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John Mullen

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Chapter 16

“YOU CAN’T HELP LAUGHING, CAN YOU?”: HUMOUR AND SYMBOLIC EMPOWERMENT IN BRITISH MUSIC HALL SONG DURING THE GREAT WAR

John Mullen, Université Paris-Est Créteil

This chapter aims at exploring the large corpus of comic songs performed on the British music hall stage during the Great War. Writings on humour generally begin by declaring how difficult it is to define:¹ underlining the absurd or unexpected is often considered to be an essential element, while Bergson’s classic essay explains that humour is specifically human and social.

The comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human. A landscape may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly; it will never be laughable²

... You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others. Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo.³

The therapeutic benefits of laughter are well-documented,⁴ yet humour is not thought to be the same everywhere. There have been many attempts to define a specifically British type of humour, relying upon concepts such as deadpan tone, understatement and self-deprecation.⁵ Humour can also be part of the identity of the British as a nation, and as such is of course amenable to being integrated into political discourse and strategy.

The First World War involved British elites and civil society in an all-out campaign to build enthusiasm among the British people. Was this campaign able to instrumentalize humour to increase recruitment and civilian involvement in the war?

¹ Georges Elgozy, *De l’humour*, Paris, Denoël, 1979, p. 9.

² Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, London, Macmillan, 1911, p. 3.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴ Rod A. Martin, “Sense of humor and physical health: Theoretical issues, recent findings, and future directions”, *International Journal of Humor Research*, Vol. 17, issue 1-2, January 2006.

⁵ Corinne François-Denève, “Every man in his humour: sur la piste de l’humour ‘anglais’”, *Humoresques*, autumn 2013, p. 10.

Robertshaw⁶ has emphasized the usefulness of the comic “as an aid to survival” for soldiers in desperate situations; Holman and Kelly write that humour continues in wartime to fulfil its “main functions of binding the group together, of releasing tension, and of aiding survival in multiple and sometimes unexpected ways”. But if humour is useful for survival, it does not follow that humour is or could be part of a deliberate strategy employed by military and political leaders to ensure victory. Christie Davis explains that, since humour is fundamentally an amateur and informal practice, it is not amenable to use as a strategic weapon. Of jokes, he explains of amateur comedians among troops or civilians: “their humour may well be defeatist, cynical or resentful rather than patriotic.”⁷ Comic music hall songs, unlike jokes, are professional, commercial products; nevertheless, we shall see that they do not lend themselves easily to strategic use.

The industry and the songs

To understand wartime song, we need to look at music hall, the dominant genre of sung entertainment. It was a mass phenomenon: around the country there were at least three hundred music halls of hundreds or thousands of seats. It was cheap; and it was working-class: in Glasgow the Panopticon played their first show in the morning for workers fresh off the night shift, and even the West End music halls in London could not do without a mass audience of ordinary clerks, shop assistants and manual workers.

Theatres were getting bigger and more lavish; theatre chains ever more present. This concentration of capital was accompanied by an obsession with “respectability”. All signs of “vulgarity” must be eliminated, and a significant presence of elite classes ensured. In this way theatre managers hoped to avoid having their licences contested by influential moralistic organizations.

An evening show was made up of a series of turns, about half of them involving singers, the other half composed of anything from “human freaks” and animal imitators, to opera singers, extracts from Shakespeare or tightrope walkers; from acrobats and sharpshooting to ballet and church organ music. The singer, coming on stage after the acrobats, say, and before the elephants, had only a few minutes to get the attention of the audience. The repertoire was therefore dominated by the comic.

⁶ Andrew Robertshaw, “Irrepressible chirpy cockney chappies? Humour as an aid to survival”, *Journal of European Studies*, September 2001.

⁷ Christie Davis, “Humour is not a strategy in war”, *Journal of European Studies*, September 2001, p. 395.

