

# Popular song in Britain and in France in 1915: processes and repertoires

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## Popular song in Britain and in France in 1915 : processes and repertoires.

Conference of the International society for the Study of Popular Music  
Campinas, Brazil, June 2015

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### Why 1915

It is important to have a tight focus. Books have been written on « British music hall from 1860 to 1920 », but for a deeper understanding, a closer focus is essential. Things in entertainment changed quickly, if less quickly than today .

Obviously I've also chosen 1915 because it's exactly a century ago. I'm interested to see which of the tools we have developed to study more recent pop music can be applied to the situation a century ago.

So all the songs I will mention (and all the song titles on your handout) are from that one year.

### What did the two industries have in common?

In both cases we are talking of music from the towns. Since 1850 the majority of the British population lives in towns, and in France the size and power of Paris Bordeaux or Marseille is constantly growing.

In both cases, sheet music and live performance were at the centre of the industry. Gramophones are reserved to a small minority of the population : often middle class somewhat geekish amateurs rather than the ruling class .

In both cases it is the song, the 3 to 4 minutes song which dominates, and a singalong chorus is frequently used. The star system is well established and the private lives of the leading singers widely discussed in the popular press.

In both cases it is a mass industry. The new music halls being built in Britain or in France have 2 000 or 3 000 seats. The French café concerts from 200 to 1 000 seats.

The audience for the songs is socially mixed, mass and intergenerational. Twelve year olds listen to the same music in the streets and in the theatres as do adults and old people.

General levels of technology are similar. From the point of view of the song the key fact is that microphones will not be used on stage until the late twenties. This fact must have influenced not only the use of voice but also no doubt the relationship with the audience, and the important role given to singalong choruses.

The fact that the radio has not yet arrived has an important effect. Almost every night the singer is performing to people who have never heard the songs before. It is fair to say that this situation does not encourage musical innovation. The singalong sections in particular must be extremely easy to pick up.

### What were the differences?

The British music industry is much bigger. Urbanization is far more advanced. Remember the French army of 1914 is fundamentally an army of peasants whereas the British army is an army of urban workers.

Concentration of capital in the entertainment industry is far more advanced.

In Britain, in 1915, music hall chains or individual theatres have shareholders, and are highly profitable enterprises

In 1915, the London Coliseum paid out 25 per cent, the Leicester Palace 10 per cent and the Hackney Empire 6 per cent.

There was a far higher proportion of smaller venues (cafés concerts) in France than in Britain.

Theatre chains have far more power in GB . Theatres often had to join or fold

In 1915, for example, the owners of the proudly independent Alhambra theatre in London was obliged for financial reasons to join one of the major chains, London Theatres of Variety.

This concentration has led in GB to the rise of revue, a new kind of evening entertainment which contrasts with the traditional music hall evening made up of individual turns.

Revue is a highly capitalized and artistically centralized show which could travel the country ( and even sometimes go on tours of America, Australia or Africa ) as a bloc. It was extremely popular. In Bristol, a city of around 300 000 people in 1915, the revue *Passing Events* sold 25,649 tickets the first week, a record for the town.

Revue benefitted from economies of scale. It involved large new groups of skilled workers, such as chorus girls, and introduced ever more lavish special effects to attract the audiences. Special effects for war scenes and wedding scenes came into their own.

Special effects At the end of the revue *Kultur*, in 1915, one could see the actors playing German soldiers 'drowned' on stage in the enormous tank normally used for synchronized swimming displays.<sup>1</sup>

The British artistes far more likely to be unionized

The Variety Artistes Federation had between 3500 and 4000 members

Members accepted union discipline and refused to sign contracts which paid less than the agreed union rate. In 1915, the union position was to refuse contracts which involved less than a week's work, and not to work on Sundays (even for charities, with the exception of war charities): several members

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<sup>1</sup> *The Encore*, 7 January 1915.

were subject to disciplinary procedures for not having respected the majority decision.

