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John Mullen

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Popular song in Britain during the two world wars

(La chanson populaire en Grande-Bretagne pendant les deux guerres mondiales)

John Mullen

Résumé

Lors de la première guerre mondiale, le music-hall joua un rôle important dans l'effort de guerre. Campagnes de recrutement pendant les spectacles, séances gratuites pour les soldats blessés, tournées de vedettes en France, contribuèrent toutes à l'effort national. Un air de satire et de critique de la gestion de la guerre était également perceptible.

Lors de la deuxième guerre, le discours officiel des hommes politiques a évolué. Le sacrifice glorieux de Lloyd George est devenu le « du sang, de la peine, des larmes et de la sueur» de Winston Churchill. L'industrie du divertissement s'est également transformée. Le gramophone est devenu un produit accessible à une grande partie de la population ; la musique populaire consommée en public émane désormais plutôt des dance halls que des théâtres de variété. L'influence américaine est très forte.

La chanson populaire et sa production sont de plus en plus étudiées, mais la période des guerres a été peu traitée. Cette contribution vise à examiner la production et le contenu des chansons populaires des deux guerres mondiales. Elle posera la question de savoir si ces chansons peuvent parfois représenter une « voix du peuple », elle cherchera à comparer les chansons de la première guerre avec celles de la seconde. Enfin, elle tentera d'analyser similitudes et différences entre la chanson « commerciale » produite en Angleterre et la chanson de soldat inventée par les troupes elles-mêmes.

Abstract

During the First World War, music-hall played an important role in the war effort, organizing on-stage recruitment for the army, concert parties at the Front and free shows for the wounded in hospital. Satire and criticism of how the war was run could also be present.

By the Second World War, the official political discourse had changed. Lloyd George's glorious sacrifice had become Churchill's "blood, toil, tears and sweat". The music industry had also changed, through the rise of the gramophone, the dance hall and the American crooner.

Popular music is more and more the object of academic study, but the war periods have been neglected. The present article aims at examining the production and the content of popular song in the two world wars. We will try to judge if popular song can at times represent a "voice of the people", and to compare first war songs with second war songs. Finally, we will analyse similarities and differences between "commercial" popular songs and "trench songs".

Introduction

Though popular music is the subject of increasing academic study, the war periods have been little dealt with. In this contribution, I intend to look at the most popular themes of wartime songs, at the tone of the songs, at some aspects of their production and consumption, and at the use made of the songs for the war drive. For each of these topics, I will try to compare and contrast the situation in 1914-1918 with that in 1939-1945.

I will be dealing almost exclusively with music-hall in the First World War and variety and Big Band in the second. These genres by no means exhaust the popular music of the time. Brass bands and choral music in the First World War were tremendously popular, for example, but because of the nature of these genres were less affected by the war experience. Those forms tended to keep to a relatively fixed repertoire and did not attempt to deal with war issues and experiences.

My conclusions about popular song will necessarily be tentative: The First World War alone gives us several thousand songs to deal with making generalization difficult.

Voices of commerce, voices of the people

A preliminary question which has caused much controversy is that of the source of the values and messages of popular song: whose voice was behind the song? For Theodor Adorno, one of the first to attack the question frontally, the answer was not difficult: popular song was purely a commodity, fabricated only for profit motives by the "culture industry", an industry which controled public taste. He wrote:

> The culture industry fuses the old and familiar into a new quality. In all its branches, products which are tailored for consumption by masses, and which to a great extent determine the nature of that consumption, are manufactured more or less according to plan (Adorno, 98).

Adorno's was the most clear-cut version of a very common idea about commercial music and its messages. He wrote about the popular music of the 1930s, but his conception could just as easily have applied to music-hall. The characteristics of a culture industry were fully present at the beginning of the twentieth century. Theatre chains, sheet music publishers, and musical comedy producers already made enormous profits from the stars and the hits of 1914.

If, for Adorno, commercial music could not express the interests or priorities of dominated classes, others who have agreed consider that the voice of the people can be found elsewhere. The great collector and defender of folk music, Cecil Sharp, argued, at the beginning of the twentieth century, that "commercial" music-hall was destroying the "authentic" people's music which had flourished in previous centuries. During the First World War, he considered that in England, the music he searched for had practically disappeared. He was looking for the "great tradition that stretches back into the mists of the past in one long, unbroken chain, of which the last link is now, alas, being forged" (Quoted in Gold and Revill, 59). Sharp undertook a series of journeys to the Appalachian Mountains to find more of the "true culture" of the English people among the descendants of English immigrants to America isolated by geography and poverty. His assistants wrote of their relief to find that in the Appalachian Mountains, their informers (singers) did not mix their "genuine" folk music with products of the music-hall, as they had done in England (Gold and Revill, 61).

Both these negative conceptions of "mass culture" music have been challenged. The whole discipline of popular music studies (Middleton, 1990, 2006) has been erected in opposition to the influential conception of Adorno, while such writers as Dave Harker have criticized Sharp and others as constructors of an imaginary and ahistorical "authentic" popular culture.

Others have claimed that commercially successful music might in fact carry a voice "of the people"; Colin MacInnes writes in his book *Sweet Saturday Night:*

since they [music-hall songs] were chiefly written by, and sung by, working class men and women for working class audiences, we may hear in them a *vox populi* which is not to be found in Victorian and Edwardian literature (MacInnes, 34).

And T. S. Eliot, not generally considered a populist, claimed (at the death of the music-hall star, Marie Lloyd):

> Marie Lloyd was the greatest music-hall artist in England: she was also the most popular. And popularity in her case was not merely evidence of her accomplishment; it was something more than success. It is evidence of the extent to which she represented and expressed that part of the English nation which has perhaps the greatest vitality and interest(ELIOT, 659).