For the audiences, the war came as an additional catastrophe in lives already precarious; they knew poverty and hunger.⁸ Humour was massively present before the war. Songs laughed at catastrophes of working class life (rent day, homelessness or unemployment), or mocked figures of authority (policemen, foremen or fathers). Others mocked scapegoats: Black Africans, Jews or the Irish, mothers in law or domineering wives. Still more dealt with intimidating subjects such as politics, courtship or sex. Here are a few titles of the thousands released between 1910 and 1914:

Cover It Over Quick, Jemima!
Let's Have Free Trade Among the Girls!
The Coster girl in Paris
Who Were You With Last Night?
I Wonder What it Feels Like to Be Poor!
That Ragtime Suffragette
Hello, Hello, Who's Your Lady Friend?

The importance of sing-along

Humour emerges from a collective experience, not only from a text. The audience sang along with the chorus, and singing in unison constitutes “a rather obvious aural icon of individuals sharing (supposedly or actually) a common cause, or identity, or set of values and beliefs.”⁹ What could be sung in unison was defined by the economic dynamic of the music industry. Heavy investment in plush theatres meant that managers needed to fill the seats, so comic singers needed to get everyone singing. If only half sang, the singer might be out of a job. Consensus rather than controversial topics were therefore central.

Escaping from sense: Tongue twisters

The comic tongue twister song was very popular; here are a few wartime titles:

Sister Susie's Sewing Shirts for Soldiers 1914¹⁰
You Can't Get Many Pimples on a Pound of Pickled Pork 1914
Mother's Sitting Knitting Little Mittens for the Navy 1915
Which Switch Is the Switch, Miss, for Ipswich? 1915

⁸ A good source on everyday life in the poorer parts of London during the war is Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Home Front, a Mirror to Life in England during the World War*, London, Hutchinson, 1932.

⁹ Philip Tagg, *Music's Meanings*, New York, Mass media scholars Press, 2012, p. 451.

¹⁰ This song can be heard on line at www.firstworldwar.com/audio/1914.htm

Patty Proudly Packs for Privates Prepaid Paper Parcels 1915
Pretty Patty's Proud of Her Pink Print Dress 1915
He Misses his Missus's Kisses 1916
I Can't Do My Bally Bottom Button Up¹¹ 1916
I Saw Six Short Soldiers 1916
Are Your Sighs the Same Size as My Sighs? 1917

This category was not invented for the war, as the 1912 hit “Does This Shop Stock Shot Socks with Spots?” attests. It is especially appropriate for a sing-along situation, where the audience can laugh at the success or failure of their companions in singing the ever-accelerating choruses, such as this one:

I saw six short soldiers
Scrubbing six short shirts
Six short soldiers scrubbed and scrubbed
Six short shirts were rubbed and rubbed
Six short soldiers sang this song
Their singing duly showed
Those six short soldiers
Scrubbed six short shirts
Sister Susie'd sewed!

Note that the war theme is arbitrarily tacked on; the war was often just one more subject to help sell songs. Such songs allow us to escape from sense (and from wartime tragedy) and concentrate on playful pronunciation. Most songs, however, prefer to deal with real life, but to handle it obliquely.

Laughing to push away fear

The use of humour to minimize threatening phenomena is key. This has been noted in other aspects of wartime humour, such as soldier slang.

The outer line of trenches, where the men are posted at first to draw the German fire, is known as the “drawing room”, and the inner line, where the attacks are really met is called the “reception room”. The ground at the rear where the dead are buried is “the dormitory”... Spies are described as “playing off side” and prisoners as “ordered off the field” ...¹²

¹¹ A more recent recording of this song, by Ian Wallace, can be found on Youtube.

¹² Rev E. J. Hardy, *The British Soldier, his courage and humour*, London, T Fisher Unwin, 1915, p. 211.

Treating fears humorously is just as effective in sing-along. It is tremendously reassuring, not only to experience symbolic empowerment by watching the threat minimized, but to participate in its exorcism by singing along in the theatre (or singing the song around the piano later). In the music hall, moreover, we minimize the threat as in unison and to music, creating a safe harmony which allows us to contemplate frightening subjects.

