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‘You don’t need influence ... all you need is your first opportunity!’:

The Early Broadcast Talent Show and the BBC

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Abstract:

Popular histories of the reality talent show often position programmes like *Opportunity Knocks* as key generic precursors to the popular formats of today. But the visibility of such shows in such popular histories - and in popular memory - disguises the fact that the genre has been almost totally neglected in both television historiography and celebrity studies. In drawing upon archival documentation, this article looks at early examples of the broadcast talent show in Britain, with a particular focus on radio’s *Opportunity Knocks*, and examines the institutional and cultural discourses which surrounded them.

Keywords:

BBC – Talent Show – Hughie Green – Stardom

The *Radio Times* billing for the BBC’s talent show *It’s Up to You* (1957-8) proclaimed: ‘You are invited to choose the most promising new television artists and to help you do this the artists are given advice and encouragement by a panel of experts’.¹ The generic history of the talent show is arguably of particular interest today given the phenomenal success of contemporary formats such as the *X Factor* (2004-) and *Britain’s Got Talent* (2007-). Indeed, as part of television’s own memory boom, and its obsession with narrating its own histories,² ITV1 screened the five-part documentary series *The Talent Show Story* (2012) which (predictably) positioned *Opportunity Knocks* (1949, 1956, 1964-78, 1987-90) and *New Faces* (1973-88) as the key generic precursors to the reality talent shows of today. But the visibility of these shows in such popular histories - and in popular memory - disguises the fact that the genre has been almost totally neglected in both television historiography and celebrity studies.

This is in fact characteristic of how the popular as well as academic history of reality television has been written: particular historical precursors or influences are singled out, yet they are often not actually examined themselves.³ Although there has been a move away from a predominant focus on drama, this also reflects the continued marginalisation of light entertainment in British television history (as well as the marginalisation of ITV, which has been most identified with the talent show). Despite the significant role of *Opportunity Knocks* in popular memory (it drew audiences of over 20 million at its peak, and famously launched names as varied as Mary Hopkin, Lena Zavaroni, Pam Ayres, Bonny Langford, Les Dawson, Su Pollard and Little and Large), the research files at the BBC/ ITC had lain untouched, something which reflects upon the perceived low cultural value of both format and ‘talent’ television. The programme was often subject to scathing critical discourse for much of its run, and in 1972 Peter Black asserted that, after 20 years, ‘no newspaper critic had ever written a kind word’ about *Opportunity Knocks*.⁴ While this is overstating the case, as it did receive some positive reviews in its earliest years, such perceptions also play an important role in shaping how (or whether) programmes, and their associated documentation, are preserved. Existing audio-visual and written evidence surrounding the early talent show is limited with significant historical gaps,⁵ making the texts difficult, although not of course impossible, to reconstruct and explore.

In drawing upon the written documentation of internal memos, scripts and press reports held in the BBC Written Archive Centre, the ITC collection and the BFI, this article looks at early examples of the broadcast talent show in Britain, with a particular focus on *Opportunity Knocks*, and largely examines the institutional and cultural discourse which surrounded them. This is a methodological choice – issues of ‘stardom’, for example, are a key interest here, and they often operate primarily at the level of surrounding discourse. But this is also a necessity, given that none of the earliest examples of the talent show from radio or television exist as full programmes in audio or audio-visual form (nor even, in the majority of cases, as excerpts).

Right up until the present day, the British TV talent show has arguably been seen as more of an ‘ITV’ and thus commercial genre, but as such programming emerged on radio, it is actually the BBC that provides an important formative context here. The talent show nevertheless appeared to occupy a difficult place within the public service remit of the BBC, and the institutional discourse surrounding it plays out the Corporation’s bid to manage (and at times ‘discipline’) the commercial connotations of such programming. However, rather

than subscribing to institutional and programme histories which polarise the ‘elitist’ and ‘paternalistic’ BBC and the energetic populism of ITV, the following study is part of the bid to write the BBC back into *popular* programme histories. As I have previously discussed (by moving across genres such as the soap opera, the ‘problem’ show and the quiz/ game show in the 1950s), the BBC often offered a negotiation with the popular, rather than an outright rejection of such fare.⁶

My own experience as a long-term viewer of the reality talent show means that the contemporary context is inevitably a framing presence. But I do not intend to present this as a problem: whilst, at the level of historical research, it is important to be mindful of an ‘an undue proximity’⁷ between past and present, this article operates from the perspective that such a historical dialogue can be enriching, both in terms of our understanding of media culture from the past, and in throwing the specificities of the present into sharper relief. In the context of this article, this dialogue needs to traverse the relations between radio and television given that what began as an enquiry into television history became, in large part, a reconstruction of BBC radio’s *Opportunity Knocks*, both due to historical development (it was around the BBC radio version of *Opportunity Knocks* that institutional policies and perceptions of such programming appeared to be most visibly debated and formed), and in terms of archival sources (the archival documents surrounding the show are the most extensive). Yet I also want to present this focus as productive. There has for some time been a call for more cross-media research into generic origins,⁸ and it quickly became clear that to start the history of the broadcast talent show with the advent of ITV (and television) was to neglect its crucial formative years in the British context. The early broadcast history of *Opportunity Knocks* also demonstrates that an article doesn’t need to focus on ‘television’ as such in order to offer insights into the history of a television genre and its contemporary incarnations.

Discovering the ‘Discoverers’

The talent show has a complex, cross-media history, given that amateur talent competitions were part of music hall and other leisure contexts such as pubs, holiday camps, ‘end of pier’ contests, and working-class cinemas in the 1930s⁹ before the advent of broadcasting. Equally, the more professionalised genre of variety – both in theatre and on radio – also provides an important generic context. But despite what is now seen as the highly visual appeal of the genre, it was on radio that the broadcast talent show originated. It is not my intention to

suggest that the talent show immediately emerged as a fully formed and distinct genre, as types of amateur performance took place in other programme contexts in this early period.¹⁰ But my focus is on programmes where amateur performance was the *primary* function, and which were called ‘discovery’ programmes, ‘amateur talent shows’, or just ‘amateur’ shows.