Certainly it does seem that music-hall songs were able to reflect and explore the harsh conditions of life of a fair part of their audiences. This was clear well before 1914. Gus Elen's hit, recorded in 1899, *If it wasn't for the 'ouses in between* portrays the comic pride of a working man in his little garden in the overcrowded streets of the slums:

> Oh it really is a wery pretty garden
> And Chingford to the eastward could be seen;
> Wiv a ladder and some glasses
> you could see to 'Ackney Marshes
> If it wasn't for the 'Ouses in between

The song *I live in Trafalgar Square*, published by C. W. Murphy in 1902 laughs at homelessness. The tradition continued through World War One. The music hall song *My Old Man* by Fred W. Leigh and Charles Collins in 1919 and made popular by Marie Lloyd, relates the experience of a couple who have to move house in a hurry since they cannot pay the rent. The mass experience of wartime could be expressed in music hall songs as well.

This reflection of working-class experience was however very much held within constraints of genre, consensus and a certain respectability. As has been pointed out by Gareth Stedman Jones, the workplace, site and source of many of the harshest experiences, was absent from the subject matter of music-hall. Conflict with figures of authority was also rare. The songs expressed suffering rather than resistance, although cocking a snook at authority by celebrating the pleasures of

hedonism or the joy of refusing to look for work was possible (*A little of what you fancy does you good* recorded by Marie Lloyd in 1915, and *Wait until the work comes round* by Gus Elen in 1906, for example). Further, a comic and jaunty tone are expected in the music-hall, an individual, not collective, responses to hardship are the only ones treated. In the later period, the 1930s and 1940s, David Bret in his biography of the entertainer George Formby, has pointed out that certain genres such as blues have been frequently claimed as voices of dominated classes or ethnic groups, and even the less prestigious genres, such as variety today, may reflect ordinary people's priorities.

In addition to popular and commercial voices in wartime song, there is, naturally, an instrumentalization of song for the war effort. Just as writers like G. K. Chesterton, Rudyard Kipling, Arthur Conan Doyle, Anthony Hope and John Buchan whose writing during the First World War aided the Ministry of Information, other cultural products, music too, was mobilized for war. This instrumentalization was mediated by negotiation with genre constraints and with the priorities of mass audiences as well.

Soldiers' songs

The case of soldiers' songs was particular. These songs were written and sung, generally without attribution to an author or particular artist, during the two wars by the soldiers themselves. They have been the object of much attention by collectors and war veterans, but of relatively little analysis. Some critics have called the genre a modern folk music corpus, expressing forgotten voices of the soldiers on the ground. Already, during the First World War, *The Times* of London debated the importance, authenticity and concerns expressed in "the songs the Tommies really sing"(20, 21 January 1915). Many of the soldier songs below are parodies or rewritings of commercial songs. Though they are certainly less subject to censorship than music-hall, variety or big band songs, and do not need to find a thematic consensus among different social groups in

order to be distributed by major music-hall or record companies, it is hard to distinguish a veritable rift between these songs and the commercially successful songs produced for profit. The coming and going between the two genres was continual. Soldiers sang the latest music-hall or variety songs at concert parties on the Eastern or Western fronts; music-hall or variety artistes adapted soldiers' songs for commercial production; record companies rushed to record soldiers singing "trench songs". The musical legacy from the two wars was thus neither the pure folk product imagined by a scholar searching in the isolation of Appalachia, nor was it Adorno's cultural product entirely dictated by a profit motive.

Developments between the two wars

Before moving on to the themes of popular song, I would like to look at the tremendous transformations in commercial music between the two wars. Firstly, live music-hall declined. Many histories of music-hall end in 1914; this cut off is certainly premature, but after that date, music-hall never again played the central role it did. In 1914-1918, the gramophone was still a luxury. The price of a gramophone record with two songs front and back could buy six tickets for the music-hall; the price of the cheapest gramophone would purchase two hundred and twenty tickets. The only way to hear a hit sung by a star was to go to the live performance. Sheet music was also extremely popular and profitable and readily available.

By the Second World War, the gramophone had gained tremendous ground. After 1927, the electrically amplified jukebox came into being. Music-hall was also menaced by the radio. The BBC, a public corporation after 1927, poured musical production onto the airwaves under the supervision of its formidable captain John Reith.

The domination of song distribution by the BBC altered the type of music which was easily available. In contrast with the variety theatre chiefs who were market-oriented, the BBC held close

to an elitist and even moralist view of music. "Variety music" or "Light music" for the BBC under Reith, was simply “not music”. Nor should music be avant garde: the BBC refused to broadcast a particular style of jazz improvisation, Scat. By the early forties, though, one genre, dance music, had carved itself a place on the airwaves. The programme "Dancing Club" which starred Victor Sylvester was extremely popular (Baade). Each programme included spoken dance instruction, accompanied by drawings published in the BBC magazine "Radio Times", to help listeners practice their dancing.

Indeed, dance came to the fore in urban leisure in this period. Increased leisure time, and improved public transport, contributed to the rise of the dance halls. The contrast with music-halls was enormous: the music-hall tradition of a mix of singers, acrobats, ventriloquists and magicians transformed into popular settings where music was at the centre. The audience no longer sat watching but danced. Dance halls took a central role in men’s and women’s the search for partners while allowing women a new freedom of public movement which had been impossible in Edwardian times. Finally the instruments, the band, had come to the fore and the band leader became one of the most important stars of the time. Only very slowly was the band leader overtaken by the singing star.

The last development which marginalized the music-hall was talking cinema. While films were silent, the music-hall was able to resist the competition, and indeed often integrated a short film into the evening's show. But talking and singing films were a severe blow. Hundreds of halls were closed down and reopened as picture palaces; furthermore, music and cinema were to join forces in the musical comedy film. Indeed, a large number of British films of the 1930s and early 1940s aimed, above all, at benefitting from the tremendous popularity of a small number of singing stars, notably George Formby and Gracie Fields.

Gracie Fields sang her way through *We're going to be rich,* and *Keep Smiling* in 1938, and

Shipyard Sally in 1939, before moving to the US to star in *Stage door Canteen* and *Holy Matrimony* (1943) and *Molly and Me* and *Paris Underground* (1945). George Formby starred in 14 films from 1938-1946, all of which featured him singing his hit songs accompanying himself on the Ukulele. The songs often dealt with aspects of mass experience of the war.