Further research is required but it may be that the lyricists were not from the same social media in the two countries. In any case the list of known lyricists cited by Anne Simon includes « law graduates, doctors, classicists » And yet the songs tend to be in working class dialect, if it is a stage dialect. Perhaps in GB writing for the music hall was not respectable enough to attract classicists and doctors. Certainly the British sources suggest rather lyricists who hung around in down market pubs hoping to catch a singer who would buy their song. This social difference, which needs to be checked up again, could also be linked to the stabilization of lyricist income in France ; in Britain, at this time, almost all lyricists sold for a single cash payment of a few pounds the rights to the song for performance or recording. They did not receive royalties.

## France

The French music halls and cafés concerts, along with the theatres, were closed down on the outbreak of war for reasons of national emergency. Only towards the very end of 1914 were they opening again one by one, and this process continued into 1915. There were even songs written to protest about their reopening, singing « while our lads are risking their necks on the front lines » some dare re-open music and tango clubs ! »

This serves to remind us also of the essential difference between the British and the French experience of the war : the French fought on their own soil.

## What were the reasons for the main differences?

Clearly the main reason for the differences between the two industries was the level of urbanization and industrialization, far more pronounced in Britain.

## Repertoires

What were the main characteristics of the two repertoires?

What did the two repertoires have in common?

[Note that the corpuses were constituted in a different manner. The British Library stores thousands of songs in sheet music form, one enthusiast transfers old cylinder recordings onto CDs, and otherwise songs are cited in the trade press or elsewhere.]

In France there is official centralized censorship, so the police headquarters kept a copy of all songs authorized and all songs refused authorization and all songs authorized on condition that certain words were changed.]

In both cases songs would often refer to everyday life of the working classes. Unlike, for example, the traditional rural song very insistently championed by Cecil Sharp and his folk revival movement at the time.

In both countries the use of working class language was essential to the appeal. That is to say, in both cases the experience of the working classes was validated.

### Construction of neighbourliness:<sup>2</sup>

P'r'aps you don't know Johnny Brown who sold the flowers and fruit?

I stood 'im 'cos he used to make me laugh

The other day he rolled up in Khaki, if you please

I says, 'Lumme! don't it suit yer, Jack. Not 'arf!'

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<sup>2</sup> This song can be heard on line at <http://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/1916.htm> (accessed 16 July 2014).

Everyday life reflected by references to **specific events** which changed people's lives

1915 French song (Simon 44) about getting married by proxy – in that year it was made legal for soldiers to marry even if they could not be present

Or the 1915 GB song « the Ladies football club » which reflected the intrigued or worried reactions about the extremely rapid rise of women's football, since men's football had become politically impossible to stage

In both cases, love was an important part of the repertoire, work far less so' : and in fact experience in the workplace was almost completely absent, as has indeed been the case with the vast majority of popular music repertoires today.

In both cases there was a kind of censorship and moral limits on what could be said.

In both cases the lyrics could be supplemented flexibly by the use of gesture and voice, in order to go further in certain theatres or for certain audiences or to avoid a censorship which is based in text alone.

### Useful songs for the war drive

A number of songs work at building the sense of national unity of purpose, in a specific, intimate, neighbourly manner, which no doubt makes these songs more effective among the ordinary people than are speeches by bishops or ministers.

So (Simon 48 ) 1915 French song where a soldier narrator says n so many words

You see, my little wife, we do get in right well

Us working men and the aristocratic lot  
 When the fight against the savages is over  
 We'll all be mates together, you will see

Tu vois ma petite femme qu'on fait bon ménage  
 Les ouvriers et les aristos  
 Quand on se battra plus contre ces sauvages  
 On s're de vrais poteaux

Another A French 1915 song ( Simon 165)

about fraternity in the trenches, a touching tale of how a soldier always allows his friend who has no family to read his letters form home

« a soldier is better than a brother, if we're sharing bread, we can share our family » he says.

British songs also work at the war drive, of course  
 You can see on your handout a series of songs about the war.  
 Never let the old flag fall/be a soldier, lad of mine/ pack up your trouble sin your old kit bag...

