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What Use to People Was British Wartime Song 1914-1918?

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I have been working for over ten years now on First World War popular song in Britain, a repertoire which has its centre of gravity in the music hall industry. In this paper, I would like to present some of my results and some recent reflections.¹

Historians, in my view, can be best defined by the questions they decide to ask. My own approach to popular song is to maintain that it does not **illustrate** history with a capital H, history which happens elsewhere in muddy trenches or oak-panelled offices. It rather constitutes a series of mass activities which are a part of history, just as much as are other activities such as working or fighting. This is the reason for the title of my paper: “The **Uses** of British Wartime Song”. The question positions popular song as a material activity serving a purpose, and not as an expression of “national spirit”, “the soul of the people” or the “zeitgeist”, nor as only a particular stage in the artistic development of a musical genre. As we shall see, many of the specific characteristics of the mass activity, and of the structure of the music industry, influence the repertoire: notably the importance of audience singalong, and the absence of a system in the United Kingdom of paying royalties to songwriters.

I shall begin by presenting briefly the nature of the popular music industry in 1914. I shall then treat some of the myths that have grown up about wartime song, mostly in the absence of large-scale archival work and very much coloured by the idea of the “home front” – the view of all activity in the nation as subordinate to the empire’s military objectives. After this, I will deal with the particularly political groups of songs- the enthusiastic war songs in the early months, and the occasional dissenting songs throughout the conflict. Finally, I will focus in on the foremost use of the songs as a kind of collective catharsis of everyday life, showing very strong continuity with pre-war and post-war repertoires and processes.

The music hall business in 1914

In 1914, music hall is the dominant form of musical entertainment for ordinary people. Radio is a long way off, gramophone is for a privileged minority: for the price of a gramophone (in 1916) one can go 200 times to the music hall! Most people, then, only ever hear live music: at home, in the streets or on the stage. In

¹ For initial reflections on a corpus of 1 100 songs published in the UK during the war, see John Mullen, *The Show Must Go On: Popular Song in Britain during the First World War*, London, Routledge, 2015. For a comparative international view see John Mullen (Ed.), *Popular Song in the First World War- an International Perspective*, London, Routledge, 2018.

highly urbanized Britain, rural folk music, with its songs of seasons and witchcraft, harvests and agricultural fairs, no longer has the favours of the masses, despite energetic campaigns by its middle-class enthusiasts.² The music hall, in ever-larger theatres of 1 000 to 3 000 seats, was the centre of attraction.

The music hall show was made up of very varied turns of around fifteen minutes each; over a third of them were singers, the rest ventriloquists or wrestlers, violinists or animal imitators, acrobats or sharp shooters, clog dancers or conjurors. More than a million tickets a week were sold for the music halls in London alone. The week's programme was on the front page of the local newspapers around the country: in some of the mines in Lancashire the workers sent along a representative from each shift to the music hall on a Monday to tell everyone if the week's programme was worth their money.

Wartime song, then, was first of all useful for the businesses. Big money was made by the theatre chains, which were now tightly-run businesses, forever making innovations: the revolving stage, the two-shows-a-night system, new divisions of labour within the theatre, and so on. More and more, theatre chains and larger venues dominated, and bought up the smaller operators. At the outbreak of the war, the fears were of a collapse in takings, and the performers' union agreed to wage cuts to stave off the threat of unemployment. However, it soon became apparent that there would be no collapse, and during the conflict the artistes played to full houses. In 1915, for instance, the London Coliseum music hall paid out 25 per cent dividends to its shareholders, the Leicester Palace 10 per cent and the Hackney Empire 6 per cent.³

The singers

On the stage in these theatres were the singers. Stars included stage Scotsmen such as Harry Lauder, a lover of empire and sentimental love, and male imitators such as Vesta Tilley, who dressed as men in order to gently mock their foibles. Or there were blackface singers like G H Elliott, who sang and acted as clearly racist caricatures of black American slaves,⁴ and women singers with feisty stage presences, such as Marie Lloyd, whose stage character was the woman who knew about life and men and intended to enjoy them.

What use were the songs for these artistes? They were a way, (as popular music still can be today), of escaping working class drudgery and having more control over one's own life. Being a music hall star seemed like a dream come true! The

² Cecil Sharpe, the leading collector and popularizer, was touring Britain in 1914, giving lectures in working class institutions such as the Mechanics' Institutes (*Burnley Gazette* 3 October 1914). There were even influential calls to integrate folk music turns into music hall evenings (*The Era* 11 August 1915), but these were rarely acted on.

³ See also Felix Barker, *The House that Stoll Built*. London: Frederick Muller, 1957.

⁴ One of these, in a later recording, can be heard here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XcAeZIfk1Fs>

1911 UK census showed that, of a working population of fifteen and a half million, there were over a million miners, over a million textile workers, and over a million domestic servants, to name but three important segments. Most music hall stars came from the poor layers of the population, and they had plenty of reasons to want to escape.