Since music was more and more dominated by electronic recording, local autonomy in a capital-intensive industry became more problematic, and, as previously with film, US domination increased sharply from the already significant pre-World War One US presence in the sheet music and song writing industries. Bessie Smith, Paul Whiteman, Duke Ellington, Fats Waller, Jack Hylton were the artists that led this “American invasion”. In 1930, according to James Nott, 84% of the most popular pieces in Britain were of US origin (Nott, 209). This proportion fell to 64% in 1935.

More accessible phonographs, radio, amplifiers, musical movies, dance halls and transportation, the importance of band leaders all contributed to the changes in popular music between the wars. It is also interesting to note, however, what had not yet happened in the history of popular music. Firstly, songs of the two war periods, unlike many later productions, were not complex from the point of view of the narrative structure. Though they may have been highly ironic, and the position of the narrator may have been ambiguous, they made little use of metaphor or of imagist-type poetry, which became common after the 1960s. Other techniques of modernist poetry such as collage were not used, and the limits of early electronic amplification meant that there could be no aesthetic of sound volume as there was from the 1970s on. The popular singers did not communicate an ethic of revolt. They were not expected to be voices of protest. They were not particularly the voices of the younger generation. Teenagers had not been invented – in 1914, girls went into domestic service or into factories at twelve years old, boys started an apprenticeship if they could. By 1939 this changed somewhat, but the leisure and independence of teenagers was

not yet sufficient to have created a “youth culture”.

Common themes in Songs of the two wars

The themes of wartime songs could show an evident base in wartime experience, and particularly mass wartime experience. But some themes, such as courtship and love, remained frequent in songs both of wartime and of peacetime, and made up a large part of the production.

The most obvious wartime theme was the “morale song”. The government as well as the music-hall milieu was conscious of the necessity of adding to the great speeches of Lloyd George or Winston Churchill or to propaganda posters and pamphlets, for morale messages carried through the idiom of cheerful song. Music-hall stars and variety stars such as Harry Lauder and Vera Lynn eventually received knighthoods and other honours as a reward. During World War One, the music industry sent portable gramophones and sheet music free of charge to soldiers at the front. In both wars travelling concert parties sang the hits of the year, while in France, Turkey, Egypt or England innumerable free concerts were given for wounded soldiers in hospital.

In both wars, the dream of home was a central subject in morale songs. *Keep the home fires burning* by Ivor Novello with words by Lena Guilbert Ford in 1914 is the classic example from World War One:

Keep the Home Fires Burning,
While your hearts are yearning,
Though your lads are far away
They dream of home.
There's a silver lining
Through the dark clouds shining,
Turn the dark cloud inside out
'Til the boys come home.

Pack up your troubles in your old kit-bag and smile, smile, smile, by George Henry Powell with music by his brother Felix Powell in 1915, was one of the most popular songs of the World

War One. As the long title and first line suggested, exhorted people to put a brave face on.

Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag and smile, smile, smile.
While you've a Lucifer to light your fag,
Smile, boys, that's the style.
What's the use of worrying? It never was worth while...

Many others, in the style of *Here we are again* or *Are we downhearted, No! No! No!* (Robert Harkness, 1914) added to the chorus of encouragement, though sometimes reflecting the difficulties of keeping up courage:

> Are we downhearted? No!
> Then let your voices ring
> And altogether sing.
> Are we downhearted ? No!
> Not while Britannia rules the waves. Not likely!
> While we have Jack upon the sea,
> And Tommy on the land we need not fret.
> It's a long, long way to Tipperary
> But were not downhearted yet.

Songs specifically aimed at recruitment were very popular in 1914-1916, sometimes sung in music-halls where the young men were encouraged to sign up for the army at once, on stage (see Quigley). The songs claimed that joining the army would help the young man attract the ladies as in *It's the boys in khaki get the nice girls,* recorded in 1915, or make his parents proud, the message of *I'm glad my boy grew up to be a soldier* also of 1915. Female artistes did not hesitate to use their seductive powers for recruiting. Marie Lloyd's song of 1915, *Now you've got your khaki on* explained:

> I didn't like you much before you joined the army, John,
> but I do like you, cockie, now you've got your khaki on […]
> I do feel so proud of you, I do, honour bright
> I'm going to give you an extra cuddle tonight.

The narrator was a respectable girl, difficult to seduce, but the uniform was the right tactic. A number of songs in the same vein were produced.

In the song *We're glad you've got a gun,* the womenfolk exclaim “There's time enough for

other games, time enough to court" and suggest that traditional youth interests in romance and courting would offer little future "if the clank of German sabres down your village street should ring" (Murdoch, 67). Even more famous was the 1914 song by Paul A. Rubens, *Your King and Country want you*, recorded by as many as 6 artists in 1914 alone:

Oh, we don't want to lose you but we think you ought to go.
For your King and your country both need you so.
We shall want you and miss you
But with all our might and main
We shall cheer you, thank you, kiss you
When you come home again.

The Second World War also produced its share of morale songs. Gracie Fields recycled a slightly earlier song by Harry Parr-Davies, *Wish me luck as you wave me goodbye* in the 1939 movie, "Shipyard Sallie". *Sing as we go* an important song, also by Parr-Davies from the 1934 depression themed Gracie Fields movie of that name came back in a war context:

Sing as we go, although the skies are grey
Beggar or king, you've got to sing a gay tune
A song and a smile make it right worthwhile
So sing... as we go along
Blues - where are you now
You ought to know that I've no use for you
Frown - get off my brow
It's plain to see that from now on we're through

There are no specific recruiting songs in World War Two, in part because conscription was introduced from the beginning of the war. Nor are women used in song as seductive recruiting sergeants – at least not in the words of the song, though "Vera Lynn, the soldiers' sweetheart" was recognized by the government as an important asset to morale.