Or the Gb song « All the boys in khaki get the nice girls »'  
 Which is intended to encourage men to join the volunteer army  
 (in France the army is a conscript army from day one.

There is plenty more analysis which can be done on exactly how the war is presented in these songs ( the glory of war is a very rare theme, and the word « home » will very quickly become the most common word in British song titles, as dreaming of the end of the war becomes the easiest theme to sell.

It is worth noting however that the many enthusiastic recruitment songs sung in Britain in August September and October of 1914 are no longer anywhere near as popular. In the Greatest Hits of the Year collection produced by Francis and Day one of the major music publishers, in December 1915, there is not a single recruitment song (although as you can see on your handout some were still being sung).



Other songs about the war also aim at raising morale and reassuring those whose lives are damaged.

Song about the Gare de l'Est 1915 : the railway station where soldiers on leave arrived and departed

They've all got mud right up to their balls  
and a lot of them are covered with lice  
But still they are joyful and ready to fight

De la Boue ils en ont jusqu'au couils sont même des fois  
remplis de poux  
Ils sont joyeux et plein d'entrain (Simon 46)

Other songs celebrate the values of the homeland and its people

French 1915 song (Simon 189) in praise of nurses who bring the hearts and souls of our wounded soldiers back to life.

It is important to handle the huge changes going on in society. Another song reassures that the nurses are not sexually available (Simon 192). She takes care of the wounded says the song « while thinking of her own fiancée »

Very similar to a GB song from 1916, the Rose of No Man's land

It's the one red rose the soldier knows  
It's the work of the Master's hand,  
It's the sweet word from the Red Cross nurse,  
She's the rose of no-man's land.

In both countries (Simon 248) there are songs about being proud of young boys playing at soldiers

Both countries have songs talking of mothers

« French 1915 song « don't cry dear mother etc »  
(Simon 234)

**What were the main differences?**

**In Britain, the centrality of humour and jolliness is key.** Shows have a circus flavour and the music hall evening will typically include animal imitators, jugglers, conjurors etc.  
. Performers generally saw themselves as showmen and showwomen rather than as artists.

Melodrama, which had been a feature of British music hall songs thirty years earlier, seems to have disappeared. Tragedy was almost never seen in the songs.

If hardships of everyday life in the war could be dealt with it was almost exclusively through humour.

**In France there is a far higher level of realism,** in particular about personal or even intimate matters which are banned de facto on the British stage.

So we find in the French repertoire [Anne Simon p 20] that (quoting from Anne Simon)

« the songs express the longing of separated couples for affection and sex ; they express the acute torment of those mutilated by the war, they express the terrible sadness of mothers grieving for their lost sons ».

This is absolutely untrue of the British repertoire.

One 1915 song which did not get through the censor, spoke of a female narrator who says how she loves to stare at the lovely bodies of men in scanty sportswear.

So although this verse was censored in 1915, it was presented  
 « Pour moi, la chose émouvante/ C'est de lorgner  
 presque à nu/ Sous l'maillot, l'torse d'un beau gas/ Ayant  
 du poil sous les bras ! »<sup>3</sup> (in the song “ah les petits  
 homes)”

Another 1915 French song was censored since it spoke in a most suggestive manner of a woman on her wedding night and the « cigar » which her man was to provide for her as a gift.

Another 1915 song refused by the censors spoke of a soldier coming back from the wars impotent, but his wife being very understanding.

Also a song was censured in 1915 Toute aussi directe, cette femme qui n'hésite pas à dire : « J'en demande, il m'en faut ! ». Il s'agit des hommes, bien entendu. Elle n'a pas de préférence, « un jeune ou bien un vieux », ou encore « mariés ou célibataires », « qu'ils soient riches ou qu'ils soient gueux »<sup>4</sup>, elle ne peut pas se passer d'hommes et attend d'eux plaisir et frissons...La chanson est censurée, comme deux autres chansons sur le même thème :

These songs were censored... but they were presented to the censor so one might imagine the songwriter felt they would have been well received by audiences.

Other realistic of intimate songs were not censored. Here are three examples

One song (Simon 134) which spoke of the « terrible torture » of men being without women at the front.