Which wartime fears and threats were dealt with, then? Death, bereavement and the military enemy come first to mind, though death was a frequent visitor for audiences in peacetime too. Violent death and killing are never dealt with humorously in music hall song. The horror of war needs to be approached obliquely. We do see songs about the enemy. He is, however, ridiculed, not hated. Here are a few examples:

Belgium Put the Kibosh Up the Kaiser 1914
The Kaiser's Little Walk to France 1914
Hoch Hoch the Kaiser! 1914
The Germans are Coming, So They Say 1914
I'm Giving Up My Job to the Kaiser 1915
Goodbye Kaiser Bill 1915
My Old Iron Cross 1916

There are practically no wartime music hall songs which express hatred of the Germans. Hatred for Germans certainly existed – a violent minority organized the burning of shops and businesses belonging to people with German-sounding names, and¹³ one could see xenophobic sentiment at the music hall in melodramatic plays¹⁴.

One reason for this surprising lack is that the comic song genre cannot express hatred or anger directly. Secondly, the many Germans in Britain before 1914 had been very well integrated and appreciated. Furthermore, in the trenches, different forms of cooperation between British and enemy soldiers created a fellow-feeling which may have made direct anti-German bigotry difficult to present¹⁵. It seems it was not possible to get an audience to sing in unison hatred of the Germans.

A typical song “The Tanks that Broke the Ranks out in Picardy”, written in 1916, recounts to a joyful melody:

¹³ Richard Van Emden and Steve Humphries, *All Quiet on the Home Front*, London, Headline, 2003, p. 70.

¹⁴ At this time a short, half-hour play was often included in a music-hall evening.

¹⁵ See Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare 1914-1918, the Live and Let Live System*, London, Pan, 1980.

And the tanks went on, and they strolled along with an independent air,
And their guns began to blare, and the Huns began to swear,
For they pulled the trees up by the roots, and they made the Huns look like galoots;
Did the tanks that broke the ranks out in Picardy!¹⁶

The “hun” are not shown to be killed or hurt but simply to “look like galoots”. In fact, even such mockery was frequently reserved for the Kaiser, not for Germans in general. In the songs, even the Kaiser is made to look like a silly child. In a 1914 hit, “The Germans are coming, so they say”, the narrator insists that his scary wife will bombard the Kaiser with her puddings, and will spank him. A 1916 hit mocks the German medal for valour, the Iron Cross. This song was presented by Harry Champion, dressed in a worn-out suit too big for him and singing in a cockney accent to an upbeat tune:

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 “Hurray!”
The Kaiser says to me “Old Cock,
My kingdom for an ‘orse!”
So I gave him one the missus dries the clothes on
And he gave me the old iron cross!

The Kaiser is reduced to a pathetic figure, desperately giving out worthless medals: the fearsome spectre of a valorous and aggressive enemy disappears.¹⁷

As the war lengthened, the humour became more varied. Black humour made its debut with the success of late war songs such as “Oh, it’s a lovely war!”. In this piece, the soldier narrators declaim:

Oh Oh Oh it’s a lovely war
Who wouldn’t be a soldier, eh?
Well, it’s a shame to take the pay!
Form fours right turn,
How do we spend the money we earn?
Oh Oh Oh it’s a lovely war!¹⁸

¹⁶ <http://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/tanksthatbroketheranks.htm>

¹⁷ This song can be heard online at www.firstworldwar.com/audio/1915.htm

¹⁸ Lyrics and 1918 recording online at www.firstworldwar.com/audio/ohitsalovelywar.htm

The verses describe some aspects of the trench experience (“Up to your waist in water, Up to your eyes in slush”), so we are not seeing escapism here as such, though killing and dying are absent. One verse expresses the bitterness of the soldier narrators: “Don’t we pity the poor civilians, sitting beside the fire!” This is not however, a soldiers’ song, invented in the trenches. It is a commercial, music-hall piece, written and composed by J. P. Long and Maurice Scott. The soldier narrators sing to a mostly civilian audience. The status of their voices is complex. The chorus will later become popular among soldiers, but it was invented for the stage, and is a sign that there is not such a strict division between music hall song and soldier song as has sometimes been suggested.