An important category of morale songs from both wars are the "Better times are coming" songs. In the 1914-18 war *When the boys come marching back to Blighty* and *When we've wound up the watch on the Rhine* by Stanley Kirkby, 1915, are the most notable. World War Two songs also looked forward to victory and a new world, in *When they sound the last all clear* (Hugh Charles

and Lewis Elton and recorded by Vera Lynn in 1941), *When we dance at the victory ball* (Jack Denby, Muriel Watson and Horatio Nicholls, 1944) or *When the great new world is dawning.* Al Bowlly sang of *When that man is dead and gone* in 1941. The most famous of the "better-times coming" songs was of course *The White cliffs of Dover* by Walter Kent and Nat Burton, sung in the well-known recording by Vera Lynn in 1942:

> There'll be bluebirds over
> The white cliffs of Dover
> Tomorrow, Just you wait and see
>
> There'll be love and laughter
> And peace ever after
> Tomorrow When the world is free

The song goes on to describe rural England restored, and the return of the children evacuated from bombed zones;

> The shepherd will tend his sheep
> The valley will bloom again
> And Jimmy will go to sleep
> In his own little room again

Rural England was often presented in songs as elsewhere as typical of England, part of an imagined nostalgic utopia, and it is often "the lads of the village" who are out there fighting the Germans, as in for example the 1942 George Formby song *When the lads of the village get cracking.*

"I want to go home" songs were often sung by soldiers, but could also appear in music-hall and variety. In World War One, *Take me back to dear old Blighty* (Arthury J. Mills, Fred Godfrey and Bennett Scott, 1916) is a key example:

> Jack Lee, having his tea, says to his pal MacFayne,
> "Look, chum, apple and plum! it's apple and plum again!
> Same stuff, isn't it rough? fed up with it I am!
> Oh! for a pot of Aunt Eliza's raspb'ry jam!"
> Take me back to dear old Blighty!
> Put me on the train for London town!
> Take me over there,
> Drop me ANYWHERE,
> Liverpool, Leeds, or Birmingham, well, I don't care!

I should love to see my best girl,
Cuddling up again we soon should be,
WHOA!!!
Tiddley iddley ighty,
Hurry me home to Blighty,
Blighty is the place for me!

In 1918, the songs *I wish I was in Blighty* (Herman Darewski and W. R. Titterton, 1917) and *I'm sick of this ere blooming war*, both taken from a musical comedy, were popular. Several of these songs were recycled in the Second World War, but new songs on this theme were not produced.

Patriotic songs

During the First World War overt glorification of King and Empire was possible in songs. *Send me a photo of the King* was a successful song, as were *Britannia's prayer* and *I love my motherland* (A. J. Mills, Bennett Scott and Fred Godfrey, 1916). In the Second World War, the King and the empire are hardly mentioned in the songs and the patriotism is less tinged with words of glory. Other forms of propaganda had also changed. According to Frank Huggett there was an important difference between Lloyd George's rousing parables about "the pinnacle of sacrifice" in a speech which practically celebrated the war as an uplifting experience for the race, and Winston Churchill's down-to-earth promise of "blood, toil, tears and sweat" (Huggett, 52): "Nor was there any emotional need for old-style patriotic songs : there was a more maturer sense of obligation than there had been in World War One". There was also certainly more of a democratic spirit – since 1914, universal male suffrage had been won. Patriotism was perhaps more homely as in Rose Parker and Hughie Charles's *There will always be an England* written in the Summer of 1939 and recorded by Vera Lynn. The song's lyrics bore some resemblance to the pre-industrial imagery of *The White Cliffs of Dover* as if nostalgia had taken the place King and empire as the stuff of

patriotism. The song sold 200,000 copies of sheet music in the first two months of the war.

> There'll always be an England,
> While there's a country lane,
> Wherever there's a cottage small
> Beside a field of grain.
> There'll always be an England,
> While there's a busy street,
> Wherever there's a turning wheel
> A million marching feet.

For the music-hall songs of the end of the nineteenth century, Penny Summerfield hypothesized a difference between the extravagant jingoism present in the halls that attracted middle class audiences, and a patriotism of more working class halls which she says concentrated on celebrating the qualities of ordinary soldiers (Summerfield, “Patriotism and empire”). Certainly this second type of patriotic song is very much present, and even more dominant in The Second World War. These are songs which praised or blessed “our boys”, as in Harry Lauder’s *The laddies who fought and won* of 1916:

> When the fighting is over, and the war is won,
> And the flags are waving free,
> When the bells are ringing, and the boys are singing
> songs in every key,
> When we all gather 'round the old fireside,
> And the old mother kisses her son,
> A' the lassies will be loving all the laddies,
> The laddies who fought and won.

Other First World War songs of this type included *Kitcheners men* and *Songs the soldiers sing*, and among Second World War songs are *When the lads of the village get cracking*, *The Daring Young Man*, *There’s a boy coming home on leave* (Jimmy Kennedy, 1940).

First World War songs may also denigrate the “slacker” who refuses to join the army:

> The conscientious slacker,
> Is nowhere in this day;
> God bless the boys of England,
> Who’re ready for the fray.
> With heart alert and watchful,
> They go to face the foe;

God bless the boys of England,
Wherever, they may go.

In *A conscientious objector* from 1915, the conscientious objector is presented as an effeminate, homosexual coward. In the Second World War, this theme is simply avoided.

Unity and division

If the pacifists were to be excluded from the national community in song in World War One and by being ignored in World War Two, other groups must be brought together. The theme of national unity was understandably a priority for patriotic propagandists and songwriters. A series of songs underlined that past divisions between British people were to be abandoned "for the duration". In the First World War, the song *Follow the Drum* declared in so many words: "No longer are we socialists, conservative or red". While *Then they all sang God save the King* recounted the meeting of an Irishman, a Scotsman and a Welshman. Each sang a patriotic song from his homeland, then together they sang the British national anthem.