<sup>3</sup> APPP, série BA 699, non visée par la censure entre 1915 et 1918, « Ah ! Les petits hommes ! », paroles de Pinel et Chimenès, musique de Lust et Hamel.

<sup>4</sup> APPP, série BA 712, refusée le 28 juin 1915, paroles de Lucien Bouvet, musique d'Edouard Jouve, éditions Jouve.

Another 1915 song (Simon 267) speaks of the children born who will never know their fathers cos they died in the war

But another (Simon 152) speaks of sexual frustration among the women who wait at home. Again this is quite explicit – in one song the woman narrator explains to her husband that she has been completely faithful and has not even masturbated while he was away.

Another still (Simon 157) recounts how the fiancée who had been reticent about sex gives everything to her soldier boyfriend when he comes home on leave

Several 1915 French song (Simon 135, 138, 144) promises plenty of sex once they get leave after 14 months at the front. It is explicit compared with British songs, but it is not bawdy.

Another 1915 song (Simon 179) speaks of the flannel shirts sent by the penfriends (marraines), regretting that the flannel shirts didn't come with the women penfriends inside.

Songs may mix talk of sex with a moral project for the nation. A 1915 French song (Simon 119) has a soldier narrator who presents the war as a source of moral renewal. Before the war he was a pimp and his partner a prostitute, he says, but the military medal he has won means he must live up to it, and he writes to his partner that she must give up prostitution ; he in his turn promises to become an « honest working man ».

#### Songs about street kids 1915

« On connaît tout, on sait y faire

Nous pratiquons tous les métiers

Aux bourgeois on ouvre les portières

Leur z'y donnant des noms princiers [...]

Le soir nous changeons de boulot

Pour mettre quelques ronds dans la caisse [...]

Quand y a la fringale  
 On s'en va aux halles  
 Là dans les paniers  
 Ya de quoi bouffer  
 On chipe en passant  
 Une pomme au marchand. »<sup>5</sup>

## Racism

As well as these star acts, there were at least a dozen other blackface professionals in wartime music halls, as well as many amateurs. In 1915, one could see a novel act on tour of a young 'negro imitator' only eight years of age.<sup>6</sup>

One 1915 song, 'John Bull's Little Khaki Coon', blends a celebration of the participation of Black African regiments alongside the British Army with condescending racist content. The narrator is a

Black soldier:

Germany has found that the colours won't run

No matter how you shoot

We always stand our ground

And John Bull's very proud of his little khaki coon

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<sup>5</sup> M.P., 1915, paroles et musique de Vincent Scotto, éditions Delormel/Fortin.

<sup>6</sup> *The Performer*, 18 February 1915.

Comic stupid Irishmen appear in songs such as ‘Paddy Maloney’s Aeroplane’ (1915), in which Maloney claims to have invented a plane which has remarkable technology:

His corrugated iron-plated wonderful machine  
 Scatters a thousand frizzly wigs on every submarine  
 With telescope and microscope, Maloney says it’s right  
 That he can see the enemy when they are out of sight!

### Pride and identity

It is worth noting that the revue *Irish, and Proud of It Too!* inspired several other revues of a similar type, singing the praises of other communities and identities. *Lancashire, and Proud of It* was a success in the North,<sup>7</sup> and in 1915 the revue *Jewish and Glad of It!* played in London;<sup>8</sup> *Scotch and Cockney* followed in 1917.<sup>9</sup> Each was dedicated then to significant sections of the working-class audience, and followed a similar formula of playing on some of the positive stereotypes of the groups.

### Anti-German songs

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<sup>7</sup> *Burnley Express*, 19 February 1916.

<sup>8</sup> *The Era*, 19 May 1915.

<sup>9</sup> *The Era*, 3 January 1917.

GB In 1915, he sang a very successful war song, 'Me Old Iron

Cross', mocking the Kaiser and the German bravery medal:

I'm the bloke that broke the bank at Monte Carlo  
 I'm the hero of a dozen dirty nights  
 I went down in a submarine to give the Kaiser one  
 It went off bang and up I went and landed in the Sun  
 There I met the Kaiser and he said, 'I'm up the stick  
 If you can get me out of here I'll treat you mighty quick.

