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John Mullen

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How did the British popular music industry react to the outbreak of war in 2014?

John Mullen, Université Paris-Est Créteil

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The war dawned on a powerful music industry which was determined to continue to show its respectability through voluble patriotism, but within which its different actors also scrambled to position themselves in the new context, in order to ensure that the war would not harm them commercially and might even improve their profitability. Whether artistes or theatre chains, songwriters or record companies, each actor was obliged to take into account this new factor which added itself to the multiple existing constraints of their professions. This paper will evaluate these constraints and the weight of the new context, and will also attempt to judge the alleged jingoism of music halls of the time, by examining it within a much wider corpus of the songs of 1914, of which the vast majority did not speak of the war.

THE INDUSTRY

The industry in 1914 is made up of a series of actors each with their own interests and priorities. Theatre managers and owners, and the owners of chains of theatres are, by this time, in charge of tightly run businesses expecting to show a healthy profit, and sometimes quoted on the stock market. The owners and managers are also in the process of fully integrating local elites. This is no doubt why they are so obsessed with ‘respectability’ and the elimination of ‘vulgarity’: their profession has a bad reputation to shake off. The arrival of the war provokes fears of the collapse of takings (the theatres in France are shut down by the government for several months at the start of the war). This will lead to particular measures to safeguard profitability. And from the very beginning of the conflict, being part of the elite means being enthusiastically in

favour of British victory, and the theatre owners will join in somewhat jingoistic patriotic expression, and in particular encourage recruitment speeches in the theatres themselves (whereas the Church of England, for example, though it supported the war, refused to have recruiting speeches given from the pulpit).

The singers, constantly on tour and endlessly negotiating with theatres for a better salary or more prominent billing, and quite often living a hand to mouth existence have also both an economic and a political response to the war. From an economic point of view, they are very worried that audience numbers will collapse and theatres will close, resulting in a vast increase in unemployment in an industry where life is already precarious. Their trade union, the Variety Artistes' Federation, negotiates with the organizations of owners and managers a sharing scheme in which artistes accept reduced wages on a pro rata basis to takings, the hope being that in this way fewer theatres will close. This agreement will in fact only last a few months: the expected collapse in takings does not happen, and indeed within six months box office takings are higher than they were before the war. For the remaining years of the war, the variety theatres will be full, a phenomenon encouraged by soldiers on leave with money to spend (since although their wages were low, there was little to spend them on in France), and also by rising incomes for working class people due to full employment and, in particular, increased opportunities for women.

Singers and songwriters could also have an opportunistic approach to the arrival of war. The music hall singer felt themselves more showmen than auteurs, so adding a war verse to an existing favourite song to keep it up to date was a common reaction to the coming of the war (just as in the years before the war they might add a verse mocking suffragettes, whatever their personal position on women voting, if they thought it would help their song become a hit). Closely in tune with what working class audiences want to sing along to,

they will be, perhaps surprisingly, careful not to propose songs about hating or killing Germans.

Musicians, stage hands and dancers, although less likely to be constantly touring and more likely to be attached to one particular venue, followed a parallel trajectory to singers in their economic response to the outbreak of war.

Politically, the priority of singers, as ever, was to propose to audiences consensual songs, since sing-along was at the centre of the appeal of music hall, and sing-along can only be built around the consensual or the ambiguous. This is why the repertoire at the very beginning of the war was often loudly patriotic and included a large number of recruitment songs. It is also the reason that the recruitment songs disappear almost completely after the first few months of the war (in the Greatest Hits collection of 1915, published by Francis and Day, the biggest of the music publishers, there is not a single recruitment song, although outside the theatres, the recruitment campaign was at its height (its eventual failure led to the introduction of compulsion in the spring of 1916).

The REPERTOIRE

Questions of repertoire

ON STAGE IN 1914 5from a collection of playbills from the argyle theatre in Birkenhead

BEFORE THE OUTBREAK OF WAR : example of a day's programme :

Mann And Franks-Singing Comedy Act
Brown's Royal Bioscope
Lipinski's 40 Dog Comedians, 'A Wonderful Animal Pantomime'
Harry Thornton and Emma Wagner-American Vocalist and Instrumental Act
Bros. Curran-Boxing Comedians

Cooke-Juggling Joker
The O'Mahonys-Irish Songs
George Gilby-Lancashire Comedian
Frederick Sylvester and Company, World's Smallest Acrobats
Brown's Royal Bioscope-'The Curse of War'
2 Coleys, Fay and Fay-American Quartette-Novel Negro Comedy Song and Dance
Hickey's Comedy Circus Including the Comical Unridable Mule
Bertram Banks-Mimicry of Children
Alice Maude-Comedienne and Male Impersonator
Bert La Mont the Singing Comedian and Cowboys

17 AUG no patriotic content
14 Sep no patriotic content
21 sep ditto
28 sep : latest war pictures is first sign on the playbillsthat there is a war on!

