

JOHN FULLER SNR

Incl. Fullers' Concert Parties / John Fuller and Sons Vaudeville Company / John Fullers' Empire Minstrel and Variety Company

Minstrel performer, tenor, variety entrepreneur. The founder of the Fuller theatrical empire, John Fuller began his career as a performer in England in the late 1860s or early 1870s. He came to Australia in 1889 with the London Pavilion Company, remaining in the country for some five years before moving his family to New Zealand, in 1894. The Fullers initially presented their own concerts, and then gradually expanded the shows through the addition of other performers. Fuller returned to Australia in 1899 with most of his family and began presenting "Shilling Pops" concerts in Melbourne. He later established the Empire Vaudeville and Minstrel Company (Sydney, 1901) before touring elsewhere, including Tasmania. In 1904 the family returned to New Zealand and set about re-establishing a permanent circuit there. Fuller kept performing into the 1910s but by then had long since relinquished management of the family business to his sons.

Born in 1848, John Fuller Snr initially pursued a career as a composer in Fleet Street before turning to the stage as a music hall singer. According to Peter Downes this change of careers came about through fortuitous circumstances when 23 year-old Fuller rescued a London singing teacher from drowning in the River Thames. When the man discovered that his rescuer had a natural tenor voice he offered to train him. Some five years later Fuller decided to give up his trade and became a professional singer (145). Downes goes on further to record:

[Fuller's] first engagement was to sing three songs in a tavern for which he received the princely sum of two shillings and sixpence. "When I pocketed my first night's salary," he once told an interviewer, "I wondered what I had done to get so much money for so little work" (145).

Two of the companies he is known to have been associated with during his career in Britain during the 1870s and 1880s were the Mohawk Minstrels and the Moore-Burgess Minstrels. The Mohawk Minstrels engagement in particular demonstrates how quickly he had developed as an entertainer. Regarded as one of the two best blackface companies in Britain at that time, Fuller would not have been taken on unless he had already shown remarkable talent. Away from his stage career Fuller and his wife Harriett (née Jones) had seven children during this period, including sons Benjamin, John Jnr and Walter, and daughters Lydia and Hetty. All were later encouraged to follow their father into show business.

Sometime around 1888/1889 Fuller joined the London Pavilion Company for a season in the English capital. The company came to the attention of F. E. Hiscock's UK representative, J. Saville Smith who subsequently booked it to undertake a tour of Australia. In an interview with *Theatre* magazine in later years Fuller indicated that his decision to accept Australian offer was primarily due to an (undisclosed) illness that required a change in climate (June 1923, 13). His popularity with Australian audiences was, however, very likely a major reason for remaining in the country long after the contract had ended.

1889 - 1899

The London Pavilion Company, which was known in Australia as Hiscocks' London Pavilion Co., opened in Melbourne in August 1889, and followed this by a season at the Opera House in Sydney in early October. In addition to Fuller, who was billed as "the celebrated tenor from St. James' Hall, the company also included "imports" J. Whitworth, Jolly John Nash ("Old England's Greatest Comique") and "Grotesque Ethiopian Character Delineators" Morton and Sadler; along with several well-known Australian performers, including Harry Clay, W. Horace Bent, George Turner, Beaumont Read (SMH: 5 Oct. 1889, 2). One of the more popular features of the entertainment was a double quartet which comprised Fuller, Harry Clay, Beaumont Reade, George Turner, J.V. Doran, W.H. Harrison, J. Whitworth and a Mr Smith. Two of the songs they are known to have performed were "The Cruiskeen Lawn," and "A Soldier's Love" (SMH: 4 Nov. 1889, 4). Fuller also appeared in the pantomime *The Barber's Daughter; or, the Great Kan-Kan Dance* (adapted and localised by John W. Morton from Rossini' *The Barber of Seville*).



