

CHARLIE VAUDE

(Incl. **Lilas Birt**)

With his onstage partner Bill Verne, Charlie Vaude established one of Australia's greatest-ever patter acts – Vaude and Verne (1908-1929). In addition to writing much of their comic material, Vaude wrote songs – many of these also became hits for artists. After they parted ways, Vaude moved to Melbourne where he turned to radio. With Renn Miller he provided light entertainment and advertising material for 3DB's coverage of the 1930, 1934 and 1938 Ashes series. The pair also recorded a number of songs and several patter-style comedy pieces.

1882-1901

The son of Charles John Ridgway (a printer) and his wife Mary (née McCarthy), Charles Joseph Ridgway was reared and educated in London. After a period of time employed as an errand boy, he took up a carpentry apprenticeship, a decision that was influenced by his father. Ridgway's passion from an early age, however, was to pursue a life on stage, a career of which both his parents apparently disapproved. Frequenting music halls as often as possible during his teen years, Ridgway learned to imitate the patter routines and songs of such leading comedians as George Robey and Wilkie Bard. Desperate to be free of his indentures, he eventually enlisted in the Royal West Surrey Regimental Band, after lying about his age to the recruitment officers. It was with the regimental band that he played at King Edward VII's coronation in 1901.



Source: National Library of Australia.

1902-1909

Sometime around 1902, Ridgway migrated to Australia, initially settling in Western Australia. Although still keen to pursue his interest in the stage, fiscal demands meant that he was required to pursue various alternative jobs, including labouring and auctioneering. In an interview with the *Theatre* magazine he recalls that the latter job allowed him the opportunity to perform a miniature variety show with fellow auctioneer Bert Thomas ("a good singer"):

I used to operate at Pingelly, Albany, Bunbury, Northam, York and Fremantle. So as to stimulate buyers in making a bid I make it a point of working off topical jokes... [While] in Northam we [attended] a bioscope show. Something had gone wrong with the machine. I thought it would be a good thing for the following day's [auction if Bert and I] could work off a sort of announcement from the stage to the crowded audience. The proprietor of the show said I could do this if in return I could put anything in the shape of a turn. Thomas and I gave a few songs and worked off a number of topical jokes. The turn occupied twenty minutes. So pleased was the bioscope man at the way we had delighted the audience that besides allowing us to announce our sale, he threw us 30s between us (Jan. 1912, 25).

At one stage, Ridgway and Thomas found themselves forced to spend some time in Perth due to a show down in the auction trade during the winter months. Ridgway approached veteran minstrel comic W. B. (Billy) Warner, who was then about to begin a season in Perth and Fremantle, and succeeded in getting themselves on the bill. They followed this engagement with a season at Cotteslow with Medora's Pierotts. When Thomas decided to return to auctioneering, Ridgway put together a small show. Comprising a ventriloquist, a magician, and himself, the company nevertheless worked up a two-hour entertainment package.

In 1908, after having concluded that Perth and West Australia could not offer him the opportunities to develop both his act and career, Ridgway travelled east to Adelaide. While he did not find any engagements in that city, he did come across an advertisement for performers to undertake a season in the north-west N.S.W. mining town of Broken Hill. It was here that he met with Will Barrington, a comedian who was then viewed by the locals as a favourite. Ridgway and Barrington soon teamed up, adopting the stage names (Charlie) Vaude and (Bill) Verne. His use of the word "vaude," was likely a take on the slang term for vaudeville which had been popularised by the USA industry magazine, *Variety*.¹

After completing their debut season in Broken Hill, they travelled to Melbourne, and shortly afterwards toured regional Victoria (including Ballarat and Bendigo). Around this time, they came to the attention of the Fullers' Collingwood-based agent, and subsequently signed with the company for an eight-week tour of New Zealand. The

¹ The assertion that "vaude" had been popularised by *Variety* as a slang term for vaudeville is made by Anthony Slide. *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville* (1994), 526.

contract with Fullers was extended to nine months, after which they toured Tasmania, followed by a sixteen-week season in Brisbane under Ted Holland. It was in 1909, during the latter engagement, that Vaude and Verne came to the notice of Harry Rickards' brother/manager Jack C. Leete. He signed the act to tour the Tivoli circuit, and it was in association with that organisation that Vaude and Verne became household names throughout Australia and New Zealand over the next two decades (TT: Jan. 1912, 25).