One of the most prominent examples in this regard appeared in the 1930s on Radio Luxembourg, which emerged as an offshore competitor for the BBC in 1933.¹¹ Entitled *Carroll Levis’ Discoveries* (1935-39, 1953-56), the Canadian-born Levis brought a series of weekly hopefuls to the microphone in the ‘Quaker quarter hour’ - the show was sponsored by Quaker Oats - and he invited the audience to judge the ‘new and unknown artistes I have discovered on my travels all over the British isles’ and they would compete for a ‘handsome cash prize’.¹² Although the programme had a live studio audience, it was the home listener who would determine the winner, and as with the later *Opportunity Knocks*, this was done by post. If, as existing evidence suggests, the British talent show largely began on commercial and perceivably ‘Americanised’¹³ radio, this may be significant in reflecting upon institutional and cultural perceptions of such programming within the BBC.

There has long since been the perception that programmes involving prizes were institutionally difficult for the BBC – as played out, for example, around the quiz and game show. Not only was it important to be seen to put public money to ‘appropriate’ use (a memo later emphasised how programmes containing prizes ‘inevitably introduce an element of bribery rather than adequate reward as a means of stimulating interest’),¹⁴ but such shows could also be construed as a form of advertising, and were thus prohibited by the BBC’s official charter. The talent show may appear to flirt less with such commercial discourses, but as *Carroll Levis’ Discoveries* indicates, there was still the matter of a cash prize, even if the ‘real’ reward was deemed to be broadcast visibility and the subsequent chance of a career in the entertainment industry. Yet this in itself indicates how there is also an intrinsic promotional function to such shows: they circulate performers as potential commodities to be ‘bought’ which, as explored below, occupied a troubling space within the BBC’s culture of public service broadcasting. Indeed, it is notable that the talent show had a far more prolific presence in American broadcasting at this time, with *Major Bowes’ Amateur Hour* being the most popular example.¹⁵

Nevertheless, in the mid 1930s, well-known talent spotters such as Brian Michie and Leonard Urry were given space on BBC radio to present their ‘discoveries’: Urry, for

example, was associated with *Stars in the Making* (1939), whilst he also presented a spot called ‘May we Introduce’ in *Monday Night at Eight* (1940).¹⁶ But it seems that the first fully fledged talent show on the BBC emerged in 1939. The press ran the headline, ‘BBC to have amateurs’, thus announcing that the Carroll Levis show was transferring to the BBC.¹⁷ (The Canadian-born Levis had already become a BBC radio presenter in 1935). There is little extant information about Levis’ show on BBC radio at this time, but it was broadcast on a Monday evening at 7:30-8:00pm, and it appears that the ‘handsome cash prize’ had been removed. At the same time, the BBC’s institutional anxiety surrounding the talent show should not be over-emphasised for a number of reasons. First, in the form of *Carroll Levis’ Discoveries*, they had clearly pursued (or poached) a format that they considered to be popular. Second, despite popular and academic perceptions to the contrary, there was actually a long history of the Corporation pursuing extant popular formats, whether from commercial or American radio.¹⁸ Third, the BBC’s conception of public service was not articulated by a universal, monolithic or unchanging set of discourses, as the period of the 1940s in particular makes clear.

From the mid to the late 1930s, radio historians have noted a softening in the BBC’s didactic approach and an ‘increased sensitivity to public taste’.¹⁹ This was due to a range of factors including competition from Radio Luxembourg, Reith’s departure and the emergence of BBC Audience Research (and the decision to adapt *Carroll Levis’ Discoveries* may well be testament to such shifts). The period of the Second World War and the consequent restructuring of BBC radio – especially the emergence of the Forces Programme - undoubtedly accelerated this process of popularisation, whilst also marking a further decisive shift. According to Cardiff and Scannell, this was not only a move toward more popular radio, as it expressed a redefinition of the BBC’s relationship with its audience, ‘or rather its acceptance of the audience with different tastes and needs’.²⁰ It was the recognition of a more diverse audience that gave rise to the Home, Light and Third Programmes in the post-war period – a move that was controversial within the BBC itself. Although the Director General, Sir William Haley, conceived that the ‘pyramid’ of programmes would lead the listener ‘up the cultural scale’,²¹ others saw it as a rejection of the mixed programming policy that had previously been central to the BBC’s conception of public service. What the new structure *did* offer was a clear stratification of broadcast culture in which a particular topic, such as film for example, would be covered in substantially different ways by each programme.²² With regard to the talent show, the Home service certainly offered Variety, but it was on the

Light programme that the *amateur* talent show could be found, further suggesting its apparent association with the most ‘popular’ end of the spectrum.

Opportunity Knocks: Explanations of fame

In February 1949 the Light programme launched *Opportunity Knocks*. The famously brash Canadian host of *Opportunity Knocks*, the fast-talking Hughie Green - himself a pre-war ‘discovery’ by a talent spotter - took the idea of the show to the BBC in 1948, and they agreed to do a trial recording.²³ This was a success and the programme itself started the following year, broadcast on a Thursday evening between 7:30-8:15pm (and as with its precursor show, it is interesting to note that the naturalised link between a Saturday night schedule and this particular kind of light entertainment programming is not yet in force). There were 5-6 acts in every show, and the programme was pre-recorded in front of a live studio audience. Acts would perform in regional auditions, as attended by Green and the show’s Producer, and the prize was the chance to perform in a national variety show. The winner was determined by the audience sending in their votes, although there were no studio ‘Clapometer’ as there was in the later televised version (presumably because this was essentially a visual gimmick), and the winner of each week would return to compete at the end of the series in the ‘Winner’s Show’. The Producer, Dennis Main Wilson, explained how:

Hughie Green’s fundamental idea for the programme is that every listener is a potential talent scout. The listeners will be invited to write to Hughie Green to suggest artistes who they themselves have discovered for inclusion in the programme. Once in the programme the ‘talent scout’ will be interviewed first to say, how, when and where he found the artiste, with a small amount of biographical discussion. There will be an orchestral effect of ‘Opportunity knocking’ and then straight into the artistes’ act.²⁴

Given that radio was initial home for the talent show this meant that sound-based acts – largely singers, musicians and comedians – predominated. The excerpt is also indicative of how particular strategies (in terms of aesthetics and dialogue) were used to create a narrative around the amateur’s performance, emphasising their location in the ‘ordinary’ world, their talent, and their entry into a ‘special’ performance space.