The 1918 song “Goodbyeee”¹⁹ shows a soldier leaving for the war, singing “Goodbye” pronounced in baby talk as “Goodbyeee”, sounding incoherently sentimental and making indirect references to dying. The whole audience takes on the voice of the narrator for the sing-along chorus:

Goodbye, Goodbye!
Wipe a tear, baby dear, from your eye!
Though it’s hard to part I know
I’ll be tickled to death to go
Don’t cryee, don’t sighee!
There’s a silver lining in the skyee
Bonsoir old thing, cheerio, chin-chin,
Napoo²⁰, toodle-oo, good-bye- ee!

Here the narrator makes reference to deep feelings, but seems to be desensitized. The word is deformed. The terrifying Goodbye is ridiculed, and yet it might be read as sarcastic or even bitter.

It was not however possible to use on the music hall stage as harsh a level of sarcasm and black humour as is present in many soldier songs, songs which were invented for the amusement of the lower ranks. Soldier songs could ironize about violent death “hanging on the old barbed wire” or express a wish to kill their military superiors.²¹

¹⁹ 1918 recording: www.firstworldwar.com/audio/goodbyeee.htm

²⁰ This is soldiers’ slang, a corruption of French “Il n’y en a plus”: “all gone”.

²¹ Chapter seven of John Mullen, *The Show Must Go On: la chanson populaire en Grande-Bretagne pendant la Grande Guerre 1914-1918*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2012 is on soldiers’ songs (English translation to be published by Ashgate in 2015).

Mocking the government

Sing-along builds a community spirit, which is not necessarily subordinated to the state's war aims; the threat being minimized can be one's own government. A desire for Britain to win did not eliminate a strong distrust of the elite, often seen to be profiting from the war: The huge wave of strikes between 1915 and 1918 (notably dockers' and engineers' strikes) is evidence of this. For discontent or dissent to become visible in music-hall songs, it needed to be very widespread indeed. Criticism of the recruitment of volunteers was not possible, but conscription was sometimes openly opposed, and in 1916 two major hits ("Exemptions and otherwise" and "The Military representative") mocked the conscription process.

Local civilian tribunals had been set up to decide on the 750 000 cases where exemption from conscription had been requested,²² each tribunal including one military representative. The song "The Military Representative", greeted with rapturous applause in the theatres,²³ tells the story of a tribunal who refused to exempt a conscientious objector, a dead man and a man of 91 years of age.

They called on Rip Van Winkle next and smiling all serene,
He mumbled, "Gents, I'm 91! You've got me down 19!"
... But the military representative got up and shouted "Say!
Don't let him run away! Though he's 91 today!
There are men down at the War office as old as he I know
And I'm sure they're a damn sight sillier,
So of course he's got to go!"

Again, a real and immediate threat to the welfare of members of the audience is reduced to ridicule. Another song "Forty Nine and in the Army" expresses the fear of being called up when one felt too old to do the job and had felt safe from conscription:

Forty nine - isn't it fine?
Though I'm weakly across the chest, and gouty about the knees,
I'm learning to shoulder arms, but I'd rather be standing at ease,
Forty nine and in the army. And soon I will be in the fighting line,
If somebody holds me rifle, while I borrow a pair of steps,
I'll be over the top and at 'em at forty nine!

²² Will Ellsworth-Jones, *We Will Not Fight...: The Untold Story of World War One's Conscientious Objectors*, London, Aurum Press 2008, p. 64.

²³*The Encore*, September 27, 1917.