Australasian Stage Annual (1901), 43

Over the next five years Fuller found engagements with a number of companies in both Australia and New Zealand. Those identified to date are the Representative Metropolitan Co (1891), Frank M. Clark's Silk Stockings Co (1892), the People's Concerts (1892) and Emerson and Woods Alabama Minstrels (1892). He also appeared on the bills of various entertainment establishments such as the People's Concerts (Melb) and the Coojee Palace Aquarium. Having decided to not return to England, Fuller arranged for his wife and younger children to join him in Australia. John Jnr, then 12, arrived in 1891 and continued his education at a school in the Melbourne suburb of Collingwood. 18 year old Benjamin came out two years later.



In mid-1893 Fuller undertook a concert tour of New Zealand with Julie and Rose Albu. After concluding this engagement he decided to remain in the country, and once again his family followed. Having settled in Auckland, Fuller and his wife initiated a series of regular "Popular Concerts" – which included Wednesday (popular music) and Sunday (choir music). He gradually expanded his entertainment, offering vaudeville acts and a Myriorama tableau sideshow, with all of the family being involved in the business in some way. Peter Downes records that by 1895 the Fullers, along with basso singer Howard Chambers, began to make appearances outside Auckland, travelling the country from north to south:

Their programmes comprised a first half of vocal items: John Senior and Chambers would sing ballads, Hetty was the soprano, Lydia gave recitations, Walter was the solo pianist and accompanist and Ben was the comedian. In the second part the Myriorama was featured, John junior acting as projectionist. In this coloured pictures sides of various subjects were projected on to a screen while Ben spoke a commentary and the various singers provided music appropriate to the scenes being shown. There was a classic night in Dunedin during 1897, however, when the audience found the musical accompaniment too distracting and there were several loud calls for the pianist to stop playing (146).

Theatre July (1906), 4.

Although the Myriorama had been a success for the company for several years by 1898 the constant demand for new images was becoming a drain on that part of the entertainment package and it was replaced it with a waxworks display, which Fuller acquired from Melbourne. Some of these figures of notable or infamous people from around the world were also presented on stage with accompanying musical performances. Two of the highlight seasons for the family around this period were the 1898/99 Auckland Industrial and Mining Exhibition, and a substantially extended season at Dunedin's Alhambra Theatre beginning March 1899.¹

A review in a July 1900 edition of the *Observer* (Auckland) provides an insight into a typical evening's entertainment provided by the John Fuller and Sons' Melbourne Waxworks and Vaudeville Company around this period:

The doors are opened at 7:15 and the stage performances begins at eight so that ample time is given to the rounds of the "figures." These embrace models of many of the highest celebrities as well as those of a number of the most notorious. Amongst the former are the Queen and other members of the royal family, the late Mr Gladstone, the Pope, Dr Jamieson, Kruger, Cecil Rhodes, Captain and Mrs Dreyfus, and Colonel Picquart, whilst the "Chamber of Horrors" contains excellent material from the healthiest of nightmares. From the time the doors opened until the show begins there is an exhibition of Punch and Judy worked by professor Buckford.

At 8 o'clock the curtain rises on a company of seven who call themselves the Bijou Minstrel Party. They consist of four corner men, an interlocutor and two lady artists. An item is rendered by each of them and an encore is the inevitable result. The second part is varied and interesting. Quite a host of artists is engaged in it, and each of them contributes something. There are ballads and comic songs, character impersonations and side splitting dialogues and the whole concludes at 10 o'clock with a farce by the members of the company. And when it is all over, the one thing you reflect upon is how Mr Fuller can for the charge of a nimble sixpence give you so much that is really good (ctd. Downes, 147).

The Dunedin season soon became such a success that John Fuller and Sons also began establishing their presence in Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland – with all four cities becoming the cornerstone of what would eventually be the Fullers' Dominion circuit. Another significant move by Fuller, and likely at the instigation of Ben Fuller, was to purchase the Alhambra – a move that not only gave them a sense of stability but also provided them a capital investment that provided them with the foundation for future growth.