The idea of ‘opportunity knocking’ is also suggestive of how the programme constructed the very *idea* of stardom - what it ‘is’ and how it comes into being. To begin with, it is crucial to stress that the programme’s articulation of stardom, at least in terms of its

institutional context, was more complex than the scripts alone suggest. In this regard it is useful to point to the BBC's somewhat uneasy relations with the commercial apparatus of stardom (which is not of course to suggest that early radio and then television did not foster well-known personalities or 'stars').²⁵ For example, in 1949, the same year that *Opportunity Knocks* began, Sir William Haley, the BBC's first post-war Director General, contrasted the development of television in Britain and America as he felt it likely that American television would be built around 'personalities', while British television would favour 'ideas': 'there is little interest in America whether television does plays or ballet or opera. There is every interest in who is becoming popular...'.²⁶ This perspective can also be related to the BBC's historical ambivalence, even in the post-war period, about the extent to which, as a *public* corporation, they should engage in the practice of publicity generation. The BBC did have a Publicity Department, but even this could express a distaste for 'the ballyhoo.... the press party, the interviews, the glamour photographs, the screen-trailing, the Sunday paper story', especially when 'nothing succeeds like a good programme'.²⁷

Opportunity Knocks of course offered the possibility of *creating* 'stars', which arguably threw these tensions into even sharper relief. Significantly, the early planning memos insist that:

...nowhere in the programme will the term... 'discovery' be used. Nor will the artistes be given fantastic promises with regard to their future careers on the stage or radio. The whole essence of the programme is that we are giving new artistes an opportunity to show their talent. The rest is entirely up to them.²⁸

The vocabulary in the production memos plays out a contrast between 'amateur' and 'professional' (rather than the more contemporary naturalisation of 'ordinary' person versus 'star'). At the same time, the favoured internal term for the contestants was 'artiste', a term which leans more toward the professional, but which also eschews overtly commercial connotations.

Yet certain contestants clearly *did* emerge from the early *Opportunity Knocks* as well-known names at the time (the BBC stated that of the 160 acts showcased, 22 received professional offers), such as the accordionist Gwenda Wilkinson from London, or the comedian Jonny Wilkins from Devon, although the majority of successful contestants were singers. These included Clive Wayne, a 'crooner' from Newcastle, who obtained a record contract with HMV, singer Archie Higgs, a plasterer from Tooting, who sang to an audience

of 6000 at Empress Hall, Earl's Court, or 'war-crippled Tony Sparrow, the wheel-chair bound singer, who made the studio audience weep at his courage'.²⁹ Such contestants did receive coverage in the popular press which largely appeared to be favourable, with the amateur talent show initially seen as a useful mechanism for finding 'fresh talent for the light entertainment business'.³⁰ In a manner that is certainly recognisable today, emphasis was also placed on the contrast between the contestant's 'ordinary' life or occupation (the clearly working-class contestants made the 'best' narratives here), and the fantastical aspirations and opportunities of showbusiness.³¹

In making sense of these discourses on stardom at this particular time, it is useful to turn to Joshua Gamson's work on what he calls explanations of fame in the twentieth century. Following a large-scale study of popular magazines, Gamson argues that there are essentially two discursive stories about fame: in the first - dominant in the first part of the century - stardom is about an 'innate' talent and specialness and the deserving rise 'naturally to the top'.³² In the second story, especially prevalent in the period following the Second World War, stardom is the product of image-making and manufacture, and the production of celebrity itself becomes more visible in texts. Given that an emphasis on stardom/celebrity as the product of manufacture threatens the very enterprise of fame, Gamson explains how, at various points, 'new narrative elements' negotiate between the two stories. For example, in the face of the increasing visibility of public-image management from the 1930s onwards (and with the further growth of mass media outlets), a dual emphasis was placed on the 'power' of the audience, as well as the innate 'ordinariness' of stars: 'As celebrities were being demoted to ordinariness in narratives ... the audience was being promoted to the position of religious prostration. The public became the final discoverer, the publicity machine shifting the spotlight according to the public's whims',³³ and both of these discourses work to temper the anti-democratic implications of stardom, particularly in the context of the Depression. This narrative also suggests that 'for the grace of the lucky break, the star would be just like us'.³⁴ Indeed, this discourse insists that 'Greatness is built in; it is *who you are*. If one works at it, or gets a lucky break, one may be discovered. If it is discovered, one becomes celebrated for it, which is evidence that one had it to begin with'.³⁵

This narrative clearly compliments the success myth which pervaded the studio-created biographies of 1930's Hollywood stars, in which 'ordinariness is the hallmark of the star; the system is seen as rewarding talent and 'specialness'; in which 'lucky breaks' may happen to anyone, and in which hard work and professionalism are valorised.³⁶ But as this

suggests, Gamson's analysis prioritises the American context, and this article has already emphasised how nationally specific factors need to be acknowledged in terms of the cultural and institutional contexts for stardom.³⁷ Nevertheless, there do seem to be important historical connections here. For example, it is notable that the American broadcast talent show was at the *height* of its popularity in the period (the 1930s) to which Gamson refers – playing out the specific discursive formations of fame that he outlines. Furthermore, in terms of particular institutional and national connections, Green had appeared in the American radio review *Meet the People*, which was built around amateur performers, and he specifically cites this as an influence on *Opportunity Knocks*.³⁸ Green was also mistakenly but frequently positioned as 'American' himself (he was born in London but later became a Canadian citizen), which may have functioned to naturalise this link to what was essentially an 'American' broadcast format. Either way, it is not stretching evidence too far to suggest that there may be historical connections between Britain and America here. As discussed above, the idea of the BBC adapting – formally or informally – American formats was by no means unusual. Valeria Camporesi explains how although the BBC maintained in its publications that its programmes were 'truly British', often holding up American radio (and later television) as the 'imperfect model', 'since the 1930s, American models were attentively studied, partially adopted and in greater part translated to suit British ears'.³⁹