Compare France 1915

Melodramatic song to show that dogs have more of a heart  
 than do Germans (le chien du boche)

Songs about how wonderful war is and realism about the  
 experience of war

Songs about women's fear

- fiancée's letter 1914 which says every time I hear some boy  
 has died I'm afraid it will be you
- song 1915 about mothers whose sons have been killed, who  
 curse the Kaiser

Sexy songs about Rosalie la baïonnette – song by Theodor

Botrel which was given away as a free supplement to the « petit  
 journal », one of the most important Parisian daily newspapers,  
 which sold 800 000 copies a day.

Elle adore entrer en danse  
 Quand, pour donner la cadence  
 - Verse à boire ! -  
 A préludé le canon  
 Buvons donc !

La polka dont elle se charge  
 S'exécute au pas de charge

- Verse à boire ! -  
Avec tambours et clairons  
Buvons donc !

Another song, written in 1915 « ma petite Mimi » was a love song to a machine gun

À la guerre, on n'peut guère  
Trouver où placer son cœur  
Et vivre ainsi sans p'tite femme  
Quand l'aut' semaine, j'eus la veine  
D'être nommé mitrailleur  
Ma mitrailleuse, ô bonheur  
Devint pour moi l'âme soeur.

- Refrain -  
Quand elle chante à sa manière  
Taratata, taratata, taratatère  
Ah que son refrain m'enchante,  
C'est comme un zoiseau qui chante  
Je l'appell' "la Glorieuse"  
Ma p'tit' Mimi, ma p'tit' Mimi, ma mitrailleuse  
Rosalie m' fait les doux yeux  
Mais c'est ell' que j'aim' le mieux.

One song written in 1915, but not approved by the censor (Simon 95) in which the narrator declares that the French soldiers will rape the beautiful German women just as beautiful French women have been raped by German soldiers

### What were the reasons for the main differences?

We would not want to find answers only in stereotypes of the sexy French and the inhibited English.

The French star if he was the key player at a particular café concert perhaps had more artistic control than a GB star touring the country with a fifteen minute turn

The power of respectability was not the same



In Britain in 1915, and for decades before and after, respectability was a major ideological force. But in France although of course there were always attempts by elites to urge working class people to follow their tastes and manners, this was not configured as a major ideological force .

In December 1915, the manager of a Birmingham music hall was fined by magistrates after there were complaints about three songs sung by Harry Champion. Champion denied the charge of vulgarity, but admitted that he sometimes changed the words of his songs to make the audience laugh.<sup>10</sup>

This is why, when you search in Google for « respectable working class » you find 17 000 results, and for the French equivalent you only find 123

The power of natalisme was not the same.

There are a series of nataliste songs, like this one from 1915 (Simon 202)

We need children, pile soft hem, kilos of them  
 We need boys and we need girls  
 The place should be crawling with them, swarming with them  
 The pavements full of them  
 Let's go, don't be layabouts

France needs children !

And another (Simon 204) explains that the soldier on leave doesn't sit about but does his duty to repopulate France. There are several such songs (204-205)

There is a 1915 French song making jokes about the importance of having contraception ready for when you are on

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<sup>10</sup> *The Guardian*, 21 December 1915.

leave : this is censored, because using contraception is refusing to make a baby for the fatherland

### Anti-German feeling was not the same

There was a tradition of anti-German songs, demanding revenge for the annexation to Germany in 1870 of Alsace and Lorraine. But also the political response to the debacle of 1870 was the institution of compulsory military service.