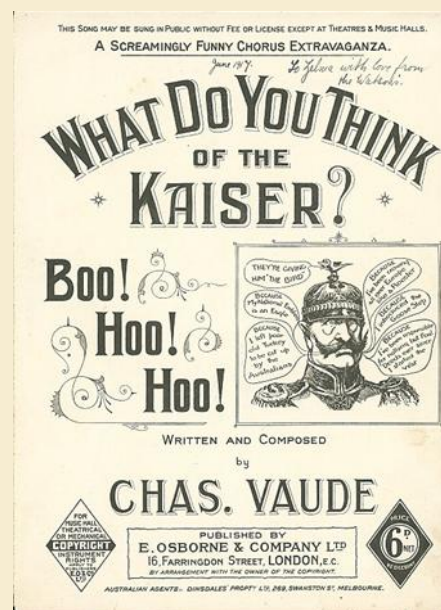
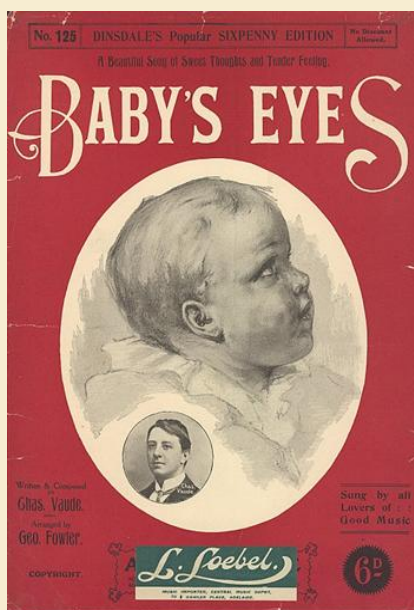
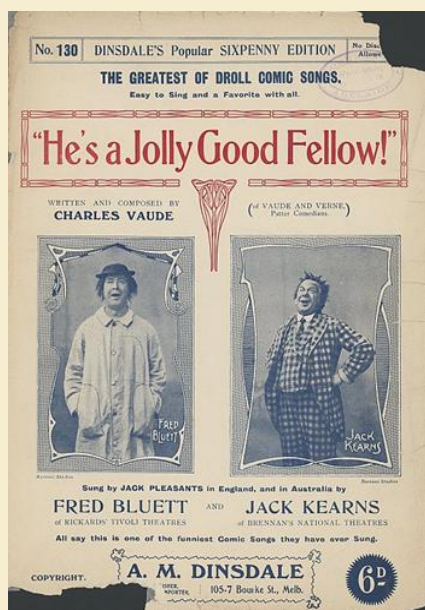
1909-1929

[For details regarding Charlies Vaude's career with Will Barrington (ca. 1909-1929), see *Vaude and Verne.*]

1911-1919

On 25 September 1911, Charlie Vaude married seventeen-year-old variety performer Lilas Birt at St Jude's Anglican Church, Carlton. She had been performing on the variety stage as a serio-comic from at least 1905. Their only child, a son, was born in Melbourne in early December 1915. [See *Historical Notes* section below for further details on Birt].

By 1914, Vaude had become a major figure in Australia's vaudeville 'A' list of celebrities. His induction into the Chasers social group led to a number of his poems about the group's Sydney Harbour outings being published in *Australian Variety*, including one about Harry Clay: "When the Baritone was Waiting on the Hungry Harry Clay" (1914). Other Chaser-related poems include "In Sydney on a Thursday When it's Wet" and "Has Joe Been In?" (both 1914).



Source: National Library of Australia.

