the ordinary Jazz band.¹ In that way Donegan followed a live tradition the band had created a few years earlier. Between the jazz sets, it performed a few songs in, what members regarded as a more easyminded music style.² The following year Rock Island Line was released as a single, which in January 1956 reached the English chart. The same spring it also reached the charts in America.

This recording is often seen as a starting point for the British skiffle movement or ”the Skiffle Craze”, which reached its height between 1956 and 1959. It was a youth movement crossing class barriers, and with a particular music style as core.³ The development went rapidly. Already in 1956 more than 600 skiffle bands were established in Greater London. It is estimated that in 1957 about 50.000 bands had been established all over Great Britain with about 300.000 teenagers more or less involved.⁴

However, Lonnie Donegan was not originally labelled as a teenage-idol. On the cover of his first solo album from 1956, Lonnie Donegan Showcase, he was pointed out as a “variety star”.

“For the successful Variety star cannot rely on that one sure-fire number, on the wizardry of the recording engineer or on the artificial boost achieved by the plugger. He must have A Good Act – an act sufficiently good to impress critics and public on Monday, so that there will be more people coming to pay out their money to see him on Tuesday. And on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday. Donegan did more than that. His dynamic rhythmic singing, backed by the compelling beat of his Skiffle Group, broke records at the Variety theatres and drew in more customers than they had enjoyed for months...

   And he did this because he brought to his act a zest, a vitality and a capacity for sheer theatrical work that is normally associated only with the best transatlantic performers.”⁵

² Patrick Humphries 2012, s 75
⁴ Patrick Humphries 2012, s 167ff; Chas McDevitt, Skiffle. The Definitive Inside Story, London 2012, s 8.
⁵ Album sleeve design by Ian Bradbery, Pye records NPT 19012
How then, what characterized British music hall in the 1950s? How was it possible for a jazz-musician, who had turned into singing American folk songs in a particular way, to be recognized as a successful music hall performer in the particular British working-class culture?

**Music hall in the 1950s**

In describing a typical music hall show of the 1950s I will start with a quotation from *The Times*, in which this core element of working-class culture is described by a reviewer writing on a show at the *London Palladium* in 1951:

> "When an act such of the Five Varias, venturesome young ladies who do astonishing things on trapezes, opens the entertainment, we know we are in for an evening out of the ordinary. Bears (Miss Edith Crocker) that ride bicycles seven feet high, a gentleman (Mr. Rex Ramer) who sings duets with himself, another gentleman (one of Los Ona) who juggles with knives and stands on his head at the top of a long ladder which somebody else is balancing on the soles of his feet, this is once more the true stuff of music-hall, which we have been hankering after for a long time. The comic side of the programme is as well furnished as the marvelous side. Mr Jimmy James has polished his sketch of the tipsy wayfarer until its essentially British humour seems at least as dazzling as anything we import; Mr. Hoagy Carmichael, the American composer and singer of popular songs, has a dry humour and an amusing affection of nonchalance..."  

During the 1950s the importance of the comedians and the comedy singers were emphasized over and over again in reviews and articles on music hall. Particularly it was pointed out that comedy singing was one of the original substances of the music hall scene and essential if the amusement should survive in the new televisionized era. Another essential feature of music hall amusement was that working-class people could recognize themselves in songs and jokes. Already in the nineteenth century singers and comedians like Marie Lloyd and Dan Leno sang songs on working class life with a strong sense of humour. Since both of them had working-class background it was allowed for them to do so.

---

6 *The Times* 27. March 1951  
During the 1950s, British music hall partly changed its character. Though, much of the traditional content remained, new attractions went on to the stage. Many of those new acts were not recognized as suitable to the tradition. Conservative reviewers complained about jazz and other kind of “new” music that came. Under the headline “No time for comedy in modern jazz” it was stated that modern jazz lacked sense of humour. Jazz, at this time, was regarded as music often seriously listened to by young people with leftish attitudes. Here was no space for comics.

“With the decline of the English music-hall into a glorified listening-booth in which popular recording ‘artists’ of the day offer us anything but-free samples of their wares, it is hardly surprising that the old-age tradition of the comic song should have declined and virtually disappeared with it. Since modern popular songs are largely a derivate of jazz the absence of the comic element is not altogether surprising, for a sense of humour – let alone a sense of comedy – is a quality which has grown increasingly rare in jazz...”

Lonnie Donegan; a comedy singer in the old fashion

However, as mentioned in the beginning of this paper, Lonnie Donegan became popular within music hall entertainment though he had his background in Ken Colyer’s and Chris Barber’s jazz bands. Even if Donegan and the whole skiffle movement performed American folk-, blues- and country-songs they did it in their own style and were regarded as typical British. This also means that many of them had their roots within an English working-class culture, in which music hall was an essential part. They had listened to music hall performances on radio or watched it on television, which meant that they had knowledge on how to make successful performances at the music hall stage.

When Lonnie Donegan got his breakthrough with *Rock Island Line*, and after that left Chris Barber’s Jazz Band, he knew perfectly well how to adopt himself to the music hall stage and the tradition of comedy singers.