¹ Maurice Gordon Hirst (*Music and the Stage in New Zealand*) records that the Dunedin season last 87 weeks but also records the years as being 1897-98. Hirst also refers to the company as "Fuller's Bijou Co," a name which appears only to have been used as a title for the troupe's first part minstrel entertainment (i.e. "The Bijou Minstrel Party"). While the years mentioned by Hirst are likely to be incorrect it is possible that the length of the season is close to the mark.

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Australasian Stage Annual (1901), 24.

After running for 20 months in Wellington, Fuller and Sons' Empire Company closed their long season on Friday night. The hall was crowded, so much so that the doors were only open half an hour when the sale of tickets was stopped. The genial Johnny was here, there, and everywhere, and was indefatigable in his efforts to get everybody placed as comfortable as possible. He came on the stage to introduce some competitors in a beauty show, and the audience at once cheered and sang, "For he's a jolly good fellow." Several presentations were made, including three to Will Stevens, and a nice umbrella to Miss Maud Fanning. The latter lady has now been performing in Wellington for over six months, and was as great a favourite during her last nights as when she first opened. It is now about two and a-half years since the waxworks first opened in Dunedin, with seven people, but since that time over 150 artists have come from the other side, and played seasons with the Fullers. One, Will Stevens, is so popular in New Zealand that he has been now nearly two years showing in this colony, except for a short trip he made to Sydney, where he showed at the Empire for close on four months. Among the artists who will long be remembered are the Flying Jordans, Tyfers, John Coleman, Leslie Bros., Maud Fanning, Charles Fanning, and Georgie Devoe, Will Stevens, Will Watkins, George Dean, Fred Bluett, Denis Carney, Blutch Jones, Ted Herbert, Daisy Chard, Eva Wilson, Freddy Garnet, and a host of others too numerous to mention. Messrs Fuller are withdrawing from New Zealand to open theatres in Australia, and everybody will wish them the prosperity they deserve. *Kie-ora.*

Otago Witness 14 Aug. (1901), 57

Despite the gradual expansion of their business and the popularity they had gained during the mid to late 1890s, John Fuller Snr had gradually come to the conclusion that he was more ideally suited to performing than managing and subsequently gave his son Ben more managerial responsibility. Satisfied that his son could look after the family's business in New Zealand, Fuller decided in early 1899 to attempt to establish a foothold in the more lucrative Australian variety market. In this respect he most likely hoped that the family's experience and professionalism, along with his well-regarded reputation would be enough to begin the process of a trans-Tasman expansion. By July the family, minus Benjamin, had returned to Melbourne, where Fuller inaugurated a series of Shilling Pops concerts at the Town Hall. One of the features of the entertainment was the Myriorama, which Benjamin had by then preferred to do without. The scenes depicted for this season included "London by Day," "Through Ireland on a Jaunting Car," "Glasgow" and "Doon the Water" (A: 1, 8 and 29 July, 1899, 12). The vocal items were presented by a Fuller Snr and his daughter Hettie (by then billed as Hettie Warden), along with a changing role call of performers, including Arthur Hahn, Minnie Waugh, Hector McLennan, Mary Godwin, John Flora, Carey Penney and Leonore Orelli. Walter Fuller as usual provided accompaniment on organ and piano, as well as his instrumental pieces. John Fuller Jnr was invariably billed as 'the Myriorama expert.' In early August the company also undertook a small suburban tour.