1920-1929

When the variety industry began to decline in the late 1920s, Vaude and Verne temporarily established a base of operations in the Queensland coastal city of Rockhampton, with Vaude taking over the lease of several theatres in the city (and also in other nearby centres, including Mount Morgan). It is possible that their association with the area began as early as 1926, when Vaude took on the responsibilities of producer/performer with the Minna Theatres, which operated in both Townsville and Rockhampton. Certainly, by 1929, both men were well established in Rockhampton, with Verne's wife running her own dance school (advertised as Mrs Billy Verne's School of Dance). The school catered for adults' ballroom dancing, juveniles' theatrical and fancy dancing, and private tuition (MB: 2 July 1929, 2). Verne is believed to have also continued performing, appearing with the various companies that toured through the area.

Charlie Vaude's managerial career saw him lease Rockhampton's Coliseum and Oddfellows' theatres. Under his management (known as Vaude's Theatrical Enterprises), the city was treated to vaudeville and revue by such troupes as the Merrymakers of 1929 (ca. July). The troupe was led by George "Hermie" Ward, with the other performers including Mrs George Ward, Vaude and Verne, and the Le Brun brothers. The *Morning Bulletin's* review of the opening night records that Vaude (invariably referred to as Chillo Vaude, or just Chillo) had instigated a Thursday

night Merrymakers' market, whereby all holders of programmes were able to participate in the purchase of such articles as watches, gramophones, cutlery, thermos flasks, etc. He also held regular "How Do You Do" competitions at the theatre (26 Aug. 1929, 3). Vaude also leased the Oddfellows' Theatre in nearby Mount Morgan around this period. The Vaude and Verne partnership most likely ended in 1929 or 1930, after Vaude moved to Melbourne to establish a new career in radio.

1930-1942

Charlie Vaude's radio career began in 1930, when he was employed by Melbourne station 3DB to invigorate its radio advertising. He was engaged to provide similar interest to the station's evening broadcasts of the cricket during the 1930 Ashes series. Partnered by Renn Miller (previously associated with Huxham's Serenaders and Edward Branscombe's Dandies),² Vaude provided gags and songs to keep the audience amused while the experts deciphered the vital information from cables. Vaude was again involved in cricket broadcasting during the 1934 and 1938 Test series. During the 1930s, he also recorded a number of songs and several patter-style comedy pieces in collaboration with both Renn Miller and Richard Tauber.

Vaude's popularity with radio audiences saw him given further on-air opportunities, including the enormously popular *Smile Away Club*. By 1937, the show boasted 37,000 members, including Prime Minister Joseph Lyons and his wife. He also featured in 3DB's *C. and G. Minstrel Show*, hosted community singing and tours of country towns, acted as the rat-bag professor of Bonehead College, and become a leading figure in the station's charity events. He also played an influential role in helping develop the careers of a number of variety performers, including Joy Westmore. With his almost two-decade-long career as a comedy star with the Vaude and Verne partnership and his subsequent radio career, Charlie Vaude was firmly entrenched as a household name in Melbourne.

Following the death of his first wife in 1931, Vaude married dancer Leila Halliday at Northcote in 1935. He died of cancer at his home in the same suburb on 29 October 1942 and was buried in Melbourne general cemetery. His wife and his son from his first marriage survived him.

SEE ALSO

- [Vaude and Verne](#)

PERFORMANCE STYLE

1. As a comedian, Charlie Vaude adopted different delivery strategies to those he had learned in his youth, requiring him to work on much broader lines:

In England one can always tickle [an] audience into laughter - or excite them to enthusiasm - by playing on their jingoistic feelings. Here [in Australia] if you attempted anything of that kind you would be given the bird. The Australian wants something in the nature of real humour - satirical or otherwise. He wants this, it is true, but you must not presume upon his being able to follow you if you become in any way subtle, nor must you take it that he is conversant with the political and general topics of the hour (TT: Jan. 1912, 27).

In this same interview, Vaude provides examples of jokes that worked and failed. He also provides reasons for the different audience responses (27).