After the armistice, the patriotic consensus was not so constraining. Pent-up frustrations, and anger about demobilization, led to a number of mutinies.²⁴ In 1919, a huge wave of strikes took place totalling 35 million strike days. In the music hall too, it was easier to break with the wartime consensus. A few hit songs criticized the myth of a heroic national unity. The piece “First I Went and Won the DCM”²⁵ mocked those soldiers who invented stories of their courageous exploits in the trenches. And top singer Tom Clare presented a cynical “What did you do in the Great War, Daddy” in 1919.²⁶ In each verse, we meet some British citizen and his contribution to “the great great war”:

What did you do in the Great War, Bertie?
“I” said the young man from the grocery store
“Took no coupons from the woman next door
Whose husband was on the Tribunal!”

What did you do in the Great War, Frederick?
“I” said the special, “From ten to four
Guarded the local reservoir and saw that no one drank it”

...
...And all the profiteers who had been so long in clover
Fell a-sighing and a-sobbing when they heard the war was over
For they'd all made their 'bit' in the Great War, Daddy.

This is symbolic humorous revenge against those who had profited from the war to put themselves above others. Another example of this mechanism is in a hit included in the “Greatest hits of the year” collection for 1920 by leading publisher Francis and Day, and was entitled “Pop goes the Major”, the “pop” representing the sound the Major would make when burned to death:

When first the Armistice was signed,
We took an oath, made up our mind
When we got home we d try to find
Our Late S. M. or bust!

He thinks he's been forgotten quite,
We'll soon see him in a different light
We're going to set fire to his house tonight!
Pop goes the major!

²⁴ See Andrew Rothstein, *The Soldiers' Strikes of 1919*, London, Pluto Press, 1985.

²⁵ Distinguished Conduct Medal.

²⁶ The song can be listened to here: <http://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/1919.htm>

That such a song should be a popular hit says much about the inexpressible suffering of ordinary soldiers under their superior officers.

Everyday fears

We have looked at different wartime fears. Yet by far the majority of popular songs during the conflict did not refer to the war: only 25% of my corpus of 912 wartime songs had war or life in wartime as its principal theme. Many aspects of people's lives went on as before, and the music hall continued its decades-old task of dealing with more everyday fears. The stresses of courtship in a moralistic society was a common theme, with hits like "Why am I always the bridesmaid (never the blushing bride)" from 1917, or a 1916 song about a shop assistant trying to court a young lady, always interrupted by some customer ("Somebody would shout out 'shop!'"). Married life was also treated, as in George Formby Senior's piece "Since I had a row with the wife" (1917), or in songs like "Poor old bachelor a-living by himself, thinks he doesn't need a wife..." of the following year. Here are a few other titles:

Everybody Loves Me but the Girl I Love 1915

I Sobbed and I Cried Like a Child 1915

If You Can't Get a Girl in the Summertime 1915

What You've Never Had You Never Miss 1916

I'm The World's Worst Girl 1916

You're a Dangerous Girl 1917

I Want Someone to Make a Fuss Over Me 1917

A Good Man is Hard to Find 1918

The butt of the joke was often the shy man, the domineering wife, the ridiculous father or the vicious mother-in-law.

Daring songs

Sex, of course, is the classic everyday fear. The suggestive or daring song approaches this subject obliquely. The transformation of a private question to a public sing-along, is a source of emotional relief. Much of the daringness seems extremely tame to the 21st century reader, but should be seen in the context of the time, when far stricter rules around sex existed than

today's, and ignorance about the facts of life was not rare. Robert Roberts reminds us: "millions went into marriage either ignorant or with ideas utterly distorted".²⁷

Here is an extract from one song, "The End of my Old Cigar":

One afternoon about teatime, at a garden party grand
The wife and me were shaking every hand
She was carrying on – and going rather far!
But I was doing a trade of my own with the end of my old cigar!
The End of my old cigar, tara tara tara!
Everybody knows me by the end of my old cigar!