While the Australian movements of the Fuller and his family over the remainder of 1899 and 1900 have not yet been located, it is known that they were joined in early 1901 by Ben. According to Peter Downes the 25 year old entrepreneur made the surprising announcement to the Dunedin public in October 1900 that his family was to withdraw from the Alhambra at once and had arranged to lease it to their competition, Percy R. Dix. Over the next few months the family's three remaining theatres in New Zealand were systematically closed down, allowing Ben to join his family in Sydney. By early March 1901 Fuller Snr had taken over the lease of Sydney's Royal Standard which he renamed the Empire Theatre. In announcing the start of the Empire Minstrel and Variety Company season, Fuller indicated that his stay was to be "lengthy," and that he would introduce the best of English, American and Australian talent. "The theatre has been cleansed, painted and renovated, both before and after the curtain," he wrote, further noting that "hilarity without vulgarity [would] be the motto of the management (SMH: 11 Mar 1901, 2).² Comedians

² Downes mistakenly records that the Fuller family ("the whole concern") left for Australia following the closure of its New Zealand operations (149). As this biography has established, however, they were already in Australia as early as July 1899.

Will Watkins and Will Stevens, who (along with Fred Bluett) had been among the first big name performers to be engaged by Fuller for his New Zealand operations (ca. 1898) were re-engaged for this season. Others to in the company included Lennon, Hyman and Lennon, The Three Waiters, May Marlow and Fisko, the Boy Juggler. Another feature was the Empire Vocal Quartette, comprising John Fuller Snr (the "silvery tenor"), James Hughes, Kate Lynn and Amy Blackie. Among the key artists to be engaged by Fuller during this 12 months engagement were McKisson and Kearns, Ida Roslyn and Frank York. The season also featured the "old-fashioned, up-to-date" Christmas pantomime *Robinson Crusoe* (26 Dec. 1901 -).

Immediately after ending the Sydney season Fuller took his company to Tasmania, initially opening at Launceston. According to a report in the Examiner, the entrepreneur/ performer intended to establish a permanent vaudeville

entertainment in the town, after first thoroughly renovating and bringing the Empire Theatre, formerly the Bijou Theatre, up to date (15 Mar. 1902, 4). While the work was being carried out the company, billed as John Fuller's Myriorama Co, opened on Good Friday (28 Mar.) at the Albert Hall with a grand illustrated concert featuring the passion play *The Land of the Cross*. Three nights later he presented his Empire Vaudeville Co for the first time in Launceston, with the company headed by McKisson and Kearns, Amy Blackie, Ted Herbert, Will Stevens and Will Watkins. From 5 May through until sometime around August/September,³ Fuller operated two companies simultaneously in Tasmania, one continuing at the Empire Theatre (essentially a new company headed by Charlie Fanning and Georgie Devoe), and the other staging entertainment at the Temperance Hall, Hobart. Billed as John Fuller's Polite Empire Entertainers, the feature artists were largely those from the Launceston season. Among the new artists to appear under Fuller's management from May onwards were Fred Bluett, Tom Edwards, Daisy Chard and Little Vera Kearns.

In addition to his vaudeville entertainments Fuller also presented several sacred concerts in Launceston and Hobart, and appeared a number of local community charity events and benefits. On 19 April at the Albert Hall, Launceston, for example, he and Amy Blackie performed the duet, "Excelsior" as part of a benefit. Fuller also organised a tour of smaller towns sometime around August/September, with known dates being Burnie (15-126 Sept.) and Waratah (17 Sept.). He eventually ended his Tasmanian account at the Temperance Hall, Hobart on 29 November, having played more than 30 weeks in that city alone.

In 1903 a decision was made to return to New Zealand. Whether Fuller viewed his Australian experiment, which had lasted some three and a half to four years, a success or not is not known. Certainly the move back to New Zealand may be seen as a sign that the venture had not succeeded in building a permanent base of operations in Australia. It did, however, allow the family to set in place a number of crucial interests which were pivotal when Ben and John Jr returned some ten years later. The timing of their return to New Zealand was however, to play a crucial role in shaping the family's future as an Australasian entrepreneurial organisation. What is unclear, however, is whether the decision to return was simply fortuitous or whether the Fullers were made aware of certain circumstances which would make a successful re-engagement with the country more likely. The key factor in this equation was Percy Dix, who had run into financial difficulties over the previous couple of years. This resulted in him being forced to close down his operations in both Dunedin and Christchurch, thus leaving those cities bereft of regular variety entertainment.