Vaude's specialty was to make fun of topical issues and current personalities, relying on wit to turn his observations into a combination of humour and satire. Typical of the responses to Vaude's performances is the following *Brisbane Courier* review from 1918:

He has an amazing range of talk, and it is seldom that his act is the same as the preceding performance. Verne is never sure what his nimble-witted partner is going to say, and makes it a practice to studiously read his daily newspaper half an hour before they go on the stage so as to have some knowledge of the events which Vaude is likely to satirise (21 Sept. 1918, 12).

A 1924 *Theatre* review of a Fullers' program similarly refers to the Vaude and Verne act as working up 'seemingly inexhaustible topical newspaper jokes' (July 1924, 21).

² As noted in the Huxham's Serenaders and Dandies entries, Miller's Christian name was been spelled variously as 'Ren' and 'Renn' throughout his career. For uniformity purposes, the AVTA has adopted the second spelling, which was more frequently used in advertising during the 1920s. 'Ren' appears to have been more common post-1930.

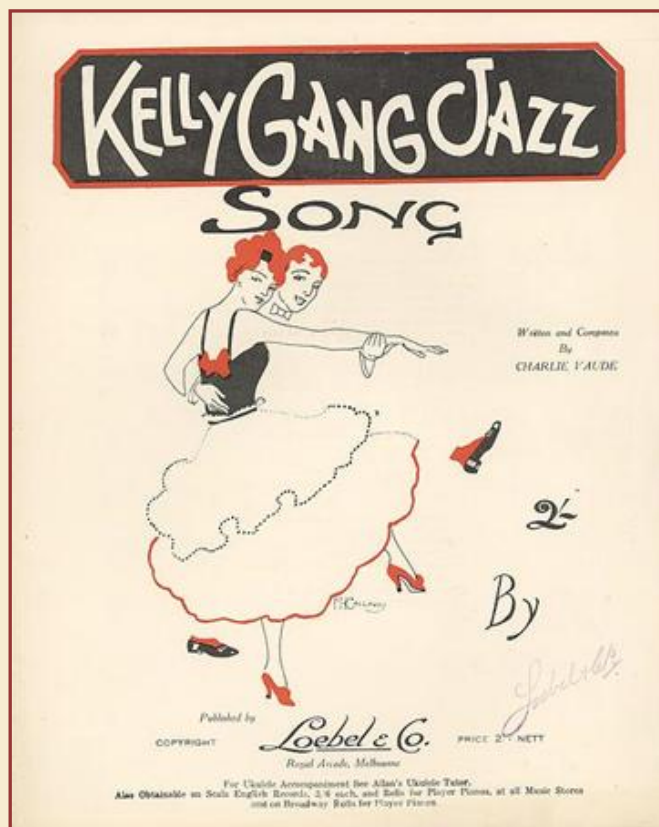
HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. Bill Verne's real name has been referred to as 'Partington' (Isadore Brodsky, *The Streets of Sydney*, 40) and 'Bartington' (David Dunstan, ADB: 312). According to several reports published during their career (including an interview with Charles Vaude), Verne's birth name was Will Barrington. [See, for example TT: Jan. 1912, 25 / Oct. 1915, 34 / and Apr. 1916, 34.
2. Vaude's reputation in Brisbane was seriously compromised in late 1914 when he was reported to have made some contentious jokes about Ted Holland's recent death during a Perth engagement. The jokes were quickly relayed back to Queensland, with the *Truth* publishing them in its 11 October edition. The paper proposed that not only were the jokes not funny, but that if Vaude and Verne ever made their way back to Brisbane audiences would not fail to remember this affront to the city's well-liked former entrepreneur (9). A *Theatre* article published in January the following year insisted, however, that the whole incident had been misrepresented, and that Vaude and Verne not only had great respect for Holland (and for whom they had previously worked), but that the jokes were in fact imaginary patter attributed to them by the *Sunday Times* (Perth) critic "Dryblower" Murphy (Jan. 1915, 46).