It is arguably this process of adoption, or rather adaptation, that *Opportunity Knocks* plays out. It certainly contained highly romanticised and idealistic discourses on fame, and often embraced the ideological structure of the success myth. Notably, the pilot script for the first show envisages the contestant to be a factory worker - 'those long hours, toiling away, when all he wants to do is sing' - who had been 'spotted' by a fellow worker,⁴⁰ thus clearly playing out the idea that 'opportunity' was linked to social mobility. (It was certainly not the case that this was evident in all episodes, and it is more interesting that this is how the ideal contestant is envisaged at the pilot stage). Equally, Green had a predilection for emphasising the struggle to the top in melodramatic terms:

You know sometimes it's a hard lonely wait for a newcomer looking for a chance. But even the biggest brightest stars have had to struggle through many dark moments before they reached the top....⁴¹

This offers a stark contrast to the BBC's matter-of-fact emphasis on playing down 'fantastic promises'. Yet the programme was still seeking to locate a popular form of address, to which

the promise and possibilities of stardom were key, so this led to competing tensions in this regard.

As the quote from Green, as well as the title of the show, suggests, one aspect of the success myth was valorised above all else: the ‘lucky break’. This in turn also worked to endorse the importance of the programme as a conduit for this event. As Green would exclaim:

A great entertainer once said, ‘you don’t need influence to become a great artists all you need is your first opportunity!’ So the next time you meet someone you believe would become a great artiste or entertainer, remember you can make opportunity knock for them on this show...⁴²

As this suggests, *Opportunity Knocks* presents itself as a means of *bringing* the deserving self to the notice of the public, rather than a means of *creating* the star. The emphasis on the audience as the only arbiter of judgement, as well as the concept of the public as talent spotter, arguably further worked to mitigate against discourses of manufacture in this regard. Indeed, the emphasis placed on the ‘discoverer’ in the programme – the family member, friend or neighbour who has suggested that the individual appear - is otherwise rather curious, especially when the real decisions about who would get the chance to appear were surely made by Green and the Producer at the auditions stage.

‘The Opportunity Man’ and the ‘Green Dream’

Green was to become a household name in Britain with the launch of ITV’s *Double Your Money* in 1955, but he was rather less known in the late 1940s. Of course it is difficult to compare radio and television when it comes to performance styles, but the style evident in *Double Your Money*, which involves excessive ‘mugging’ and the use of the contestant as the straight man/ woman upon whose stories Green can ‘improvise some witty remark’,⁴³ does not seem to be apparent in *Opportunity Knocks*. Indeed, Green’s main function is to introduce the talent spotter and to help them introduce the performer, whilst also mediating between talent spotter, performer and audience. There is no evidence, for example, of the later bid to ‘aggressively assert... control’ of the performance space.⁴⁴

Yet discourses of power and control here emerged in extratextual material surrounding the show. For example, the programme's bid to play down issues of manufacture and star creation contrasts sharply with Green's own description of the show in his 1965 biography:

[A]s a seasoned pro I hated to think there was any other way of getting to the top. Stars are not *born* – the raw material may be – but the people we see as stars are made, shaped and designed at the hands of a master showman.⁴⁵

The pilot script that Green sent to the BBC was actually titled *The Opportunity Man*.⁴⁶ This might just be read as Green, a famously egotistical and demanding performer, seeking to place more emphasis on his own role, in terms of both authoring and presenting the programme. After a couple of episodes, the Producer indeed complained in an internal memo that 'I don't think it is going in the right direction with so much of the limelight being focused on Hughie Green'.⁴⁷ At both textual and institutional levels, managing Green and his role within *Opportunity Knocks* was a constant source of debate in the correspondence surrounding the show (and this continued when it later shifted to ITV).⁴⁸ Green, with a rhetoric which was often disparagingly seen as 'part sharp street trader and part American evangelist',⁴⁹ occupied what Joe Moran describes as a place at:

the heart of Britain's culture wars, a long argument between commercial populism and Reithian cultural enlightenment around which clustered a series of anxieties about social class, American cultural imperialism and the uneasy negotiation between social democracy and consumer capitalism.⁵⁰

Moran cites this war as largely beginning in the late 1940s when Green famously sought to sue the BBC, claiming that bribery and corruption had ensured that *Opportunity Knocks* was not recommissioned in 1950. Yet Green lost the highly-publicised case and was left bankrupt. According to an internal memo on *Opportunity Knock*, 'every listener research report indicated that the public did not like Hughie Green... He was too American and too self-assertive',⁵¹ although it is not clear that this was cited by the BBC as *the* reason for the show's cancellation. But Green's quote above suggests more than his bid to position himself at the centre of the format: it suggests a desire to occupy the role of the impresario.

The concept of the impresario, someone who 'organises talent into a marketable product',⁵² is highly recognisable in the context of the reality talent show today, and the impresario enlists the help of 'cultural intermediaries'⁵³ who help to shape the image of the

would-be star. Contrary to existing opinion,⁵⁴ such intermediaries *were* also put to work on the hopeful contestants in the early years. Hughie Green recalls an auditionee called Rita Peggs, a singer who passed her first audition:

I sent her along to [music coach] Harry Jacobson for the first steps in showbiz grooming. Harry is one of the finest light-music coaches in the country....At their first meeting he snapped: ‘I don’t like your hat, your hair style is terrible and your make-up all over the place’.⁵⁵

Following her appearance on the radio version of *Opportunity Knocks*, Green goes on to explain how:

Offers of bookings for Rita began to pour in and I had no doubt at all that I had at last found my fledgling star...It never happened... I had worked out everything down to the final and ultimate details of what she would wear, sing, eat, do, avoid – and ignored the existence of the one obvious human frailty: I forgot to remember the singer was a woman. So she went right ahead and proved it to me – by failing in love and getting married. End of career. End of Rita Peggs. End of Green dream. But the experiment was a success (as they say in the science-fiction yarns). I had proved that a talented nobody could be moulded to stardom.⁵⁶

The barely disguised misogyny in this quotation pivots on a gendered (and historically naturalised) dichotomy between male impresario and female starlet, here also imagined in Frankenstein terms. It also plays out the assumption that it is the woman who offers the most perfect *tabula rasa* upon which the process of star construction can flourish.⁵⁷ But this is significant in suggesting the *process* of grooming which could take place, as well as Green’s desire to occupy the position of an impresario, in ways which clearly exceeded his on-screen presenting role. What is of course clearly different from today is the temporal insertion of this process into the talent show narrative: it takes place *before* the contestant goes on air.