A very similar example, *The Smiths and the Jones* from the variety artistes Flanagan and Allen was successful during the Second World War. In this case it is the Irish and the Jews ("the Kellys and Cohens") who are to join the national community, despite being previously rejected by fairly large sections of the population:

Who's building the planes? Who's building the tanks?
Who's launching the ships by the ton?
It's the Smiths and the Jones
And the Kellys and Cohens
They're all democracy's sons.

Their aim is the same so what's in a name
There's just one desire to win…

In *We must All stick together* (recorded by Billy Cotton, 1939) it is social elitism ("the old school

tie”) which is the enemy of the war effort :

> We must all stick together, all stick together
> And the clouds will soon roll by
> We must all stick together, all stick together
> Never mind the old school tie
> United we shall stand whatever may befall
> The richest in the land, the poorest of us all
> We must all stick together, birds of a feather,
> And the clouds will soon roll by.

The importance of such calls to unity of all classes and social groups should not be underestimated in a situation where social inequality remained extreme. In the First World War one need hardly underline the social inequalities that in many cultural representations occupied so important a part of Edwardian England. In the Second World War too, the poor and the well-off were by no means equally exposed to the miseries of war, despite the (initially very popular) rationing laws. People with money moved out of towns which were bombed, and rents in safe towns rose sharply. Richer parts of London were better endowed with shelters than were poorer neighbourhoods (indeed persuading the government to open underground stations to ordinary Londoners at night seemed radical). For the very rich, the menus of luxury hotels were unaffected by rationing (Huggett, 108).

Mocking the enemy was another popular theme. In recordings of 1914 and 1915 during the First World War, Harry Champion mocked the German medals which he said were given out for no reason:

Oh my old Iron Cross, my old Iron Cross,
What a waste I do declare,
Over there in Germany they're giving them away,
You can have a dozen if you shout "Hooray"
The Kaiser said to me "Old Cock",
"My Kingdom for a horse"
I gave him the one missus dried the clothes on
And he gave me the old Iron Cross.

A soldiers’ song, for which several versions exist and attributed to more than one author, including

Toby O'Brien of the British Council in 1919 demonstrates in its evolution the Second World War soldier dream of emasculating enemy leaders wholly or partially:

Hitler has only got one ball,
Göring has two but very small,
Himmler is somewhat sim'lar,
But poor old Goebbels has no balls at all.

And Michael Carr's *We're going to hang out the washing on the Siegfried line* of 1939, mocks the enemy's most trusted defences.

Mocking and attacking one's own military hierarchies was a recurrent theme not confined to the actual years of fighting of either war. The military objectives were not questioned, but the capacities of the hierarchy to organize the war were. "Lions led by donkeys," was a phrase expressing British World War One soldiers' dissatisfaction with their commanders and was a view frequently expressed in soldiers' songs and, usually in milder versions, in variety and music-hall songs. It is so prevalent, that when George Formby sang in *Our Sergeant Major,* a 1938 song, "We'd rather shoot him than salute him", it should not be taken as a meaningless joke. A 1920 song, *Pop goes the Major* by Stanley Kirkby, sufficiently popular to be republished in the annual "Most popular songs" collection which Francis and Day, the music publishers, brought out every year at the time, recounts the wishes of a group of soldiers, after the war, to find and kill their sergeant major:

We've heard it said that he
Has got the OBE
But his next decoration looks like being the RIP
And him I'm going around to see
I'm taking a hand grenade with me.

The popular song, *Bless 'em all* –singing goodbye and maybe good riddance, to soldiers and sergeants and "corporals and their blinkin' bleedin' sons" including famously, " The Long and the Short and the Tall," was claimed by Fred Godfrey as a 1916 or 1917 creation of his, *Fuck 'em all*,

but may be a protest song of airmen in India in the 1920s, and the version with expletive may be the soldier version of the Second World War recording sung, transformed, by Gracie Fields and Vera Lynn. “Bless ‘em all” as it was first recorded by George Formby in 1940 gives the impression of redirecting soldier hostility. Second World War soldiers' songs could retrieve the animosity to undeserved authority as well in songs such as *We're frightfully GHQ* that mocked the supposedly posh and effeminate general staff (Page, 132). Sometimes the expletives did not go away in World War Two, certainly not in soldier versions of songs such as *The toffs in the ops room*:

What we do object to is those fucking Ops room toffs
Who sit there sewing stripes on at a rate of fucing knots. (Page, 137)

Social comment

Songs commented publicly and openly on ordinary people’s experiences in wartime, in a way that “official” sources could not. In the First World War, Vesta Tilley’s hit *A bit of a Blighty one*, the soldier-narrator explained how pleased he is to have been wounded, not enough to threaten life and limb, but badly enough to go back home to “Blighty” (England):

When I think about my dugout,
where I dare not stick my mug out,
I’m glad I’ve got a bit of a Blighty one […]
When they wipe my brow with sponges,
and they feed me on blancmanges,
I’m glad I’ve got a bit of a Blighty one!

In a context where self-inflicted wounds were not rare, the song was daring. Vesta Tilley, a women dressed up as a male soldier, was perhaps allowed more leeway for expressing this reality and making it palatable and acceptable in a popular song. A male singer without the camp disguise, and the implied excuse of female frailty, might have attracted criticism or even censor.

Life on the home front received its musical comments in both wars. Tom Clare's *What did you do in the war Daddy*, inspired by the Savile Lumley poster of 1915, “Daddy, what did *you* do

in the Great War", gave directed late and post war criticism those whose real contribution to the war had been profiteering and activity on the black market. *Exemptions and otherwise* and *The military representative* were songs that criticized the committees which could exempted people from military service. In the second of these, the military representative on the committee insisted that men return to the front, even if 91 years old, with a wooden leg, or already dead. *Coupons,* a song from 1918 spoke of the difficulties of living under rationing.