Vaude was again dragged into a controversy when he was accused by fellow variety performer Sydney Jones in 1915 of plagiarising the songs "Who Killed Cock Robin" and "Who Smashed the Kaiser" for his own song "Who Killed the Kaiser" (TT: June 1915, 47 and July 1915, 38). Vaude responded to the allegations in the August issue in a lengthy letter, arguing that the lyrics of his work bore no similarity to either song, and that this was based on his own observation of Jones performing "Who Smashed the Kaiser" (38).

LILAS BIRT (ca. 1894-1931)

1. Birt's birth name is given as 'Lilas May Roots' in David Dunstan's un-cited entry on Vaude in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Her Christian name during the early 1900s was often spelled 'Lillas' or 'Lilias' in advertising (see, for example, *Age* 19 Feb. 1910, 18).
2. A "charming serio comic" by the name of Lily Burt was billed as appearing at Melbourne's People's Concerts for the first time on 13 February 1897. If Lilas Birt's year of birth (ca. 1894) is correct, they cannot be the same person. The performer would have had to be in her early to mid-teens to be billed as a serio. However, as Birt's birth details are yet to be firmly established and because the names during the period in question were very often mis-spelled in advertising and programs (i.e., "Burt" should have been spelled 'Birt'), there is a remote possibility that they were the same person. Further research into this issue is required. Interestingly, the same bill advertises a double song-and-dance act by the name of Verne and Colligan: it is unclear if there is any relationship between this Verne and Will Barrington.
3. She is described as 'little Lilas Birt' during her engagement at the Palace Garden's Theatre, Perth, ca. 20 January 1905. Birt is billed ca. 1910 as 'popular serio and character artist'.
4. In late December 1921, while playing a season at a Broadmeadows theatre (Newcastle), Birt suffered a serious accident in her dressing room when a floorboard gave way. The fall apparently stripped the skin clean off her shin and calf for several inches (*Everyone's* 4 January 1922, p.20).
5. A 1918 paragraph published in *Australian Variety* (10 May, n. pag) refers to Mrs Chas Vaude as being Miss Lorraine Watson, then playing a circuit around the Hunter district of New South Wales (to be followed by a tour of Tasmania for Don Henry). It is unclear if this reference is an error or whether Lilas Birt was performing under another stage name.
6. Although Birt often toured with her husband, her name does not always appear in advertised programs or in reviews. Her established engagements to date are († indicates on the same bill as Vaude and Verne):
 - 1905: LEONARD DAVIS (Palace Gardens, Perth; ca. 20 Jan.*).
 - 1906: HARRY RICKARDS (Tivoli Th, Adel; 22 Dec. -* †)
 - 1910: n/e (St Kilda Town Hall, Melb; 19 Feb. -*) • PEOPLE'S CONCERTS (Temp Hall, Melb; ca. Nov.*).
 - 1920: FULLERS' THEATRES (Fullers Th, Syd; ca. July -* †)
 - 1921: n/e (Broadmeadows, Newc; ca. Dec.*).
 - 1923: HARRY CLAY (Gaiety Th, Syd; ca. Oct.* †) • (Bohemia Th, Bris; ca. Dec. †)
 - 1924: FULLERS' THEATRES (Fullers' Th, Syd; ca. May > with Fullers' Fantastics †).
 - 1925: FULLERS' THEATRES (Empire Th, Bris; ca. Feb. > with Con Moreni Co).



Source: National Library of Australia.

ORIGINAL COMPOSITIONS (Published)

♪ = published score available online via the National Library of Australia. All other scores held by the National Library of Australia. All songs (music and words) by Charlie Vaude unless otherwise noted.