In Gamson’s paradigm, the concept of apparently ‘exposing’ the process of star production emerges as a late twentieth century strategy designed to mitigate the dominance of manufacture as an explanation for fame: in apparently revealing the process, the audience is offered a flattering position of power.⁵⁸ But this difference in turn reflects on the perceived function of the early *Opportunity Knocks*, as well as its audience address and assumed

pleasures. Popular discourses on the history of the talent show emphasise how the idea of ‘revealing’ the audition process (and making it central to the spectacle of the show) is a key marker of the contemporary formats’ generic difference and success. But this shift has also been an occasion for criticisms surrounding the ethics of the reality talent show: that people with no hope of a performing career are paraded as subjects of ridicule for an audience only too eager to ‘hoover up the humiliation of [the] ‘vulnerable’.⁵⁹ Furthermore, these discourses relate to the debate that reality TV deals less in observation than in the construction and exploitation of a ‘telescope of its own devising’,⁶⁰ with a ‘thinning out of exterior coordinates ([references to] the world beyond the screen...).’⁶¹ Such contestants evidently have no chance of progressing in the music industry, but are presented as a performative spectacle in their own right.

The early period of *Opportunity Knocks* is of course played out on radio, and it is notable that the contemporary charges of exploitation and humiliation blame the *visual* apparatus of television. But it is fascinating to observe the differences here in terms of how the show is positioned at the nexus between the entertainment industry, the BBC and the audience. In the early BBC discussion of the show, the primary emphasis is on creating an ideal opportunity for the performers, and as offering a *service* which would help the British entertainment industry, and what was seen to be an ailing variety industry: the programme’s status as a *broadcast text* appears almost secondary. It was of course assumed that a string of near-professional performances would amount to highly pleasing entertainment for the audience, and the idea of maintaining an acceptable standard is suggested by the comment ‘At least one amateur who is known to be good, [is] to be held in reserve each week in case the week’s batch of twenty [auditionees] turn out to be below the standard we require’⁶². The BBC’s initial intention was to present semi-professional performers, but it was Green, again with perhaps more of an eye on the mass audience, who suggested a focus on amateurs. The BBC sought to balance this risk by presenting the contestants in a:

thoroughly professional setting... to give the aspiring singer the benefit of a 35 piece orchestra...; to coach and vet the comedian’s material; in fact to guide and improve our amateurs in every way possible so they might have the best possible chance of achieving a professional career through the broadcast.⁶³

The BBC conducted listener research on the programme as soon as it began, and their questions indicate how they were seeking to balance these functions – helping new performers but also entertaining the audience - in a highly self-conscious manner:

Did you get the impression that *Opportunity Knocks* sets out to present these new artists in the best surroundings they could wish for?

Was your overall impression of the programme that it was:

Good entertainment and a good chance for new talent?

Good entertainment?

A chance for newcomers, but not good entertainment value?⁶⁴

In fact, the questions indicate that the BBC might conceive of these functions as somehow separate and even competing. Implicitly, they are also seeking to discover whether the programme fulfilled the principles of public service, and it was later insisted that it managed to do so on three counts:

First, from our consistently high listening figures we know our show was popular with the public. Secondly, we believed we had performed a public service in bringing forward, coaching and launching over 20 successful young artistes on professional careers. Thirdly, through our policy of open auditions held throughout the country, we materially helped public relations for the BBC by giving every aspirant a fair chance in public.⁶⁵

The BBC envisage the status of a polished performance in benevolent terms (guiding and improving the chances of the amateur), whilst Green's discussion of the contestants (the make-over of Rita Peggs) is couched far more in terms of performer management, as well as star construction and publicity. Interestingly, however, the BBC only offered the proclamation above when forced to justify their relations with the programme during the lawsuit with Hughie Green, as it is clear that they were often otherwise unsure of its public service value.

In histories of television genres, there is a tendency to treat radio as primarily a precursor, despite the fact that the two media often continued to broadcast the same genre simultaneously. With regard to the talent show, however, it does appear that once the

performances of amateurs could be witnessed in vision, there was no real return to radio. As indicated in the introduction, this article does not seek to offer a plotted history of the talent show, and there is not the space - nor the archival evidence - to enable this here. But although it is not possible to offer a full account of the institutional, textual and cultural transitions which marked the shift from radio to television talent show, certain themes can be noted in relation to *Opportunity Knocks*.

Televising Talent

The Carroll Levis Discovery Show re-appeared ‘in vision’ in 1953, and it propagated similarly mythic discourses on stardom to *Opportunity Knocks*: Levis would end each show by exclaiming: ‘Let’s wish them well as they make their way up the stairway to stardom, remembering that the discoveries of today are the stars of tomorrow’.⁶⁶ Yet retaining the apparent suspicion of what was seen as overly commercial programming, the Head of Light Entertainment, Ronald Waldman described it as ‘Cheap and cheerful. Not a show of which we can be proud but a show which will probably please the masses...’.⁶⁷ After it was cancelled on BBC radio in 1950, *Opportunity Knocks* shifted to radio Luxembourg, but it was on ITV in 1956 that it made its televisual debut (although its most visible and famous run was on ITV during the years 1964-78). Significantly, the big prize in the early years was ‘£400 or a trip to new York with the chance of appearing on American TV’⁶⁸ - a spot on the *Ed Sullivan Show* - a prize unthinkable in the context of the genre’s previous history on the BBC. But the BBC continued to pursue the genre within its own terms. In 1955 the BBC screened *Youth Takes a Bow*, a talent contest for younger performers, whilst the following year they launched the panel-led talent show *It’s Up to You!* (1957-8), and other various incarnations were seen on both channels throughout the decade.