Immediately after he had left Barber’s band and ended his first tour in the United States in springtime 1956, Donegan signed a contract with Moss Empires in order to perform at music halls. A review of the performance at *Prince of Wales Theatre* in December 1956 describes:

---


9 *The Times* 5. January 1957


11 Mike Dewe 1998, s 81.
“Miss Anne Shelton and Mr. Lonnie Donegan with his Skiffle Group lead the attack at the Prince of Wales Theatre this week, presenting styles that could hardly be more contrasting. Mr. Donegan shows a wilder punch. He bits with all he has got and this, in the case of such a highly mechanized band, is quite a lot. To ‘skiffle’, it seems, is to present American folklore songs in terms of modern jazz, and the vigour and adroitness of the performance are undeniable, with now and then a half-wild and plaintive echo from the backwoods to remind us of the music’s origin.”

But he also adds contributions from the comedy singer tradition. When he recorded Does Your Chewing Gum Lose It’s Flavour (On The Bedpost Over Night), at a live performance at The New Theatre in Oxford in December 1958 you can hear that the music stops and he makes a pun in the middle of the song. But also the song lyrics are humorous and amuse the audience. A lot of laughter is obvious. Donegan also uses his voice to make the song even funnier than it’s lyrics. In traditional variety style, he plays with his voice and some lines are expressed in a whisper. Other live recordings were made at London Palladium in 1957, with the legendary Joe Meek as producer. At this occasion two songs, Putting On the Style and Gamblin’ Man, was recorded. On the record it is obvious that the songs are filled with humour. It is also visible when he performs the first one in a television show.

Among other comedy songs is My Old Man’s A Dustman, with it’s humorous lyrics. In a television live show Donegan performs just in the style as music hall comedy singers and with typical working-class related lyrics.

Here is the lyrics from the original recording. However, in accordance with music hall tradition, Donegan used to change them and express actual issues like in this TV-show, where he relates to Yuri Gagarin’s first trip out in space.

Now here’s a little story
To tell it is a must
About an unsung hero
That moves away your dust
Some people make a fortune
Other’s earn a mint
My old man don’t earn much

---

12 The Times 4 December 1956.
13 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x6bFTVi0hHs
14 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TW9KUEMaJRO
15 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODEShfdxoR0
In fact....he's flippin'.....skint

Oh, my old man's a dustman He
wears a dustman's hat
He wears cor blimey trousers
And he lives in a council flat
He looks a proper narner
In his great big hob nailed boots
He's got such a job to pull em up
That he calls them daisy roots

Some folks give tips at Christmas
And some of them forget
So when he picks their bins up
He spills some on the steps
Now one old man got nasty
And to the council wrote
Next time my old man went 'round there
He punched him up the throat

Oh, my old man's a dustman He
wears a dustman's hat
He wears cor blimey trousers
And he lives in a council flat

I say, I say Duncan
I 'er...I found a police dog in my dustbin
(How do you know he's a police dog)
He had a policeman with him

Though my old man's a dustman
He's got a heart of gold
He got married recently
Though he's 86 years old We said
'Ear! Hang on Dad you're getting
past your prime' He said 'Well when
you get to my age'
'It helps to pass the time'

Oh, my old man's a dustman He
wears a dustman's hat
He wears cor blimey trousers
And he lives in a council flat

I say, I say, I say
My dustbins full of lillies
(Well throw ’em away then)  
I can’t Lilly’s wearing them

Now one day while in a hurry  
He missed a lady’s bin  
He hadn’t gone but a few yards  
When she chased after him  
’What game do you think you’re playing’  
She cried right from the heart  
’You’ve missed me...am I too late’  
’No... jump up on the cart’

Oh, my old man’s a dustman  
He wears a dustman’s hat  
He wears cor blimey trousers  
And he lives in a council flat

I say, I say, I say (What you again)  
My dustbin’s absolutely full with toadstools  
(How do you know it’s full)  
’Cos there’s not much room inside

He found a tiger’s head one day  
Nailed to a piece of wood  
The tiger looked quite miserable  
But I suppose it should  
Just then from out a window  
A voice began to wail  
He said (Oi! Where’s me tiger head)  
Four foot from it’s tail

Oh, my old man’s a dustman He  
wears a dustman’s hat  
He wears cor blimey trousers  
And he lives in a council flat  
Next time you see a dustman  
Looking all pale and sad  
Don’t kick him in the dustbin  
It might be my old dad

Jokes on serious matters, as the hard working-class life, was common in music hall already in the late nineteenth century and Lonnie Donegan picked up this hereditary cultural element when he performed at stage. In that way he made jokes and laughter to a serious matter. With the poor and old dustman’s actions towards middle-class people as an example it is possible to relate Donegan’s performance to medieval carnivalesque
tradition, described by Michail Bachtin, where it was allowed to turn the world upside down and do away with hierarchies, privileges and norms.  

Conclusion

This paper could be concluded by a quotation from Chris Barber’s autobiography where he writes that Donegan’s success with Rock Island Line had

"one unintended consequense, which was that it created enormous demand for Lonnie. We shared the same agent, Lyn Dutton, and he discovered very rapidly that people wanted to start booking Lonnie on his own for variety shows. Because Lonnie had been very involved in the band and in playing New Orleans jazz, I perhaps didn’t realize at the time just how caught up in the world of vaudeville he was. From what he told me later, out of everything he did in his career, the recordings he made with Max Miller were the ones he was most proud of. Lonnie was very good at doing these comic set-piece gags on stage.”

Since many of the stars of the 1960s’ pop and rock stage have expressed the great influence that Donegan had, it is obvious that we have to consider the music hall tradition when we discuss the influences on Beatles, Rolling Stones, Kinks and so on.

16 Michail Bachtin, Rabelais och skrattets historia, Gråbo 2007, s 21ff.
17 Chris Barber 2014, s 46.