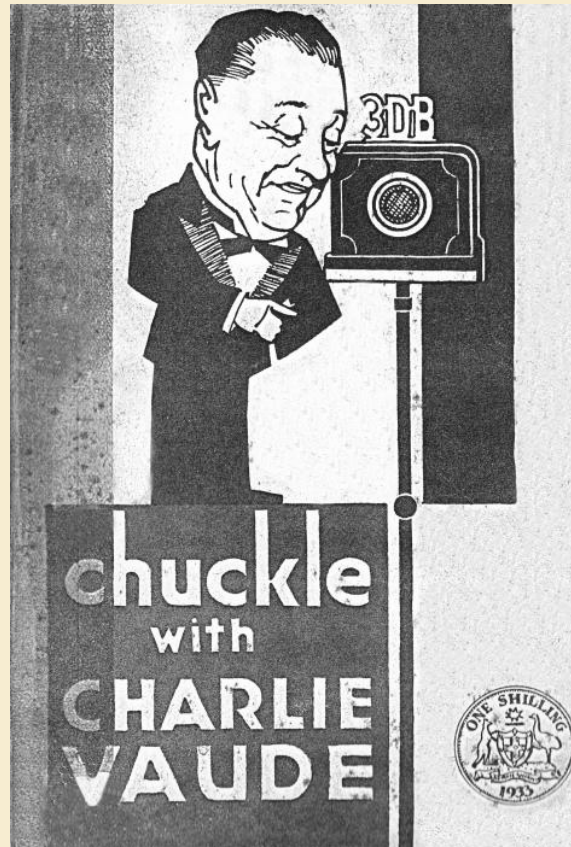


- 191-: "Oh! Oh! Oh" (Charlie Vaude/Fred O'Connor) Melb: Dinsdales
- ["We'll Have a Game of Sweethearts: For Old Time's Sake"](#)
- ["My Little Lubra \(Aboriginal Originality\)"](#)
- ["Baby's Eyes"](#)
- ["He's a Jolly Good fellow"](#)
- 1912: ["There's Someone in Australia"](#) (Charlie Vaude/Moritz Lutzen)
- 1913: ["Oh Won't You Play it Again"](#) (Charlie Vaude/Moritz Lutzen)
- ["Kosciusko"](#) (Charlie Vaude/Moritz Lutzen)
- ca.1914 ["There's a Sunny Land, Australia"](#)
- ["Sing Us a Song of Australia \(Coo-ee - 'Twill Remind Us of Home, Sweet Home\)"](#)
- ["My Maori Queen"](#) (Charlie Vaude/Moritz Lutzen)
- ["What Do You Think of the Kaiser? Boo! Hoo! Hoo!"](#)
- 1915: ["If England Wants a Hand, Well Here it Is"](#) (Charlie Vaude/Joe Slater)
- 1916: ["Daddy's in the Dardanelles"](#) (Charlie Vaude/Roger Cameron)
- ["Daddy's in the Firing Line"](#) (Charlie Vaude/Roger Cameron)
- ["A Hundred Years Ago"](#)
- ["There's No Need to Worry at All \(If You're Thinking of the War.\)"](#)
- ["I've Had a Girl in Berlin \(There's One Girl Going to Be My Own, My Australian Rose\)"](#) (Charlie Vaude/Moritz Lutzen)
- ["When the Boys Come Marching Home"](#) (Charlie Vaude/Phil Percival)
- ["What's the Use of Germany at All?"](#)
- ["They're Anzacs Every One"](#)
- 1919: ["Don't Sing a Song About the War to Me \(The War's All Over Now\)"](#)
- ["Bring Back Those Wonderful Days"](#) (Charlie Vaude/Darl McBoyle/John E. Nugent)
- 192-: ["Kelly Gang Jazz"](#)
- 1925: ["Uncle Sam"](#)
- 1930: ["Ten, Twenty, Thirty, Forty, Fifty Years Ago"](#) Comedy Fox-trot (Charlie Vaude/Jack O'Hagan)
- 1934: ["I Never Meant to Say Goodbye"](#)

ADDITIONAL SONGS BY CHARLES VAUDE

The following list comprises songs that were written by Charles Vaude, which were either unpublished or for which the publication details are yet to be established.