In their entry on ‘Talent Shows’ in the *Encyclopaedia of Popular Music*, Halper and Laing argue that some critics saw the shift to television as a drawback in the mediation of amateur talent: it privileged the ‘synthetics’ of appearance, whereas radio relied on ‘skill’.⁶⁹ This speaks to a much broader debate about television’s relations with popular music, and popular music stardom, in particular,⁷⁰ but in terms of the existing evidence of press reception, it is difficult to confirm that this was a clear concern at the time. What *is* apparent is that the possibility of visual performance enables an emphasis on the notorious novelty act (already included in variety), and with it, a somewhat scathing critical attitude toward the cultural value of such shows. As soon as it began on television, *Carroll Levis Discoveries* offered a novelty act in the form of a ‘comedy tap-dancer on skates’.⁷¹ In the early 1970s, and with

reference to *Opportunity Knocks*, one journalist cast his eye over this history and disparagingly recalled how:

In years gone by, Hughie has brought us acts of every kind, from juggling dogs, fellows who could get tunes from a garden hose... to the immortal Renaldo the Rebounder, he of the amazing skill on the trampoline while dressed as a clown, playing the bagpipes, and holding a tray of glasses in one hand [sic].⁷²

Although revered and ‘serious’ performers are still seen to emerge from the show, it is certainly the case that the inclusion of novelty acts shapes the prevailing critical discourse, especially in terms of the relationship between cultural value and fame. Whilst on the BBC Hughie Green may well have sat uncomfortably at the fault-line between ‘Reithian cultural enlightenment’ and ‘commercial populism’,⁷³ he was more able to be vociferous about the latter when attached to ITV. The press coverage of the show in the 1960s and 1970s repeatedly plays out a battle between Green and the critics in which Green positions the show as the bastion of popular appeal (‘If [journalists]...wish... to set [themselves] ... up as the arbiter of broadcasting and television taste’, then they are saying ‘to hell with the taste of the regular 20 million viewers’)⁷⁴. In fact, critics become increasingly cynical about the emphasis on *Opportunity Knocks* as the ‘people’s show’, as tied up with a general disdain for Green as a presenter and personality, and epitomised by the hail to ‘Remember folks, *your* postcard votes in *your* handwriting can make people stars... [as promised by the] unbelievably tasteless ...Hughie Green who really knows what the public wants...’⁷⁵

The idea of ITV programming being castigated as trivial and driven by popular demand was far from a novel idea by this time. But despite the emphasis this article has placed on the extent to which the amateur talent show, and *Opportunity Knocks* in particular, occupied a difficult relationship with the BBC’s articulation of public service, it would be misleading to construct a simple polarity between BBC and ITV here. For example, one of the dominant themes running through the ITC files on *Opportunity Knocks* for the 1960s and 70s circles around the question of promotional discourses – as encountered by the BBC in their first relations with the talent show. Clause 7 (6) in the 1954 Television Act prohibited in-programme advertising, and there are regular complaints from the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) about how, as the Producer put it:

Hughie Green ...reports with pride [about past contestants] - on all their latest records, television appearances, stage successes and so on.... I have always made

clear to Hughie Green that *this sort of show cannot afford the slightest slur on its integrity* [my italics].⁷⁶

Although it is not fully clear what is meant by ‘this kind of show’, it seems that *Opportunity Knocks* also occupied a somewhat contested institutional place on ITV.

Conclusion

In terms of the talent show, the narrative of historical precursors has been both present (at a very general level, and in popular discourse) and very much *absent* (academic enquiry). I acknowledge that my attempt to excavate the early history of the genre here has been modest. But especially when compared to the American context, and despite clear shifts toward the popular in British television history, there remains a reluctance to examine historical case studies of light entertainment programming in the British context - something which seems all the more problematic when we consider that the *Idol* format, the *X Factor* and *Britain's Got Talent* all originated from the UK context before becoming global brands.

The new generation of talent shows have played a central role in stemming the decline of free-to-air Saturday night entertainment television in the UK, and as Guy Redden observes, a ‘genre that previously peaked in the 1970s and 1980s ...has itself been made over’.⁷⁷ One of few scholars to refer to the talent shows from the ‘past’, Guy Redden sees the specificity of the new incarnations as lying in their discursive construction of selfhood, discourses which emerge from a neo-liberal economy. But Redden concludes by qualifying that:

That is not to say that the new talent shows are solely an epiphenomenon of such neoliberal social relations. There is no doubt that they combine dimensions of a range of pre-existing genres of television, including previous talent shows, and that in doing so they appeal to *longstanding audience interests in spectacle, character and narrative* [my emphasis].⁷⁸

Redden’s analysis of the contemporary talent show is compelling. But this quotation neatly illustrates how it has potentially problematic implications for conceptions of the history of the genre: whilst the contemporary talent show emerges as a product of historically specific social, cultural and economic circumstances, its predecessors are implicitly positioned as

providing a timeless, ahistorical backdrop against which the ‘difference’ of the modern incarnations can be measured.

It may seem contradictory that I have sought to emphasise the historical importance of the early talent show whilst focusing on its potentially problematic relationship with the BBC and a framework of public service. But the intention was not to ‘rehabilitate’ the cultural value of the talent show, but rather to write such texts back into British broadcasting history. Indeed, it is not difficult to see how some of these historical footprints continue to have a currency today: compared to other channels, the BBC has had less overt success with the amateur-focused reality talent show, and offerings such as *Fame Academy* (2001-2), *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?* (2006) and *The Voice* have sought to distinguish themselves from more popular formats in terms of the discourses of fame and celebrity they convey. Whilst *Fame Academy* (which was axed after two series due to low ratings) foregrounded the importance of song-writing rather than simply singing (covers), *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?* (and its successors, *Any Dream Will Do* (2007), *I’d Do Anything* (2008) and *Over the Rainbow* (2010)) sought to legitimise its project by finding talent for the next Andrew Lloyd Webber musical on the West End Stage. Finally, *The Voice* had the judges ‘blind’ select the contestants based on voice only, thus claiming to partially negate the crucial emphasis placed on image (as presumably linked to discourses on superficiality, surface and celebrity manufacture). In this regard, such distinctions, and the historical examples which prefigure them, provide crucial insight into how public service broadcasting seeks to negotiate pockets of difference within the province of popular programming, and in a highly competitive multichannel landscape. But if, according to Hughie Green, ‘what talent is, how you find it, is what *Opportunity Knocks* was all about’,⁷⁹ this article has examined how this quest or search was pursued, with a sometimes curious combination of reluctance and pleasure, by the BBC.