AFTER THE OUTBREAK OF WAR
Duncan and Godfrey-Coster Delineators
Alick Lauder-Scottish Character Comedian
Lily Leonhard-Soprano Vocalist
The Vedras-Comic Acrobats
Walter Stanley-Tyneside Comedian
Brown's Royal Bioscope
Arthur Aiston-Song Character Impersonator
Palette's Novel Performing Dogs
Arthur C. Clifton-Versatile Comedian
Brown's Royal Bioscope-Latest War Pictures
Yamamoto and Koyoshi-Japanese Equilibrists
George Graves-Comedian in 'Koffo of Bond Street'
Nora Delany-'Liverpool Pantomime Idol'
The Four Curtis's-Dancing Act

Syd Moorhouse-Novelty Vocal Act

Tom E. Finglass-'The Original Cowboy Coon'

Robb Wilton-Confidential Comedian

Alexandre and Hughes-Musical Comedians

Edna Payne-Violinist

Enthusiastic war songs

Be a soldier, be a man !

Belgium put the Kibosh up the Kaiser

Boys in Khaki Boys in blue

England thy name

For the honour of dear old England

Good Luck, Little French Soldier Man!

Hands Off,Germany!

I'd like to be a hero, too !

Jolly good luck to the girl who loves a soldier !

March on to Berlin !

Men of England, you have got to go !

My little Red Cross Girl

My Volunteer (he's come from his desk in the city)

Our brave Colonials

Sandy boy, my soldier laddy

Sister Susie's sewing Shirts for Soldiers

Soldier-boy

Soldiers of the King

The army of today's all right

The Germans are coming, so they say

The homes they leave behind

The Kaiser's little walk to France

The Red Cross nurse

They sang 'God save our King'

Three cheers for Little Belgium

Tommy is as good a man as any knight of old
Waltzing Willie
Watch me do the goosestep
We didn't want a European war
We're all under the same old flag.
We're all under the same old flag.
Well done little ones, bravo Belgian boys
When An Irishman Goes Fighting
Won't you join the army?
Won't you join the army?
You made us fight you, we didn't want to do it.
You ought to join !
Your King and Country want you
But
1) they disappear in 1915
2) songs about the war are a minority of songs in the war years
3) the vast majority of songs about the war are not enthusiastic

EconoMic agreements

in the early days of the war (Bunley gazette november) audiences seemed to forsake places of amusemfent so a fifty fifty scheme was set up

this was initially negotiated between the london branch of the uion an dthe three main mucis hall chains in london, but later extended (the scotsman 15 august 1914)

half the receipts went to managementt and the other hald to the artistes in proportion to their contract salaries
this lasted for three months but came up against poblems due to the divergign interests of the artistes and managment. To force up their half of the takings, managers wd sometimes overload the programmess (since it didn't cost tgem more to have more artistes on)

in November negotiations were hld to reorm the scheme, but byth ebeginning of 1915 it was being abandoned often uniltareally by the artistes; since box office receiots had more than fully recovered

During the whole of the war there is some reason to believe that the singers and songwriters were not always finely tuned to their audiences' desires. They tended to produce more songs about the war than were wanted, and fewer love songs. That is to say that

Theme	Percentage of hits with this main theme (base 264 hit songs 1915 - 1918)	Percentage of full corpus with this main theme (base 921 songs 1915-1918)
Love	21	16
War/life in wartime	17	25

Music hall stars were in demand, since their tremendous following among the working class meant that they could often have more influence in favour of the recruitment drive than could politicians, bishops, intellectuals, or other groups among the elite, in a society in which the divide between the elites and the ordinary people was incomparably greater even than it is today.

Finally, artistes and other employees of the music industry also joined the army as volunteers in considerable numbers, and would come to play a significant part in the formation of regimental concert parties and other bodies which ensured entertainment for the troops in France, in Palestine, in North Africa or elsewhere.

Music hall cannot be simply defined as a place for the expression of jingoistic patriotism, despite the denunciations of music hall on that basis made by such influential commentators as J. B. Priestley or Siegfried Sassoon. What is expressed in the music hall is the result of a compromise between numerous pressures coming from audiences, from economics and from ideology.

conclusions

Why does all this have any importance?

Well for one thing those of us who are interested in history from below, history of ordinary people have to make sure we have given sufficient impotrance to what mattered to ordinary people, and in many periods, populra song is a priority in people's lives.
For the period of the first world war it is particularly important to avoid casting what people did to enjoy themselves, reassure theselves and explore anxieties into the catch all category of "life on the home front" : that is tp say life defined by the empires's military project as secondary to the main front. Ordinary people had many other priorities even in wartimes than winning the war.

And this conceptiion fits into my wider perpective which I have often repeated: the faded, yellowed sheet music which survives from the war year should not be used only to "illustrate " history happening elsewhere, in grand ministerial offices or muddy trenches. Popular song is an activity which millions of people loved and nsisted on finding time for : it is not an illustration of history, but part of history.