For the Second World War, different stresses and dangers of war, brought closer to British populations by heavy bombing got a lighter treatment. George Formby transformed the stress of fire watching, that of course implied the horror of mass raids on British towns, into a hilarious romp in his song *Spotting on the top of Blackpool Tower*(1943). The very real worries of English men about sexual competition from US soldiers ("overpaid, oversexed and over here" as the saying went) are expressed in another George Formby song, *Our Fanny's gone all Yankee*. The narrator's sister, a traditional Lancashire lass, has taken on US habits, impressed by the GIs:

> Woodbines she used to smoke, now she thinks that they're a joke,
> With a Camel in her mouth she's very swanky.
> She drinks whisky, gin and rum and she's always chewing gum, 'cause
> Our Fanny's gone all Yankee.

Exchanging a Woodbine for a "Camel in her mouth," may be over suggestive. But several soldiers' songs take up a similar "anti-American" theme with less humour or circumspection. These songs speak of the soldiers' wives sleeping with US army personnel, and even of organizing brothels for this practice. One melodramatic song tells of the return home of a British soldier to find that his wife, made pregnant by a GI, has committed suicide. Another recounts the return home thus :

> I let myself in quietly
> and tiptoed up the stairs
> The thought of being home again
> had banished all my cares
> In the bedroom then I murmurs
> 'Nell, your soldier boy has come'

> When a voice replied in sharp surprise
> 'Say, Nell, who is this bum?'. (Page, 145)

The vocabulary of the last sentence identifies the man as an American.

Other war experiences of distress had songs dedicated to them as well. At the outbreak of war in Britain, 38 million gas masks were distributed to the population as a preventive measure for the gas bombardment which never came. The George Formby song *I did what I could with my gas mask* relieved the very real tension and fear provoked by the masks by suggesting absurd uses for gas masks. The indecency of the suggestion may have corresponded to the intensity of the gas anxiety:

> For years I courted Annabella Price
> And always found her just as cold as ice
> Until one night the lass forgot her Ma's advice
> And I did what I could with my gas mask.

The 1939 song *Goodnight children everywhere*, recorded by Vera Lynn, referred to the traumatic experience of children being evacuated from cities at risk of bombing; the blackout gave rise to songs such as *The blackout stroll* (recorded by Joe Loss and his band, 1940), which turns navigation in the dark city, where even the moon is gone, into a jaunty dance while *They can't black out the moon* (1941) transforms the potentially frightening experience of unlighted streets into romantic possibilities: "But when you stumble, you stumble right into my arms," said the song. Then the song put the moon back into the sky and allowed light to shine in a companions eyes.

Black humour

It is a commonplace to say that humour helps to survive traumatic experiences, and of course humour, including black humour, plays a major role in popular song of these periods. Innumerable memoirs of people who lived through the wars underline the usefulness of cheerful

and humorous songs in helping people get through. James Nott (Nott, 213) calculated that 20% of the "most popular tunes" in 1919 were comic in nature, and a similar percentage were in 1945. The black humour of soldiers' songs is legendary. From the First World War, there were, for example, *Oh! It's a lovely war!* (by J. P. Long and Maurice Scott, 1918) with its heavy ironies and the famous and even balder irony in the lyrics sung in the front line *The bells of hell are ringing (ting a ling) for you but not for me,* a song that includes the line that dissolves the horror of war along with the *King James Bible*'s prose, "Oh death where is thy sting (a ling a ling)." The soldier song *Hanging on the old barbed wire* impressed J B Priestley by its combination of grisly image and homely idiom:

If you want to see the private, I know where he is, I know where he is, I know where he is.
He's hanging on the old barbed wire.
I saw him, I saw him, hanging on the old barbed wire, I saw him…

Priestley wrote:

There is a flash of pure genius, entirely English, in that 'old', for it means that even that devilish enemy, that death-trap, the wire, has somehow been accepted, recognized, and acknowledged almost with affection by the deep rueful charity of this verse. I have looked through whole anthologies that said less to me (Priestley, 111).

The irreverence of hanging the missing private on the barbed wire may be a kind of insubordination too, or at least an assertion of democracy in death. In the same song the missing sergeant and even the missing Colonel was found "hanging on the old barbed wire".

Soldiers' songs from the Second World War also joke about death, as in the famous *Glory, Glory, what a hell of a way to die*, which, sung to the tune of *John Brown's Body* was later to become a boy scout campfire classic:

He jumped without a parachute from forty thousand feet.
We scraped him off the tarmac like a pot of strawberry jam.
And he ain't gonna jump no more.

Or song with a similar grisly message as sung to the tune of *Red River Valley* :

So stand by your class and be ready
And remember the men of the sky
Here's a toast to the men dead already
And a toast for the next man to die. (Page, 170)

But this black humour is not purely reserved to soldiers' songs and songs further darkened by scouts. Popular singers could express anti-authoritarian hostility in grotesque imagery too as in George Formby's *Imagine me on the Maginot line*:

Now imagine me in the Maginot Line
Sitting on a mine in the Maginot Line
Now it's turned out nice again
The Army life is fine
The enemy we had to chase
But my gun got out of place
I went and shot the Colonel in the base
Down on the Maginot Line

Current affairs

Some songs, particularly during the First World War, comment upon particular events in the war, usually in a jaunty fashion. In 1914, *Bravo little Belgium* (Gilbert Wells, Percy Edgar and Fred Elton, 1914) and *Belgium put the Kibosh up the Kaiser*(recorded by Mark Sheridan in October 1914) the earliest days of the German advance west are recounted. In 1916 the song *The tanks that broke the ranks out in Picardy* that put new words by Harry Castling and Harry Carlton to the upbeat tune of *The man who broke the bank at Monte-Carlo*, commented upon the first use of tanks in battle. *Why is the red blood flowing* in 1916 even goes into a pedagogical explanation of Britain's war aims.

The Second World War song *God Bless you Mr Chamberlain* expresses support for the beleaguered statesman. Written in 1938 its lyrics are ambiguous. Rhyming "looking swell" with his "umbrella" might be a critical reference to an old man who had made a mistake at Munich or given the date, the song could express genuine affection for the man and hope that war will not

come.