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Bio

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¹ *Radio Times*, 22 February, 1957, p.22.

² Amy Holdsworth, 'Television Resurrections: Television and Memory', *Cinema Journal*, 47:3, 2008, 138.

³ As also explored in Su Holmes, "'Riveting and Real – a family in the raw": (Re)visiting *The Family* (1974) after Reality TV', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11: 2, June, 2008, pp.193-210

⁴ Peter Black, 'Opportunity Knocking', the *Daily Mail*, 25 April 1972. BFI Microfiche on *Opportunity Knocks*. (Page numbers are not included for clippings from BFI microfiche or BBC WAC as these were not provided).

⁵ The BBC Written Archive Centre holds files and scripts on the early radio version of *Opportunity Knocks*, and scripts on *Spot The Winner* (1949), but nothing on any of the other BBC radio talent shows. The archive houses a slim file on BBC television's *Carroll Levis Discoveries* (beginning in 1953), but this unfortunately omits the initial material relating to the beginning of the show which, given that it was previously on BBC radio, is crucial in exploring the transition to 'vision'. The ITC archive houses files on both *Opportunity Knocks* and *New Faces*, but compared to the BBC evidence, these offer little in way of detailed institutional debates surrounding the shows, and the *Opportunity Knocks* files mainly concentrate on the 1960s and 1970s rather than the earlier period. The files are, however, excellently rich with regard to audience reception in the 1970s and 1980s, containing many viewer letters. The BFI microfiches on the early talent shows are very limited, containing little in the way of information about popular contestants.

⁶ Su Holmes, *Entertaining Television: The BBC and Popular Television Culture in the 1950s*, MUP, 2008.

⁷ John Corner, 'Finding data, reading patterns, telling stories: issues in the historiography of television', *Media, Culture and Society*, 25 (2003): 277.

⁸ See Steve Neale's canonical 'Questions of Genre', *Screen*, 31: 1 (1990), 45-66

⁹ John Ellis, '*La représentation de soi à la télévision: L'exemple du premier jeu télévisé sur ITV*', in

Television: The Experimental Moment. Delavaud, G. & Marechal, D. (eds.). Rennes: Éditions APOGÉE, 2011 : 279-291. Translation available at : [http://pure.rhul.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/la-representation-de-soi-a-la-television\(d6bf5a5e-3576-4547-95ef-c0f3d6bc6ec1\).html](http://pure.rhul.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/la-representation-de-soi-a-la-television(d6bf5a5e-3576-4547-95ef-c0f3d6bc6ec1).html)

¹⁰ See Su Holmes, 'The "Give-Away" Shows – Who is Really Paying?': 'Ordinary' People and the Development of the British Quiz Show (1945-58)' *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 3: 2, 2006, 284-303.

¹¹ See Michele Hilmes, *Network Nations: A Transnational History of British and American Broadcasting*, Routledge, 2012, pp.91-2.

¹² Found at '208 it was Great', <http://www.208itwasgreatradioluxembourg.co.uk/sounds/> [accessed 16 October 2012], which contains various excerpts from Radio Luxembourg shows.

¹³ See Hilmes, *Network Nations*, pp.91-2.

¹⁴ J.P Clarke to Head of Talks, 28 June 1954. R19/989 (BBC Written Archive Centre (WAC)).

¹⁵ Donna Halper and Dave Laing, 'Talent shows', John Shephard, Dave Horn and Dave Laing (eds), *Continuum Encyclopaedia of Popular Music of the World*, Part 1, p.467.

¹⁶ 'Amateurs, and No Bones About it', *Radio Times*, 18 November, 1949, p.7.

¹⁷ Hughie Green, *Opportunity Knocked*, Frederick Muller, 1965, p.134.