One evening after supper, while strolling in the park
I came upon a lady – it was getting rather dark!
Says she "Can you direct me? I've wandered rather far!"
So I takes a puff and I shows her the way
With the end of my old cigar!²⁸

Given that a woman alone in a park in the dark was already a risqué subject, the audience easily understood the Freudian symbolism of the cigar. The song could also be made considerably ruder by the use of gestures, or indeed by changing the words. Harry Champion, once admitted in court that he did adapt the words according to the nature of the audience.²⁹

Wartime hits in this category included the following:

A little of what you fancy does you good 1915
I was a good little girl till I met you! 1914
There's a little bit of bad in every good little girl! 1914
Just one kiss, just another one 1915
Any time's Kissing Time 1916
Coupons for kisses 1918
Tight skirts have got to go! 1915
The Mormon's song 1915

Songs targeting scapegoats

²⁷ Robert Roberts, *A Ragged Schooling: Growing Up in the Classic Slum*, London, Fontana, 1978, p. 51.

²⁸ A version of Harry Champion singing this song, with slightly different lyrics, can be found on YouTube.

²⁹ *The Guardian*, December 21, 1915.

Fears alleviated through comedy were not necessarily justified fears. Black Africans, Jews or Irish people were among the characters laughed at throughout the war, at times in songs which were simultaneously fulfilling other functions.

There had been a wave of racist songs a few years before the war, with titles including “The Silliest Coon in Town” (1905), “The Lazy Coon’s Dream” (1912), and “The Simple Nigger” (1913).³⁰ There are fewer such songs during the war, the 1914 piece “The Laughing Nigger Boy” and the 1916 piece “A Lovesick Coon” being exceptions. These pieces ridicule those perceived as threatening, but politically, they undoubtedly served to help maintain popular support for British policy in Africa, which was based on a theory of the superiority of White people.

One song deals with the contradictions of “inferior” Africans becoming “heroes” for the British Empire. “John Bull’s Little Khaki Coon” blends a celebration of African regiments 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!

There are few specifically comic lines in this song, but the Black African was considered, in the racist normality of the time, as funny in himself.

Songs about the Irish were more complex; some invited the audience to celebrate their inferiority, others seemed to express an envy of their supposedly idyllic rural life and strong community spirit.³¹ “Paddy Maloney’s Aeroplane” from 1915, presents an Irish engineer who has “made an Irish aeroplane that’s going to win the war”. The idea of an Irish engineer is supposed to be comic in itself, and the song goes on to describe the contraption:

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!
Hurray for Paddy Maloney’s aeroplane! ...

³⁰ See John Mullen, “Anti-Black Racism in British Popular Music 1880-1920” in *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* special issue, 2012,

³¹ See John Mullen, “Stéréotypes et identités: Irlande et les Irlandais dans le music-hall britannique 1900-1920” in Michel Prum (Ed.), *Racialisations dans l'aire anglophone*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2012.

All the Zeppelins of which the Kaiser brags
Paddy Maloney says they're only big gas bags

The audience is laughing at the Irishman, but also the fact that the terrifying zeppelins which were bombing Britain are defeated by Paddy's invention, reduces the enemy airships to ridiculous "big gas bags". Symbolic empowerment is again activated. In contrast, the 1914 hit "Irish, and Proud of it too" which later figures in an entire revue of the same name, presents "positive" stereotypes of the Irish.

The antisemitic song, "Sergeant Solomon Isaacstein", a 1916 hit,³² proposes to toast the health of "the only Jewish Scotsman in the Irish Fusiliers", but repeats all the old stereotypes of cunning and avaricious Jews. Isaacstein opens a usurious lending bank in the trenches, at the same time as fighting with enthusiasm. He is almost killed when his pawnbroker's sign explodes. This is presented as hilarious.³³

Sergeant Solomon built a little pawnshop in the trench,
With money lent at ninety percent!
He hadn't any three brass balls
To hang out for a sign,
So he found three bombs and gilded them
And my word they looked fine!
But one of them fell wallop from the chain
And nearly sent him back to Petticoat Lane!

