

Wartime Popular Music

John Mullen

▶ **To cite this version:**

John Mullen. Wartime Popular Music. 2019. hal-02428108

HAL Id: hal-02428108
https://normandie-univ.hal.science/hal-02428108

Submitted on 5 Jan 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

British Music Hall Songs of the First World War

John Mullen, University of Rouen, France

For a long time, historians did not study the wartime popular music of 1914-1918. Perhaps it seemed trivial to concentrate on analyzing entertainment during such a tragic period, when so many were living in deep fear at the Front, or waiting for a horrific telegram at home. When it was mentioned, it was presented either as a form of spontaneous jingoism defending the empire, or a morale-building way of putting a brave face on. However, until recently, the vast majority of the songs had been completely forgotten, so this reputation was not based on objective research: popular song was in fact far richer and more varied than has been supposed.

Popular song does not reflect or illustrate history which is produced elsewhere in muddy trenches or panelled ministerial chambers; rather it constituted a series of mass activities (singalong, music hall attendance, sheet music buying) which are part of the history of society. It was important in people's lives, as it is today. Thousands of songs were written and performed -funny songs, sentimental songs, political songs and rude songs, to name but a few types. Fortunes were made by the theatre chains and sheet music publishers, and a few stars became tremendously wealthy. Just like today, the three-minute song dominated, and the Christmastime hit might be forgotten by the Summer. Yet so much was different from today. There was no internet, Mp3, TV or radio, and very few houses had gramophones. What sold by the million was sheet music, and tickets to the music hall. In 1916, in Britain, for the price of the cheapest gramophone, you could buy 220 cheap tickets to go to the music hall, the central institution for popular song at the time. A hit could sell over a million copies in sheet music. There were three million pianos in Britain in 1914, and the web of singalong consumption included thousands of street singers, and millions of middle-class musical evenings and working-class family singsongs. Popular music

was not youth culture at the time: at 12 years old, girls frequently became domestic servants and boys became labourers or worked in a factory. Teenagers did not exist, and on a Saturday night young and old would watch the same turns at the music hall.

What did people sing about?

For the case of Britain, we know that three quarters of popular songs did not refer to the war in any way at all. People continued wanting to sing about love, exotic fantasy and knockabout comedy (Mothers-in-law, shy fiancés and "village idiots" were among the topics). But new themes were added which could express popular anxieties, generally without threatening a fragile consensus about the necessity of the war. Love songs, generally sung from the point of view of the man, were never about breaking up, but generally about having met the perfect girl (pieces such as "My Bonnie Lassie" or "The Girl with the Golden Hair"). This theme could be made topical ("Little Rosalie, My Pretty refugee" or "My Little Ammunition Girl"). A female, let alone feminist, point of view was almost unheard of.

Songs dreaming of a distant rural paradise – generally Ireland or Dixieland (both places the vast majority of the audience would never go) were very well-liked ("My Little Cottage Home in Sweet Killarney" or "Back Home Again in Indiana"). During the war there was more reason than ever to dream of being far away, and the two smash hit musical comedies of the war years were set far from home: "Chu Chin Chow" in China and "The Maid of the Mountains" among bandits in Italy. It goes without saying that racist stereotypes were very much present in these shows.

Most members of the music hall audience had probably at some point in their lives known what it was like to go hungry, and this might explain the popularity of songs about food ("Boiled Beef and Carrots" is still known today, whereas "Hot meat pies, saveloys and trotters has been forgotten). The food theme could also be made topical with songs about rationing (which was introduced in early 1918) such

as “Never Mind the Food Controller, We’ll Live on Love!”.
Popular song was, by 1914, thoroughly respectable. Frankly rude songs would not get on stage, though indirectly suggestive ones did (“Tight Skirts have got to Go!” or “Nothing but Boys and Khaki by the Seaside!”) A jolly tone was generally compulsory, but this did not stop widespread prejudices expressing themselves, and occasional racist or antisemitic songs could be hits (“Sergeant Solomon Isaacstein”, “The Lovesick Coon” or ‘John Bull’s Little Khaki Coon”).

The war songs
The first few months of the war saw many dozens of recruitment songs and pieces defending the Empire’s cause. The recruitment songs and the glory-of-war songs almost completely disappeared after the first few months (the 1915 book of Greatest Hits contained not one recruitment song, though conscription had not yet begun). People still wanted Britain to win the war, but for a song to be a success in the music hall, the entire audience had to sing along with enthusiasm, and songs like “Your King and Country Need You” or “Be a Soldier, Be a Man” could no longer raise such unanimity once the first heavy casualty figures had come in. For similar reasons, there are no British music-hall songs about hating Germans, whereas in the US and France there were a number of such numbers. Before 1914, the German and British people had been close.

