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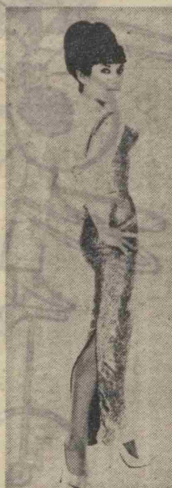
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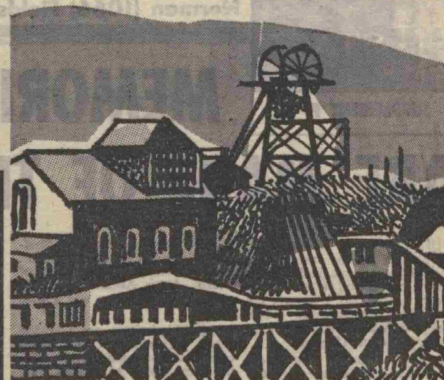
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THE WELSH
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MENT
EXPLOSION
by
PETER TATE



MAFIA IN WALES?

Not Yet, But Its A Possibility



Peter Tate

It should be simple enough to define an "explosion", even when the word is used as a metaphor for a sudden flurry of activity in a specific section of the community. But for some reason, the word amuses the people who make these living out of entertainment in South Wales. They greet it with a wry smile and a glance at the calendar.

Perhaps it is because they know that things just don't happen like that in South Wales. Most progress is two steps forward and one-and-a-half paces back.

They agree the entertainment business is in a healthier position locally than it has ever been.

But it is part of the contradiction that is the hallmark of South Wales that this "boom" has come only with attendant failures.

Attempts to organise the entertainment business have refused absolutely to last beyond the initial enthusiasm. As recently as two or three years ago, concert secretaries were being repeatedly flummoxed and frustrated by last-minute calls from artists saying that they were too ill/working night shift/otherwise unable to appear.

Today, at least a dozen agents can afford to make booking a full-time job (though they may, like Clarry Rogers, keep a butcher's shop besides), because the club secs. have turned over the task of securing artists and holding them to the "professionals".

Occasionally, a club tries to rebook an artist without consulting the agent. Then, more often than not, the artist contacts the agent with the information. Such practices are not so much a breach of good faith as a seizure of convenience and opportunity.

Then again, how long is it since I wrote in my "Gallery" of the formation of a South Wales Agents' Association?

It was close to Christmas. The association hold meetings religiously every fortnight. Last meeting but one, they decided to have an agents' dinner. Last meeting, nobody's told me about yet.

Founder member Pat Stewart has missed two meetings through illness, so did not feel qualified to make an assessment.

"But it is a little disappointing," she admitted. "Nobody seems to be very enthusiastic any more."

Yet the entertainment scene is hopeful. Agents individually — and in the area's two new amalgamations — are reporting that business has never been so sustainedly good.

There are MORE beat groups who can afford to turn professional, thanks to the business supplied by the Ted Crutten-Les Barritt consortium. There are MORE clubs, seeing BETTER artists on BIGGER fortnightly circuits, as a result of the operations of Mrs. Stewart working from Cardiff and Marlene Hones working from Beddlinog which, 12 months ago, was

barely a village, let alone an entertainment hub.

People are making money. New premises are opening — latest is the St. Mary's Club, in Newport, which has the Ebbw Bridge and the Casino and other Gwent niteries watching very closely.

Annis Abraham reports that his planned Showbiz Club is already under construction above his Cardiff Cleopatra Club—12 months ago, the place was still stocking vegetables for a merchant.

Last week the Cardiff City Council decided finally to allow the planning application of Hargin Entertainments for a restaurant and cabaret club on a site recently occupied by a rubber tyre warehouse—DESPITE the plea of one local councillor, W. Campbell Balfour, that the place would provide a "particularly sleazy form of entertainment not in keeping with the cultural buildings which surround it".

This is the REAL progress. It is only in the last two years that the authorities have shown any favour to such development. Regular readers of the "Gallery" will recall the hostility there used to be to the early ventures of—for instance—Annis Abraham, who gave the city its first night-club proper (though he modestly referred me to the old Mayfields) because nobody else could be persuaded the city was ready for a real, live NIGHT CLUB.

Today, the swing is the other way.

While Cardiff has yet to suffer as London, Birmingham and Manchester suffer with fire-traps in tenements and on blitzed sites, clubs ARE blossoming and not all are what they might be.

Discotheques are springing into being—here I do not limit myself to Cardiff. South Wales police forces have been as active as those elsewhere of late in chasing up drug distribution centres. It is only fair to say that they have discovered no indication of any organised trafficking or any clear connection with any particular club.

Nevertheless, the potential drug hazard exists and it would be naive to plead ignorance of this fact.

There is another hazard, too, which could prove more subtle. On the other hand, such an incident as the one I am about to record may have only local and limited significance.

Two Cardiff men were goaled last month after they "menaced"

Tony Miles, a director of Cardiff's Club Roma.

One reads anew each day of the hold the Mafia (the old religion) has—according to the papers—on Britain's clubland. It would be a pity to think such an organisation might find a foothold in South Wales. If time proves me a pessimist, I shall be happy.

Nevertheless, as I say, the possibility exists...

All this may seem a little out of keeping with the analysis of a "boom". Bear with me just one sentence more. As a newspaperman, I take my brief to be an investigation of the South Wales club scene in its entirety—I would be failing in my duty if I did not hint at all the nuances which exist.

Now to more pleasant things. Caught up in the whirlpool of popularity that flows and eddies about South Wales are such people as Brian Dover, the Jimmy Crawford show, Julian Jorg, Peter Firmani, Dave Newman, the Discos, Ronnie Dukes and Ricky Lee, Mitzi Graham, The Chant, Wee Willie Harris, Claude Powell, Bob Hatch, Geoff Tolson and Grace Stevens, Carl Adams, Johnny Stewart, Cindy Williams, Lenny Layton, Tony Cawley... these are the people who are being rebooked time and again.

One cannot turn a blind eye to a trend.

Audiences, says Clarry Rogers (who is planning a club "command" on March 22) are a fickle lot. Most of all they like a comedian—he thinks. Until somebody starts asking for a good tenor or a musical group. But the type of act that seems to be increasing in the night clubs or in the more humble workmen's clubs is the "exotic". And if anybody in Wales is responsible, it is Clarry Rogers.

So far, Clarry hasn't come up against the sort of animosity Con Crowley found during his pioneer "stag" mornings at the Ynysyboeth Social Club. Local clergy have stayed markedly quiet while the skin game made itself an essential part of life in the clubs.

Perhaps the clergy have realised that the men who go to the clubs Sunday lunch-time wouldn't have gone to chapel anyhow. Perhaps they have adopted the philosophy that one who writes comprehensively about show business has to adopt—that one would not oneself care to witness such displays (to me, the comment of one stripper that the men in the audience were "fools, all of them" was perhaps the most profound of the whole business) but that that was one's own choice, pure and simple.

More likely, they have accepted the inevitable. And that is the REAL word for swinging South Wales. Not "explosion"—"acceptance".

Realisation that show business—with all its flaws, with all its little connivances, with all its great beating heart—has come to South Wales to stay.