- ¹⁸ Valeria Camporesi, *Mass Culture and the Defence of National Traditions: The BBC and American Broadcasting, 1922-54*, 1993, European University Institute.
- ¹⁹ Andrew Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*, Routledge, 1997, 30.
- ²⁰ Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, 'Radio in World War II', in *The Historical Development of Popular Culture in Britain 2*, Open University Press, 75.
- ²¹ Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, Blackwell, p.51.
- ²² See Su Holmes, *British TV and Film Culture in the 1950s*, Intellect, 2005, 55-6.
- ²³ 'Final notes on trial recording of *Opportunity Knocks*', Dennis Main Wilson, 31 August 1948, R19/870 Entertainment: Opportunity Knocks 1948-60 (WAC).
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ See James Bennett, *Television Personalities: Stardom and the Small Screen*, Routledge, 2011, pp.41-88.
- ²⁶ Haley, cited in Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, volume IV: Sound and Vision* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).
- ²⁷ Nest Bradley to Head of Publicity, 29 September 1958. T16/168/2, BBC Written Archive Centre (WAC).
- ²⁸ 'Final notes on trial recording of *Opportunity Knocks*'.
- ²⁹ *Reynolds News*, 2 October, 1949. BBC Press clippings on *Opportunity Knocks*.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ E.g. *The Herald*, 18 February, 1949, *Reynolds News*, 19 April, 1949. (BBC press clippings on *Opportunity Knocks*).
- ³² Joshua Gamson, 'The Assembly Line of Greatness: Celebrity in Twentieth Century America', in Sean Redmond and Su Holmes (eds.), *A Reader in Stardom and Celebrity*, Sage, p.140. Originally published as Joshua Gamson, 'The Assembly Line of Greatness: Celebrity in Twentieth-Century America', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 9 (1), pp.1-24.
- ³³ Ibid, p.148.
- ³⁴ Matthew Stahl, Matthew. 'Authentic Boy Bands on TV? Performers and Impresarios in the Monkees and Making the Band', *Popular Music* 21:3 (2002): 313.
- ³⁵ Ibid, p.147.
- ³⁶ See Richard Dyer, *Stars*, BFI, 2001, p.42.
- ³⁷ The BBC more generally appeared to negotiate what might be termed a form of public service broadcasting fame – marked by a less overt desire to facilitate the intertextual circulation of their performers, or to promote them beyond the radio waves or television screen (Su Holmes, *Entertaining Television: The BBC and Popular Television Culture in the 1950s*, MUP, 2008).
- ³⁸ Green, *Opportunity Knocked*, p.136.
- ³⁹ Valeria Camporesi, *Mass Culture and the Defence of National Traditions*, p.182.
- ⁴⁰ Pilot script, R19/870 Entertainment: Opportunity Knocks 1948-60.
- ⁴¹ Script 3, R19/870 Entertainment: Opportunity Knocks 1948-60.
- ⁴² Script 4, R19/870 Entertainment: Opportunity Knocks 1948-60.
- ⁴³ John Ellis, 'La représentation de soi à la télévision: L'exemple du premier jeu télévisé sur ITV', p.284.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Green, *Opportunity Knocked*, p. 136
- ⁴⁶ Pilot script, R19/870 Entertainment: Opportunity Knocks 1948-60.
- ⁴⁷ Mr J. Macmillan to AHV (P), 16 March 1949, R19/870 Entertainment: Opportunity Knocks 1948-60.
- ⁴⁸ File on *Opportunity Knocks*, ITA/IBA/ Cable Authority Archive.
- ⁴⁹ Peter Black, 'Hughie Knocked', *Daily Mail*, 24 July 1967 (BFI press clippings on *Opportunity Knocks*).
- ⁵⁰ Joe Moran, 'Stand Up and Be Counted': Hughie Green, the 1970s and Popular Memory', *History Workshop Journal*, 70 (Autumn 2010): 179.
- ⁵¹ TW Chalmers, Controller Light programme, 3 February 1950. R22/193 Legal: *Opportunity Knocks* 1949-51.
- ⁵² Matthew Stahl, 'Authentic Boy Bands on TV?', p.309.
- ⁵³ Chris Rojek, *Celebrity*, Flicks Books, 2001, p.33.
- ⁵⁴ See Guy Redden, 'Making Over the Talent Show', in Gareth Palmer (ed.), *Exposing Lifestyle Television: The Big Reveal*, Ashgate, 2008, p.138.
- ⁵⁵ Hughie Green, *Opportunity Knocked*, p.138.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid, p.139.
- ⁵⁷ See also Su Holmes, 'Whoever heard of anyone being a screaming success for doing nothing?': 'Sabrina', the BBC and television fame in the 1950s', *Media History*, 17 (1) 2011, pp.33-48.
- ⁵⁸ Gamson, 'The Assembly Line of Greatness', p.150.
- ⁵⁹ Darren Devine, 'Ceri Rees on X-Factor: Exploitation of a Vulnerable Woman or Good Television?', <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/2011/09/21/ceri-rees-on-x-factor-exploitation-of-a-vulnerable-woman-or-good-television-91466-29457036/> [accessed 10 October, 2012]

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- ⁶⁰ Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture*, Indiana University Press, 1994, p.54.
- ⁶¹ John Corner, 'A Fiction (Un)Like Any Other?', *Critical Studies in Television*, 1:1, 2006: 92.
- ⁶² 'Final notes on trial recording of *Opportunity Knocks*'.
- ⁶³ HG to Wing Commander Cooper, MO House of Commons, 25 November, 1949. R22/193 Legal: *Opportunity Knocks* 1949-51.
- ⁶⁴ Dennis Main Wilson, 'Listener Research Questions', 17 March 1949, R19/870 Entertainment: *Opportunity Knocks* 1948-60.
- ⁶⁵ HG to Wing Commander Cooper, MO House of Commons, 25 November, 1949. R22/193 Legal: *Opportunity Knocks* 1949-51.
- ⁶⁶ Undated script, T12/42 TV Light Entertainment: *Carroll Levis and his Discoveries*
- ⁶⁷ Ronald Waldman to Controller of Programmes, Television, 16 June, 1954, T12/42 TV Light entertainment: *Carroll Levis and his Discoveries*.
- ⁶⁸ *TV Times*, 15 June 1956, p.19.
- ⁶⁹ Halper and Laing, 'Talent Shows', p.467.
- ⁷⁰ Andrew Goodwin, *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, 1992.
- ⁷¹ 'Outline for show', 15 May 1953, T12/42 TV Light entertainment: *Carroll Levis and his Discoveries*.
- ⁷² 'Knocking for What?', *The Times*, 7 August 1973 (BFI press clippings on *Opportunity Knocks*).
- ⁷³ Moran, 'Stand up and be Counted', p.179.
- ⁷⁴ Hughie Green, 'Opportunity Knocks', the *Times* 3 April, 1975, p.15, Col A.
- ⁷⁵ The critical reception of Green becomes increasingly vicious as the programme progresses (and aspects of Green's political affiliation may be important here (see Moran, 2010)). But it is notable that the shift to *visual* performance seems crucial.. Negative reactions to his performance style – his 'variety of winks, twitches, grins, ogles, eyebrow raising and forehead wrinkling' and a 'smile that is enough to send the toothpaste crawling back up the tube' (Gerard Garrett, *The Daily Sketch*, 9 September, 1969 (BFI press clippings on *Opportunity Knocks*) appear quite early on.
- ⁷⁶ Brian Tesler to Bernard Sendall, 21 April, 1971, file on *Opportunity Knocks*, ITA/IBA/ Cable Authority Archive.
- ⁷⁷ Guy Redden, 'Making Over the Talent Show', in Gareth Palmer (ed.), *Exposing Lifestyle Television: The Big Reveal*, Ashgate, 2008, p.130.
- ⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p.140.
- ⁷⁹ Green, *Opportunity Knocked*, p.233.