God bless you, Mr Chamberlain,
we're all mighty proud of you.
You look swell holding your umbrella,
all the world loves a wonderful fellow.
So carry on, Mr Chamberlain,
you know we're all with you,
and when we shout 'God bless you Mr Chamberlain',
our hats go off to you!

George Formby's *Thank you Mr Roosevelt* of 1940 reacts positively to US government support with less ambiguity, though the lyrics and tune are decidedly light and the line about the "British empire smiling through" might be a misunderstanding of Roosevelt's motivations. The decision of the Russian government to join the war against Germany gave rise to songs (and propaganda posters and events) giving a positive image of Russia. Most notably, *Russian Rose* and '*Ya Vass Loublou' means I love you. Russian Rose* has a Slavic minor key lilt to the tune and an operatic delivery, at least in the recording by Anne Shelton who often sang for British soldiers. The songs touching on Russia seem to have displaced admiration into sentimental possibilities while appreciation for home politicians or Americans seem to wait and see how things will turn out.

Changes between the two wars.

The world of popular songs in World War Two seems less provincial and less prone to express local prejudice than the songs of two decades earlier. Xenophobia and racism in commercial popular songs tend to disappear between the two wars. In the First World War, such songs as *Sergeant Solomon Isaacstein* (recorded by Gus Harris in 1916) voiced standard prejudices against Jews in a violent tone. The song had a cruel punch line in which a bomb exploded in the Jewish soldier's hand when he was trying to sell it for profit. Meanwhile the chorus of *It's a long way to Tipperary* (Jack Judge and Harry Williams, 1912) has remained in popular memory while

the not very well-known verses portray a standard "stupid Irishman" stereotype. It seems that xenophobia was not as automatic and consensual in the Second World War as in the First. The ambiguous character, Mr Wu, in a number of George Formby's songs, before and during the war, including *Mr Wu's an air-raid warden now,* show the "chink" character with all the characteristics of a stage Chinaman, but it would be hard to find a song that integrated any non-white person in home front activities during World War One. At the same time, soldiers' songs could be anti-Semitic or racist in other ways. A particular a song mocked Leslie Hore-Belisha, secretary of state for war in 1939-40, and accused him of putting Jewish interests before those of Britain. More clearly read as an indicator away from provincialism was the massive reduction in the number of songs celebrating regional identity. In the First World War dozens of songs celebrated in one way or another the fact of coming from a particular place. From Ireland, there were such songs as *For Killarney and you* and *You can have an Irish name*; from England *We're the boys of good old London, My little Surrey Home, We're all North Country lads and lasses, I want to go to Lancasheer, My Devon girl* and *In Somerset in summertime* are just some examples. The expression of someone longing for a particular home was more important than the listener's coming from that place, in spite of the titles. The Jack Yellen and George Cobb song of 1915, *Are you from Dixie?* was very popular in Britain. The Dixie song's second line is "cause I'm from Dixie too," which of course limits a British person's identity with the geography of the song but not with the sentiment of longing. The rise of national popular culture with the advent of the radio and the gramophone seems to have put paid to the entire category. The exception might be Noël Coward's song of 1941, *London Pride* which celebrates what he sees as stoic bravery in the London blitz:

> Every Blitz
> Your resistance
> Toughening,
> From the Ritz
> To the Anchor and Crown

Rhyming blitz with Ritz, however, might suggest a civilized cosmopolitan quality to the City rather than localism. "From the Ritz to the Anchor and Crown shows a democratic "resistance" at work.

Songs (and sketches) showing very traditional attitudes towards working women also disappeared. The First World War saw a series of songs where women – "taking the place of men" in public service, were the object of surprise, and either paternalistic praise or gentle mockery. Such songs as *Kitty the telephone girl* (Harry Gifford, Huntley Trevor, Tom Mellor and F. J. Lawrence, 1912)*, The Hyde Park girl, The lady bus conductor* or *You're some tram conductor girl* show the unease with which certain types of women's work (dealing with the general public) were seen. The lines *Kitty the telephone girl*, "Kitty, Kitty, isn't it a pity, that you work in the city so hard…and waste your time…" would not have meant anything by 1940. The song, popular during World War One may have expressed nostalgia for pre-war attitudes.

Missing themes

A few key themes are absent in the songs of both wars. It is very noticeable that death is almost totally absent, though there is a little more in The First World War than in the Second. Also absent is the sentiment of revenge. As Brian Murdoch points out "Genuinely belligerent material in popular song is relatively rare" (Murdoch, 192). Songs from the United States from the First World War could be belligerent but in a comic song idiom. In the Tim Pan Alley song of 1918, *Hunting the Hun*, Archie Gottler's light march music fit Howard E. Rogers words that do not get more violent than:

"When they start to advance

Shoot 'em in the pants".

If belligerent songs are rare, anti-war songs are almost impossible to find. The consensual power of music-hall and of radio airing made it difficult for such songs to become popular once either war had begun. Nevertheless, in the few months before the First World War, an anti-war music-hall song was a great hit. Socialist activist Harry McShane recounts in his memoirs his experience of the outbreak of war :

We felt that we were speaking for the masses in our opposition to the war. Just prior to the outbreak there was a music-hall song which really caught on - you could hear it sung everywhere, in the workshops and on the streets. it went:
"Little man, little man
You want to be a soldier, little man;
You are mother's only son -
Never mind about the gun,
Stay at home
Fight for her all you can."
In the socialist movement we were surprised and delighted by the song's popularity. But the day war was declared that song just died; it was amazing the way *nobody* was whistling it. Instead, another music-hall song "It's a long way to Tipperary" was being whistled and sung everywhere (McShane , 61).

Unfortunately no witness left such a record of the fate of the song *God bless you Mr. Chamberlain*, which among its possibilities, may also have conveyed a pacifist message.

Tone

It is not of course only the themes of hit songs which changed between the two wars. The tone of the songs changed, and musically they evolved. The hits of the First World War were musically less sophisticated. Military marches were very popular; voice technique was limited by the need for singers to project without microphones. The lyrics too were less sophisticated. They were often stories about particular characters, frequently in the third person, allowing more hesitance and distance in expressing personal emotion. The classic tone of a First World War song is jaunty, the romantic tone rare; the tragic is absent.