The war songs, after the first few months, left behind jingoism and concentrated on dreaming of the end of the war. “Keep the Home Fires Burning”, “When Tommy Comes Marching Home” and “The Trail that leads to Home” were typical. In 1918, for every song with the word “victory” in the title, there were ten songs with the word “home”, and the same was true the following year”.

What about anti-war songs? Once the war broke out, these were not seen on the variety stage. Singers saw themselves as showmen and women not political

analysts, and one would have been unable to get the whole house singing along for an anti-war song. Anti-war songs then were reserved for campaign meetings, like those of the Stop the War campaign in 1916, which was strong enough to organize meetings in hundreds of towns across the UK. The popular anti-war song "Never Mind about the Gun" was an exception: it had a wide following just before the outbreak of war, but it died a death the moment the war broke out. This does not mean that dissenting songs could not get onto the stage. In 1916 a few anti-conscription songs were sung, in particular "The Military Representative" comically portraying an officer refusing to exempt anyone from military service, even if they were 92 years old, or already dead! And once the war was over a cheerful song about murdering one's superior officer was a smash hit ("Pop Goes the Major!). The history of soldiers' feelings about their officers remains controversial, but popular songs may help us understand.

Large numbers of songs express anxiety about the new roles which women have been able to take on during the war. Surprisingly, these songs are almost never opposed to the changes, nor in support of them: neither of these sentiments was consensual enough for a singalong chorus, and in any case direct political argument was not the stuff of the music hall song. Anxiety, however was widely expressed, and songs such as "Where are the Girls of the Old Brigade", "Women's work", "Woman's Opinion of Man", "If the Girlies Could Be Soldiers" or "The Girls Know as much as You Know" explored these feelings in a dozen different ways.

The music

If we look at the musical material, we notice at once that it is much less sophisticated than today's. The technology was incomparably simpler, but this was not the only factor. The singer travelled from town to town and was accompanied by the local "house orchestra" who learned the tunes on Monday morning for the first show Monday night. Experimental musical ideas were not welcomed! The use of voice

was also simpler. In a hall of two or three thousand seats, without a microphone, projection was the main problem, and intimate voices could not be used. Singalong choruses helped to build up volume. Finally, the singer had fifteen minutes in a variety programme (perhaps before the acrobats and after the ventriloquist!). They had to make an impression quickly, and stereotypes and knockabout humour were much used.

A new kind of show, on the rise during the war years, the Revue, allowed a more flexible approach to songs, since instead of an evening made up of dozens of individual acts, the revue was a full-evening show with centralized artistic control allowing to build up atmosphere (as well as use dance girl choruses and special effects). A boom in romantic songs was one of the results. “If You Were the Only Girl in the World”’ was, in 1916, one of the very first romantic duets on the UK variety stage, and it was a smash hit.

Soldiers’ songs were a separate category, invented by the troops, set to well-known tunes, not written for a market, and not required to please a mixed social audience. Soldiers also loved to sing music hall hits and religious hymns, but the songs they wrote themselves provided a supplementary repertoire which was absent from those. In particular many of them were vulgar (“Do Your balls hang low?”, “Charlotte the Harlot” or “Mademoiselle from Armentieres”, in its uncensored versions). Many were antimilitarist or otherwise dissenting (“Hanging on the Old Barbed Wire”, “When this bloody war is over”, “Now I’m a General at the Ministry” or “Ode to the Corporal”). All in all, popular song, as in other periods responded to a demand to portray and express an impressive variety of feelings, worries, attitudes and fantasies. The centrality of singalong added a communal fibre to the activities which, then as now, helped people to keep on living, but cannot be reduced to patriotic fervour.

Listening:

A number of songs, with a concentration on the patriotic, can be heard on the website http://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/index.htm

Further reading

Arthur, Max. *When This Bloody War Is Over: Soldiers' Songs of the First World War*. London: Piatkus, 2001.
John Mullen, *The Show Must Go On: Popular Song in Britain during the First World War*, London, Routledge, 2015.
John Mullen (Ed.) *Popular Song in the First World War: An International Perspective*, Routledge 2018.
Michael Pickering, *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2008.

John Mullen is Professor of British Studies at the University of Rouen in France. He has published widely on the history of British popular music. He is the author of *The Show Must Go On: Popular Song in Britain during the First World War* (Routledge 2015) and editor of *Popular Song in the First World War: An International Perspective* (Routledge, 1918). His website is at www.johncmullen.net