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Music Hall in the First World War: Myths and Realities

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Myths and realities: British popular song of the First World War.

The performances of the plays in this project will be accompanied by interval music made up of songs of the period. John Mullen give some background on popular song 1914-1918.

The reader may well know of ten or twenty songs released during the Great War: “Pack up Your Troubles” “If you were the only girl in the World” “Tipperary” and “Keep the Home Fires Burning” perhaps. But there were at least five thousand songs released in Britain during the war, as well as hundreds of soldier songs and the immense majority have been completely forgotten. Over the last few years I have put together a corpus of just over a thousand of them, and found that the reality of the repertoire is very different from the stereotypes we have of songs of the time.

Music hall

The stereotype shows Music Hall as jingoistic and warlike: Siegfried Sassoon and J.B.Priestley thought of music hall in this manner. The great First World War historian, Arthur Marwick, stated, in passing, that popular patriotic songs made up the majority of those produced in wartime. This is quite untrue, as we shall see, but as the thousands of songs involved lay forgotten in the British Library, no one contradicted this vision.

One can see from this list of song titles that enthusiasm for war was present in the music hall:

We don't want to leave you, but we think you ought to go
Be a Soldier, Be a Man
We didn't want a European war
Tommy is as good a man as any knight of old
Bravo, British Volunteer!
For the honour of dear old England!
I'd like to be a hero, too!
True sons of England!
March on ye gallant Britons

However, such songs practically disappear in a very few months. At the end of 1915, the year of the biggest recruitment campaign in history, whose relative failure led to conscription in 1916, the published book of the greatest hits of the year by Francis and Day contained not one single recruitment song. Even in January of 1915, hits being sung in dozens of pantomimes around Britain were “Are We Downhearted, No!” and “Cheer Up Little Soldier Man!”: already a far cry from glory and unfettered confidence.

Throughout the war, the majority of music hall songs did not speak of war or of life in wartime. In a music hall evening, there might be twenty songs (interspersed with acrobats, animal imitators, “freak shows”, jugglers, elephants and clog-dancing for example). Who would want to listen to twenty songs about the war every week? Pre-war themes of food and drink, beautiful far off Ireland or Dixieland, courtship,

friendship, mothers-in-laws were prevalent, interspersed, as they had been for decades, with occasional racist or anti-Semitic songs (the 1915 hit “Sergeant Solomon Isaacstein” for example).

The war did bring some new material, but almost all of it was not jingoistic. Endless songs spoke of the boys coming home. In both 1918 and 1919, for each song with the word “victory” in the title, there were ten with the word “home”. Dozens of songs expressed anxiety about women's new roles in wartime. Typical of 1914 was “Women who wait” , but when the public image of women became tram conductors, football players and munitions workers, songs such as “Where are the Girls of the old brigade” were penned, laughing both at women in new roles and at the fuddy duddy narrator who regretted the old days. By 1918 audiences were singing along to “We thank you, women of England”.

Other hits spoke of rationing (“Never mind the Food Controller, We'll Live on Love”, “Save, Save, Save!” or “The Food Inspector” for example).

Music hall depended on the whole audience singing along to the chorus (a necessity reinforced by the lack of microphones in the two and three thousand seater theatres). Material had then to be consensual, or ambiguous . This is why enthusiastic war songs disappeared so quickly, and why there are practically no songs about hating Germans (whereas in French and US repertoires there are). It is also why pacifistic or anti-imperialist songs are not found in wartime music hall.

Dissenting material is of course present though occasionally. Ernest Hastings had a smash hit with “The Military Representative” in which the army officer on the exemption-from-conscription tribunals is presented as brutish and ridiculous. Once the war was over, dissent was naturally easier, and Tom Clare's sarcastic hit “What did you do in the Great War, Daddy” could be heard. Possibly the harshest anti-war hit was the 1920 piece “Pop Goes the Major” which speaks of the joy of arson and of the murder of a senior officer. (“He thinks he’s been forgotten quite/ We’ll soon see him in a different light/ For we’re going to set fire to his house tonight/ Pop goes the Major!”)

Soldier songs

It has often been suggested that soldier songs, invented by bored Tommies for sing-alongs within the battalion contrast completely with music hall song, since they are frequently dissenting, mocking the army and in particular the officers, with sexual and scatological humour a plenty. This has an element of truth. Songs such as “Hanging on the old barbed wire” or “Never Mind” show black humour and hatred of the higher ranks

But there is an “optical illusion” in the vision of a binary opposition between jingoistic music hall and oppositional soldier songs. The soldier song repertoire is a *supplementary* one. Soldiers loved music hall hits and some religious hymns, and sang these in addition to songs they made up. The made up songs deal mostly with themes not available in music hall hits or in hymns : vulgar themes (“Do your balls hang low?”) dissenting themes (“I want to go home”) and black humour (“The Bells of hell they ring a ling a ling, for you but not for me!” sung to relieving troops arriving). There are no love songs among the soldier songs, since any desire to sing

love songs would find a well-known music hall hit to sing. There are no soldier songs about trusting in God or in destiny, since hymns were available for this sentiment.

Soldier songs could be oppositional since the processes leading to their singing were quite different from those governing music hall songs. A Music hall song had to be approved by theatre management, often very keen to emphasize respectability, having only recently been counted among local elites. It also had to be sung in chorus by an audience which, if mostly working class, included higher social groups in the more expensive seats, and of course covered every shade of political opinion. Soldier songs only had to please the immediate group of “other ranks”. This is why it was possible for soldier songs to express hatred for sergeant- major and mockery of the army and of jingoism. It is also the reason that dissent in these songs does not go as far as pacifistic declarations or calls for collective mutiny.

The study of First World War popular song in Britain and elsewhere will no doubt yield more valuable insights into popular feeling over coming years.

John Mullen is professor of British Studies at the University of Rouen, in France. His book “The Show Must Go On: Popular Song in Britain during the First World War” was published by Ashgate in 2015. He is now working on a follow-up volume: “Popular Song around the world during the First World War”.