This changed during the inter-war period. The romantic song of the "crooner" rose unstoppably. The number of songs devoted to the theme of love rose from 42% in 1919 to 55% in

1935 (Nott, 212), reflecting this shift. More and more of the love songs were written in the first person. The words addressed the loved one directly.

Such changes are difficult to analyse, but the titles from the First World War concerning love, such as *Every Jack must leave a girl somewhere, He misses his missus's kisses, I think I'll get wed this Summer, I never heard of anybody dying from a kiss,* or *There's a little bit of bad in every good little girl,* compared to song titles from the second war such as *You'd be so nice to come home to, I'll be with you in apple blossom time, We mustn't say Goodbye, I wish I could hide inside this letter* or *I try to say "I love you",* reveals a more direct approach to the subject of love along with a heightened chance for love's disappointments. According to Nott, a more optimistic and positive tone of First World War love songs was largely replaced by a more melancholic and negative tone by the nineteen thirties. Generalizations are tempting but the thousands of songs involved do not easily fall into clear-cut categories. Nevertheless, there seems to be some truth in the existence of a heightened sense of vulnerability to love's travails. Nott quoted classically trained composer and music commentator Constant Lambert offering an opinion that, though clouded with class judgment, addressed a new intimacy without conventional endings of marriage and family and without sustained joy.

In modern songs it is taken for granted that one is poor, unsuccessful, and either sex-starved or unable to hold the affections of such a partner as one may have had the luck to pick up (Nott, 213).

Changes in tone were addressed by the broadcasting authorities. The BBC, under the uplifting influence of John Reith till 1938, having been opposed to the broadcasting of most popular music before the mid-1930s seemed to feel, with the war, that the old, First World War

tone of jaunty stoicism would be best for morale. There was strong opposition within its hierarchy to the new melancholic songs. In 1944, the BBC even refused to broadcast the song *I heard you cried last night* (by Ted Gouya and Gerrie Kruger, recorded by Helen Forrest and Harry James in 1943) since it suggested that a soldier might be moved to tears by homesickness (Huggett, 150). It was thought that such songs might even encourage desertion. Meanwhile, the Dance Music Policy Committee of the BBC opposed the broadcasting of sentimental "crooner" songs, seen as "anaemic", "debilitated" and "slushy in sentiment". The radio programme *Sincerely Yours* presented by Vera Lynn from Autumn 1941 throught the Spring of 1942, was criticized in parliament as "a potential threat to the national fibre" (Nicholas, 82).

Of course, one of the most important differences between the hits of the First World War and those of the second was in the method of consumption. First World War hits tended to make listeners wish to sing along. They were often referred to as "chorus songs". A Second World War hit made listeners want to dance**.** The rise of dance halls had transformed middle and working class leisure in the late twenties, in particular allowing women a physical freedom they had not had before. During the Second World War a loosening of dancing rules, symbolized towards the end of the war by the jitterbug, gave more space to "exuberant self-expression"(Huggett, 132).

During World War One, music-hall, a musical genre generally looked down on by the elite, became much more respectable because of its leading role in supporting morale and raising money for wounded soldiers. In the Second World War, cultural elites like members of the BBC management, were obliged to take into account popular taste. Very strong resistance was felt within the BBC to the broadcasting of dance music and of variety. But when military leaders and others pointed out the increasing popularity of German radio stations among British troops, the BBC was obliged to change. Classical music, accounting for 17% of air time in 1938, was down to 9% in 1942. Dance music went from 5% to 10%, while variety went from 6% to 15% of airtime. This

did not mean that traditional attitudes were dead. The hit song *Coming in on a wing and a prayer* was taken off the air because of the mild mix of religion in the lyrics with a foxtrot melody. Meanwhile the BBC Head of Variety did not seem to approve of his own job. He declared “the variety department of the BBC is the only department which has no moral values whatsoever… its sole desire is to give the public what it likes”(Nicholas, 80).

Conclusions

This exploration of popular song during the two world wars aimed at situating this complex phenomenon within the history of popular music in Britain exposing the underlining the importance of popular song both as a part of the war drive, and as a source of neglected cultural texts which often reflect mass priorities of the time. During times of total war, it may be more difficult for popular song to reflect the problems and demands of dominated classes, especially where these demands conflict with the national consensus. Nevertheless, songs can express some aspects of mass experience. They can even complain and resist. The sheer numbers of songs, and the difficulty of defining tones and attitude precisely make providing a full characterization of the role and content of popular songs a delicate undertaking. But the slight separation, much less pronounced than many have claimed, and the considerable communication of tunes lyrics and themes between “authentic” soldiers’ songs and “commercial” music-hall and variety, points to the existence of a shared set of cultural possibilities and attitudes among the different levels of culture and between soldiers and the cultural institutions at home.

The main thrust of popular songs, it turns out, both those collected from among soldiers and those sung in music halls of between 1914 and 1918 or sung by soldiers and broadcast during the Second World War, was their contribution to the war effort. War propaganda needed to be produced in multiple forms, including those more acceptable to working class people than the official

politicians' speeches may have been. Harry Lauder and Marie Lloyd during the First World War, Gracie Fields and George Formby during the Second were undoubtedly, for the poorer classes, more idolized than were Lloyd George and Winston Churchill. The result of this need of popular music producers to assist in the war effort led to an increased legitimacy of some genres (music-hall and dance music in particular), and this new acceptance continued in peacetime.

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A note about the Songs

A great many of these songs have been mentioned in the important studies of popular music in the bibliography above. Even more exist on a great variety of internet sites where their sheet music or original record jackets can be examined. This study has made use of all these, sometimes ephemeral, sources.

John Mullen
16 Rue Béranger
47000 Agen

john.mullen@wanadoo.fr
06 16 95 09 53

Maître de Conférences, Université Paris 12