- "Attic, The' (n. yr.). Written by Vaude for Billy Rego in *Tails Up* (ctd. TT: Aug. 1920, 16).
- "Basement, The' (n. yr.). Written by Vaude for Billy Rego (ctd. TT: Aug. 1920, 16).
- "Dear Old Dad' (n. yr.). Written by Vaude for Lilas Birt (ctd. TT: Aug. 1920, 16).
- "If There Wasn't Any Money in the World' (ca. 1908-1911), Charlie Vaude. (Vaude indicates that this song had been published.)
- "There is Not Another Baby in the World Like Ours' (1917), Charlie Vaude (ctd. AV: 30 May 1917, n. pag.).
- "When I Lost You' (1914). Parody by Charlie Vaude (ctd. AV: 20 Jan. 1915, 5).
- "Who Smashed the Kaiser' (1915). (ctd. TT: June 1915, 47 and July 1915, 38).



RECORDINGS:

The following recordings are available commercially and/or through various Australian libraries.

Compact Disk Compilations:

- *Stars of the Australian Stage and Radio: Volume 1*. Larrikin, CD, LRH 429. [Series: Warren Faye Presents Yesterday's Australia] ('Grandfather's Shirt').

National Film and Sound Archive:

The following recordings are held in various collections:

- "The Mountains of Mourne" (incl. "Introduction of Song"). Performed by Ren Miller [Side 1]
- "Test Cricket 1938" (1938). Comic dialogue between Charlie and Vaude and Richard Tauber [Side 2]. Released by Radio Station 3DB.
- 'Dudley Flats and Melody Mixture. Performed by Charles Vaude [Side 1] ; unidentified song performed by an unidentified dance orchestra [Side 2] (1938). Recorded in the studios of Radio Station 3DB and released by 3DB.
- "Air Check" [Side 1] "Smile Away" [Side 2] (ca. 1930s). From Radio Station 3DB's *Smile Away Club* program. Performers Charlie Vaude and Ren Miller. [see 3DB Radio Broadcast].
- *Smile Away: A Nostalgic Excursion - Melbourne 1925-1931* [Kenatone compilation ; K-101] ("Smile Away," performed by Charlie Vaude).
- *World War I* [NFSA In-house compilation] ("If England Wants a Hand" - performed by Harrison Latimer).

Callaway Centre, University of Western Australia

The following recordings are available on line.

- "[Baby's Eyes](#)" (sung by Fred Bluett)
- "[He's a Jolly Good Fellow](#)" (sung by Fred Bluett)

FURTHER REFERENCE

The following list comprises articles, paragraphs, and reports relating to Charlie Vaude that are not given individual entries in this database. See also Vaude and Verne.

Entries with an asterisk (*) beside them indicate that the source is an advertisement.

Djubal, Clay. "[Vaude, Charlie](#)." *AustLit* (2007).

Dunstan, David. "[Vaude, Charlie \(1882?-1942\)](#)" ADB: 12 (1990), 312-313.

500 Victorians. Melbourne: M. G. Henderson, 1934.

McLaughlan, Bill. *From Wireless to Radio: The 3DB Story* [sound recording] Melbourne: Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind, 1992.

National Library of Australia: see sheet music collection.

National Film and Sound Archive. The NFSA holds an oral history interview with Joy Westmore, in which she talks about Charlie Vaude's influence on her early career. Interview by Beverley Dunn

See also:

AV: 20 Jan. (1915), 5 [re. artists using Vaude's songs without permission] • 10 Nov. (1915), n. pag. [re. the possibility of Vaude and James White (Hawklett journalist) forming a partnership to write songs and sketches for revue and vaudeville] • 24 Nov. (1915), n. pag

E: 4 Jan. (1922), 20 [re. Lilas Birt accident]

MO: 31 Jan. (2007), 14 [photo with Renn Miller, Jack Ryder, and Frank Russell].

TT: Dec. (1914), 45 • June (1915), 47 / and July 1915, 38 [Sydney Jones's accusations re. plagiarism]

Last updated: 13/09/2015

Expanded and updated from the 2007 AustLit entry

NB: The URL for this PDF will change each time it is updated. If you wish to cite or link to this record please use the following:
Australian Variety Theatre Archive • <http://ozvta.com/practitioners-u-v/>