Somewhat surprisingly the Fullers decided begin their attempt to re-establish their New Zealand interests by taking Dix on in his last stronghold, Wellington. With a fanfare of publicity they opened at the Choral Hall in March 1903 going head to head with Dix's show at the Theatre Royal. Within six months they had entrenched their presence in Auckland and Christchurch, and by January 1904 had made a triumphant return to Dunedin, thereby demonstrating that the city was not, as Percy Dix had previously claimed, unsupportive of vaudeville entertainment. In speaking about the family's return he is quoted as saying:

Nothing will tempt us away again. We shall spare no pains in establishing our holds on vaudeville in this country even more solidly. We have the circuit well in hand now and our audiences are kindly and safe – people come –

³ No issues of the *Launceston Examiner* are available between June and December 1902. It is assumed that the Launceston company closed down prior to the brief regional tour undertaken in early September.

Amusements.

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Sydney Morning Herald 28 Sept. (1901), 2.

and come again. We are prepared to give the entertainment the audiences demand. While the New Zealand folk treat us well, nothing will induce us to move (ctd. Downes, 151).

By now Benjamin Fuller had grown more confident in his entrepreneurial skills and began to implement new directions. The waxworks exhibits were gradually phased out and he began concentrating on the stage entertainment, bringing in more and more international acts. As Peter Downes notes, he also made the best use of this talent by alternating them between the company's various theatres thus providing solid competition to the growing band of entrepreneurs who were entering the New Zealand industry (notably Percy R. Dix). Further expansion was initiated in 1907, too, when the business began exhibiting films both on their own and as part of the vaudeville entertainment programme. That same year the Fullers secured the lease of His Majesty's Theatre in Dunedin, thereby extending their domain to include three theatres in that city – the others being the Alhambra and the Princess (TT: Sept. 1907, 5).

Although John Fuller Snr had by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century largely handed over the reins of the company to his sons, he nevertheless continued to make the occasional appearance on stage – sometimes at the top of the bill – right through until the 1910s, while also maintaining a keen interest in his family's business. By the end of the first decade of the new century his daughters had also moved on – Hetty to Australia where she continued to perform as a singer and dancer, and Lydia to England with her husband.



L-R: **Mrs and Mrs John Fuller Snr, Benjamin and Elizabeth Fuller**
Theatre Sept. (1915), 30.

John Fuller Snr, the "silvery tenor, died in Auckland in 1923 having lived long enough to see his sons establish the family business into arguably the largest variety circuit in Australasia. His role in the building of this entrepreneurial empire, while largely confined to the very early years, cannot be under-estimated, however. His genial personality and desire to strive for the best in everything to do with his professional career were aspects that his sons, particularly Ben and John Jnr, continued to apply throughout their later careers. Historian Frank van Straten records an anecdote harking back to John Fuller's time with the London Pavilion Company, which provides some additional insight into Fuller the man:

One night, it's said, a fellow artiste inquired, 'John, was that B flat you touched?' 'Touched, be damned,' retorted Fuller. 'I hung on to it till I was bloody near black in the face!' After that, theatre people would always salute him with a cheery, 'Touch, be damned! (n. pag.)