The Jew is welcomed, yet rejected, and the racist fear of his intelligence or supposed business acumen is expressed. Interestingly enough, the sing-along chorus is somewhat less racist than the verses. Unlike anti-Black racism of the period, anti-semitism spoke of a group of people the audience often met in their everyday lives. Was it impossible to get an audience of thousands to sing in unison clear anti-Semitic prejudices? This may be the explanation; here is the chorus:

Sergeant Solomon Isaacstein
He's the pet of the fighting line!
Oy Oy Oy! Give three hearty cheers
For the only Jewish Scotsman in the Irish Fusiliers!

³² It can be heard online at www.firstworldwar.com/audio/1916.htm

³³ 1916 recording here : <http://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/1916.htm>

Mocking pacifists

Anti-war activists became isolated once the conflict had begun, except for in 1916 when the movement was strong enough to organize meetings in several dozen towns.³⁴ The 1916 hit, “All Dressed Up and No Place to Go” mocked the American government and British pacifists as hesitating and pathetic. In the hit song “The Conscientious Objector’s Lament”, the pacifist is presented as cowardly, effete, effeminate, intellectual, and bourgeois. The “bourgeois” aspect of the caricature is assured by using an upper-class accent:

Perhaps you wonder who I am, I will explain to you.
My conscience is the only thing that helps to pull me through.
Objection is a thing that I have studied thoroughly;
I don’t object to fighting huns but should hate them fighting me!
Non-combatant battalions are fairly in my line
But the sergeant seems to hate me, for he calls me “baby mine”!
But then I got so cross with him, I rose to the attack,
And when he called me “Ethel”, I just called him “Beatrice” back!

[Chorus:]

Call out the army and the navy,
Call out the rank and file!
Send for the grand old territorials,
They’ll face the danger with a smile!
...
Send out my brother, my sister or my mother
But for Gawd’s sake, don’t send me!³⁵

The piece simultaneously proposes different types of pleasure. The verses allow the audience to watch the mocking of the pacifist, but the sing-along chorus lets them take on collectively the voice which rejects the war, in joyful song. Soon, one could hear this chorus enthusiastically sung by troops at the front. This piece was so successful it featured in a court case where two songwriters disputed the copyright, each claiming to have written it.³⁶

³⁴ Thomas Cummins Kennedy, *The Hound of Conscience: a History of the No-conscription Fellowship, 1914-1919*, Fayetteville, University of Arkansas Press, 1981.

³⁵ Online at www.firstworldwar.com/audio/1915.htm

³⁶ *The Times*, November 24, 1917.

Conclusions

I have only been able to examine very few songs from a corpus of thousands, and have concentrated on the use of humour to avoid painful experience (as in the tongue twister songs) or as a way of re-presenting the scary as ridiculous and diminished. Nevertheless, as the last example shows, the complexity of voice in music hall song must not be under-estimated.

Comic song, emerging from a popular musical tradition, audience needs and a highly commercial industrial machine, and put into practice by an existing community of songwriters and artistes, constrained by the economic and cultural structures of the genre, was not as such available for use by propagandists as a weapon. The songs were above all a tremendous tool for psychological survival. The last word can be left to Cameron Wilson who wrote of his experience on the Western Front:

Ah! How we laughed in Amiens!
For there were useless things to buy,
Simply because Irene, who served,
Had happy laughter in her eye;
And Yvonne, bringing sticky buns,
Cared nothing that the eastern sky
Was lit with flashes from the guns.

And still we laughed in Amiens,
As dead men laughed a week ago.
What cared we if in Delville Wood
The splintered trees saw hell below?
We cared . . . We cared . . . But laughter runs
The cleanest stream a man may know
To rinse him from the taint of guns.³⁷

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³⁷ T. P. Cameron Wilson, *Magpies in Picardy*, London, Poetry Bookshop, 1919, p. 9.

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