

# Star Course

## Nineteenth-Century Lecture Tours and the Consolidation of Modern Celebrity

Peter Cherches



*Sense Publishers*

## **Star Course**

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Volume 6

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SENSE PUBLISHERS  
ROTTERDAM/BOSTON/TAIPEI

A C.I.P. record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: 978-94-6351-201-5 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-94-6351-202-2 (hardback)

ISBN: 978-94-6351-203-9 (e-book)

Published by: Sense Publishers,  
P.O. Box 21858,  
3001 AW Rotterdam,  
The Netherlands  
<https://www.sensepublishers.com/>

All chapters in this book have undergone peer review.

*Printed on acid-free paper*

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*To the memory of Brooks McNamara,  
a pioneer in the study of American popular entertainment*



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book was literally 25 years in the making. I started researching nineteenth-century lectures in 1993, shortly after I had begun graduate work in the American Studies Program at New York University. I had gone to the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts, to work on an unrelated topic when I decided to check out a hunch. I knew of Mark Twain's lecture tours, and Oscar Wilde's famous American tour of 1882, and I suspected these well-known examples were just the tip of a cultural iceberg. In the Society's broadsides collection I discovered a wealth of material that provided a lens onto the widespread impact of what had become known as the "popular lecture system"—posters and handbills that employed the kind of ballyhoo associated with showmen like P.T. Barnum, as well as the invaluable publications of James Redpath's Boston Lyceum Bureau, which told the story of a lecture system that was no longer the staid lyceum of Ralph Waldo Emerson's time but rather a form of popular entertainment that brought those famous for a wide variety of pursuits before an adoring public, with the aid of emerging management and promotion techniques. I suspected the changes in the American lecture platform were emblematic of wider changes in the public's relationship with the famous. I decided this would be an ideal topic for my doctoral dissertation, combining my interest in media and communication theory with American cultural history. This was the beginning of a journey that would take me to numerous libraries and archives, so I'd like to begin by thanking the many archivists and librarians I worked with, still the *sine qua non* of any historical research project.

At NYU I was fortunate to study in an interdisciplinary program that brought me in contact with many top scholars in diverse fields. My dissertation committee brought a range of perspectives to this work and unwaveringly supported my decision to write lucid prose unburdened by needless jargon and the fleeting academic hobby horses of the time. The perceptive media critic Jay Rosen provided invaluable direction for the theoretical framework of this study, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett kept me cognizant of wider cultural contexts, and the late Brooks McNamara, to whom this book is dedicated, was a nonpareil guide to the world of nineteenth-century American popular entertainment.

Finally, I'd like to thank series editors Jeremy Hunsinger and Jason Nolan for their enthusiasm for this project and their encouragement in finally bringing this book to light.



## INTRODUCTION

The era of electronic mass media has brought Americans unprecedented access to the celebrity personality. Since the introduction of the TV talk show in the 1950s we have been privy to glimpses of celebrities' true selves—or simulacra thereof—on a daily basis. Actors, sports figures, authors, politicians, you name it, are presented for our consumption “just as they are”—or just as they'd have us think they are. We take a relationship with celebrities, even if it is one-sided, for granted.

There were, nonetheless, pre-electronic media that served this function too, none more so, I'd argue, than the subject of this book, the organized system of lecture tours that was a primary mainstream cultural institution of the Gilded Age. The American popular-lecture system afforded audiences the opportunity to see and hear the panoply of celebrities of the time, a range similar to that to be found on today's late-night TV programs. In the winter of 1873–1874, lecture-goers could witness talks and readings by such famous authors as Bret Harte, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Wilkie Collins. Humorists Josh Billings and Petroleum V. Nasby performed early versions of stand-up comedy. Several of the most famous thespians of the time gave dramatic readings in lecture series across the country. The renowned cartoonist Thomas Nast recounted his career while demonstrating the art of caricature. African explorers talked about faraway places, noted scientists explained recent discoveries, politicians addressed the political climate and celebrity preachers addressed the moral one. And, on top of everything else, a breakaway wife from the harem of Brigham Young decried the evils of polygamy. A major difference between then and now was that, in an age before the advent of electronic media, people had to leave the comfort of their homes in order to see celebrities, and they generally had to be content with seeing, on average, only about ten of those celebrities over the course of a year.

The American popular-lecture system of the second half of the nineteenth century was, in a way, a form of network broadcasting. Though we normally associate the term “broadcasting” with electronic media of the twentieth century, the rapidly developing transportation technologies of the nineteenth century made possible the distribution of live performance forms to a mass audience over a vast geographical area. By the 1850s, a popular speaker like the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher might deliver the same lecture to more than 50,000 people across the country each winter, in cities like Boston, New York, Baltimore and Chicago, as well as in numerous smaller cities and towns in between.

The network analogy can be taken further. Most towns and cities in the North and the Midwest had one or more annual lecture series, sponsored by community organizations or private entrepreneurs, that presented, on average, ten or twelve celebrity lecturers during a season that lasted roughly from November through April. Lectures in these series, or courses as they were generally called, were scheduled

## INTRODUCTION

in advance for the entire season and given at the same place and time on a weekly or biweekly basis. Though there was much independent lecture activity of varying levels of quality outside of these courses, the most successful and reputable lecturers tended to appear mainly in these established series. The regular lecture courses, by virtue of their track records as local cultural institutions, bestowed an imprimatur of worthiness upon their scheduled performers. Members of a community could choose to purchase a subscription for an entire course at a discount or pick and choose the events that interested them most. By the early 1870s, the programming for these local outlets was supplied by the handful of lecture bureaus that represented virtually all of the lecturers and entertainers who appeared in the hundreds of courses throughout the nation. The bureaus, at the dawn of modern advertising and management practice, quickly and effectively developed and refined techniques to market celebrities as cultural product.

Useful as the broadcast analogy is, it has its limitations. Most traditional theories of mass media have treated broadcasting as a mode of transmission. In the transmission (or transportation) model, media are seen, essentially, as little more than carriers of information. Though means of distribution are a central focus of this book, the ritual view of communication that media theorist James W. Carey has proposed can lead us to a more nuanced understanding of the cultural significance of the American popular-lecture system. The ritual model, which in American culture has been a minor counter-thread to the more commonly held transmission model, has its roots in religious thought and practice. “A ritual view of communication,” Carey writes, “is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs.” The archetype of a ritual communication form is “the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality.” Within this model, “the original or highest manifestation of communication ... [is not] the transmission of intelligent information but ... the construction of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a container for human action.”<sup>1</sup> Nineteenth-century lectures reflected and reinforced the cultural values of middle-class, Protestant America, values that were generally supported and reinforced by the dominant, *mainstream* media and cultural authorities of the time—newspapers as well as religious and civic leaders. Beginning in the late 1820s, lecture attendance was seen by audiences and promoted by the popular press as an important ritual of citizenship. Lecture audiences sought community as much as information. If the prevailing content of the lecture system changed over time, to the consternation of some cultural custodians, those changes represented significant transformations in American society in general.

The popular-lecture system that, in the years following the Civil War, presented such a diverse group of authors, actors, artists, explorers, preachers, politicians, humorists and renegade Mormons was an outgrowth of the much more austere American lyceum movement. The lyceums, the first of which were established in the 1820s, were primarily institutions of adult education that catered to a passion