Interestingly the *Theatre's* New Zealand correspondent Frank Morton provides a scathing and derogatory assessment of John Fuller and his sons in the magazine's August 1912 issue. Morton's article, titled "A Family that Saves the Crumbs," is in retrospect somewhat less credible given that he proposed that "they will never do anything big in theatrical management." It nevertheless provides an interesting, if overtly biased, view of the family's dynamics and business ideology. While proposing that the Fullers were exceedingly tight with their money, which he suggests was likely a response to having arrived in Australia with barely a florin between them, Morton also derides them staging inferior and low-class entertainment. "None of the Fullers," he writes "has the slightest feeling for art. Any one of them would sooner make £1000 out of the worst show on earth than £999 19s 11 ½d out of the finest entertainment imaginable... The worst performer in Australia was sure of a Fuller engagement." What appears to have galled Morton most was that "despite the exasperating badness of their shows, the Fullers drew good houses in the New Zealand centres." He suggests in this respect that "a taste for inferior vaudeville is like a taste for inferior whisky – it grows on a man" In terms of each member of the family Morton describes John Fuller Snr as a "very confident but shockingly red in the face" performer who exudes "sentimental goo-goo in a throaty tenor worn perilously thin" and "a man with no head for big enterprises." He dismisses Walter as having no real or direct interest in the firm and hence doesn't count," while John Jnr "who holds things up in Wellington, is almost frightfully shrewd – so shrewd indeed that he has

been known to violate the Fuller tradition by buying a man a drink." Ben Fuller is similarly dismissed as a man who "has no ambition outside money-getting." His wife, "Mrs Ben is, however, described as "the most popular person in all the House of Fuller" ("Family" 3).

SEE ALSO

- [Benjamin Fuller](#)
- [John Fuller](#)
- [Fullers Theatres](#)
- [Brennan-Fuller](#)

ENGAGEMENTS CHRONOLOGY

(Australia and New Zealand 1889-1903)

- 1889:** [F.E. HISCOCKS](#) (St Geo's Hall, Melb; ca. Aug/Sept.*) • (Op House, Syd; 5 Oct. - 31 Dec. > London Pavilion Co)
- 1890:** [F.E. HISCOCKS](#) (Op House, Syd; 1-3 Jan. > London Pavilion Co)
- 1891:** [J BILLIN](#) (Vic Hall, Melb; ca. Apr.-May* > Representative Metropolitan Co) ► [COOGEE PALACE AQUARIUM](#) (Coogee, Syd; 10 May)
- 1892:** [F.M. CLARK](#) (St Geo's Hall, Melb; ca. Feb. > Silk Stockings Co) • (Garner's Rooms, Adel; 2-22 Apr. > Silk Stockings Co) ► [EMERSON AND WOOD](#) (Op House, Melb; ca. Oct.* > Alabama Minstrels) ► [PEOPLE'S CONCERTS](#) (Temp Hall, Melb; ca. July* > see 30 July)
- 1893:** (New Zealand tour; ca. May-July* > concert tour with the Albu Sisters)
- 1899:** [JOHN FULLER](#) (Town Hall, Melb; 1 July – ca. 5 Aug.*) • (Melbourne suburban tour; ca. 8-11 Aug.*)
NB: Melbourne suburban tour comprised: (Hawthorn TH; 9 Aug.) • (Mechanics Institute, Williamstown; 9 Aug.) • (Prahran TH; 11 Aug.)
- 1901:** [JOHN FULLER](#) (Empire Th, Syd; 11 Mar. - 31 Dec. > Empire Minstrel and Variety Co)
- 1902:** [JOHN FULLER](#) (Empire Th, Syd; 1 Jan- 1 Mar. > Empire Minstrel and Variety Co) • (Albert Hall, Launceston; 28 Mar. -* > John Fuller's Myriorama Co) • (Empire Th, Launceston; 31 Mar. - ca. Aug/Sept.* > Fuller's Polite Vaudeville Co) • (Temp Hall, Hobart; 5 May - 25 Oct. > Fuller's Polite Empire Entertainers)
NB: Fuller also operated a regional tour sometime around August/September, possibly after closing down his Launceston season. The itinerary included: (Burnie; 15-16 Sept.) • (Waratah; 17 Sept.)

FURTHER REFERENCE

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See also:

- LE:** 15 Mar. (1902), 4.
- SMH:** 5 Oct. (1889), 2
- TT:** Sept. (1907), 5.