By 1914 all French men did three years compulsory military service ( British men did none). Furthermore, in a largely rural country, as France was, such military service was an important point of socialbility, perhaps the only time a man expected to leave his home region. And it was also a source of many songs about drinking, friendship, and hating Germans

Whereas there were , in Britain in 1914 many thousands of Germans , often very well considered by the local population. IN particular the « German bands » were an institution in popular music (and indeed they appear in the pre-war popular hit song « Down at the Old Bull and Bush »

### HANDOUT

## **British pop songs in 1915, some examples of titles**

Of 155 songs from this year easily classified into a category, 37 were love songs; 51 songs were directly about the war (including some patriotic songs); 6 about singing or music or the profession; 3 about food and drink; 22 speaking of Ireland/ Scotland/ Lancashire/ Yorkshire etc; 6 reflecting on women's new roles; 30 in the category "general humorous".

Of 131 British songs of 1915 for which the singer can be identified, 85 were sung by men and 46 by women

## Love songs

If you can't get a girl in the summertime; It's the girls that make the seaside; Kitty Murray, I'm in a hurry; My dapper little flapper

Don't say I ever made you love me; A broken doll; Is it nothing to you?; Everybody loves me but the girl I love; I ain't got nobody; Hearts are sometimes more than playthings;

Give me your answer, dear, before I go; Little Rosalie, My Pretty Refugee; Now you've got your khaki on; On our happy wedding day;

My bonnie lassie ; My dusky princess; My girl from Slumber Town; Normandy girl. Portobello Lass; You're going back to your girl in London

Meet me at the corner of the street; Meet me by Moonlight, Mary;

You've got me and I've got you; Nobody else but you; Just we two and the moon; Just one kiss, just another one It's lovely to be in love; I want loving all the time; If I thought you loved me; Somebody knows, somebody cares.

## Songs about the war

Once the Kaiser's army; All the boys in khaki get the nice girls;

Auld Mother Scotland. : (They lie far awa' frae their ain native land.); Cockney in khaki; Mister Sergeant Michael Donoghue ; Michael O'Leary V.C Laddie in Khaki; We're all North Country lads and lasses; Bravo territorials; Follow the Sergeant I'm giving up my job to the Kaiser I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier ; Kitchener's boys; Mother's sitting knitting little mittens for the navy; Our Whistling Tommies; Sons of the Empire ; Patty proudly packs for privates prepaid paper parcels When we've wound up the watch on the Rhine; Somewhere in France, dear Mother

Tommy in the Trenches; Tommy's learning French; We'll never let the old flag fall; Cassidy-private Michael Cassidy ; Pack up your troubles ; Our Brave Navy ; the Kaiser's gramophone; ; Our British soldier; The man behind the rifle Be a soldier, lad of mine; Tell my daddy to come again; Be a man

All together shout bow wow wow (the British bulldog's bark); Cheer up little soldier man ! ; While the British Bulldog's watching at the door  
God give us victory; We must all fall in; The traditions of the Navy; While dodging German bullets in the trenches; Who's going to volunteer; When the war is over, mother dear; In these hard times

## **Role of women**

The Ladies Football Club; The Editress; Which Switch Is the Switch, Miss, for Ipswich?; If the Girlies Could Be Soldiers; Dance of the Fire Brigade Girls; Woman's opinion of man

## **Singing, music or entertainment**

'Twas an old-fashioned song he was singing; Any old song my mother sings I love a piano If you want to get on in revue; Ragtime Ragshop That sentimental ornamental oriental tune;

## **Food, drink and fun**

Little bit of cucumber, Bread and Marmalade; A little of what you fancy does you good

## **Dreaming of far away**

A prairie life for me; Alabama jubilee; Just try to picture me Back Home in Tennessee; Somewhere in Sunset Land; Road

to the Isles; The Mississippi Barbecue; Anywhere on Louisiana Bay

## General humorous

A wedding. on a gee-gee. Advertise! At the vicar's fancy dress ball Father's Got the Sack from the Waterworks; I sobbed and I cried like a child  
 I'd like to shake Shakespeare I'm William the Conqueror If I were king for a day Keep your hands in your trousers pockets  
 My new hat  
 Tight skirts have got to go; I'm glad I took my mother's advice; Frightened to go to sleep again;  
 Paddy Maloney's Aeroplane; The Yiddisher Irish You must change your name to O'Reilly

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