Of course, the majority were never big stars. Most artistes were permanently on tour, around the country (and occasionally around the British Empire), staying in specialized lodging houses, often run by retired artistes or artistes' widows. These houses offered 'three to a room, [and] cost thirty-five pence, and that included a morning cup of tea and fish and chips at night'. The adverts for lodgings boasted 'cooking and cleanliness a speciality' or 'a piano in each room'. Some were proud to announce 'lavatory in house'. A few could go as far as 'electric light'.⁵ Artistes appeared in a different town each week, getting special reduced fares on the railways, but not making much money. But for women artistes in particular this was undreamt of freedom. (30% to 40% of singers were women). With their trade union, the Variety Artistes Federation, the artistes tried to defend themselves. From 2600 members at the beginning of the war, the union grew, like other unions during the war and counted 3 900 members by 1918.

What use were particular songs to the artistes? The singers were showmen not auteurs. They had no desire to be the voice of the youth (indeed since boys and girls began work at 12, adolescence did not have the same meaning as it does today). The artistes were almost never committed to spreading philosophical or political messages – on the contrary, jollity was generally obligatory. The occasional racist or antisemitic song was integrated unproblematically into the repertoire. Even the romantic tone was not yet typical, since expressing personal feeling on stage was a delicate matter (although the romantic tone would make great advances during the war).⁶

The songs had their uses for others. They allowed songwriters to make a living. Most works were sold to the singer in the pub for a one-off price, (there was no royalties system for songwriters in Britain at this time). This meant songs had to be written quickly and frequently, and this unstable source of income tended to attract unstable people (whereas the royalties system in France attracted more educated groups and led to more sophisticated lyrics). This despite the existence in London of song-writing schools for those tempted by the trade.⁷

⁵ See music hall trade-union newspaper, *The Performer*, July 3 1913.

⁶ This 1916 song, for example, may have been the first ever romantic duet in the UK music hall : <https://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/ifyouweretheonlygirl.htm>

⁷ John Abbott, *The Story of Francis, Day & Hunter*, London, Francis Day & Hunter 1952, p.17.

Audiences.

The priority of music hall was to please the millions, so we must now turn to the audiences. The centre of the audience was the working class: whether miners or millworkers, domestic servants or shop workers. The theatres tried hard to attract the better-off classes, by offering more expensive seats (reached by a separate entrance) and by getting rid of anything which was considered “too vulgar” or “not respectable”. This last was something of an obsession – in the war years there were more editorials in the trade press about vulgarity and respectability than there were about the war. Nevertheless, the working class remained the core audience.

For these audiences the music hall was a complex place. In some ways those going to the show were symbolically elevated, seated in velvet seats between marble pillars and glittering chandeliers, symbolically compensated for their everyday degradation. In another way, they were in a home away from home. The tone of the songs was neighbourly, the singers had working class names (Fred, Gertie, Billy, Jack, Harry, Daisy). They often sang in working class accents, thus validating the language of the ordinary people. The adoration which fans showed towards the stars who came from their class was linked to pride that “one of ours has made it!”. The star Marie Lloyd was nicknamed “our Marie”, having moved up from the daughter of a waiter and of a dressmaker to one of the best-paid performers of her generation. The singers sang about ordinary domestic working class life, in a tone of obligatory jollity. Holidays, sweethearts, mothers in law, jealous wives and foolish fathers, were among favourite themes, whereas the directly political, and singing about the workplace, was generally absent. During the war, as we shall see, joining the army, reacting to rationing and the new roles for women were added to the repertoire of song themes. Most importantly, the music hall provided a collective experience: singalong was fundamental to popular music, as dancing would be twenty years later.

Let us now go into more detail on the different types of song and their usefulness for the audiences and other agents. Mentioned in passing by many writers at the time and historians since, music hall has generally been presented as centrally useful “for the war drive”, or even as proof of universal war fever taking over the civilian population, far from the realities of massacre in the trenches. J B Priestley the novelist, had this to say in his memoirs, and his comment is not atypical: “The first war, unlike the second, produced two distinct crops of songs: one for patriotic civilians, ... drivel ... ; the other, not composed or copyrighted by anybody, genuine folk song, for the sardonic front-line troops.” Sadly, Priestley (despite his many other merits) was wrong here in a number of ways: the song repertoire for civilians was extremely varied, only a tiny proportion of it was jingoistic, and the civilian repertoire was loved among soldiers in the army.

There were, of course, enthusiastic recruitment songs suggesting a glorious view of war. A series of stars in 1914 sang “We Don’t Want to Lose You” which insisted men volunteer for the armed forces:

Oh we don’t want to lose you
But we think you ought to go
For your King and your country
Both need you so!
We shall want you and miss you
But with all our might and main
We shall cheer you hug you kiss you
When you come back again.⁸

The seductive voice of women was used in this and other hits to recruit men to the army. Other recruitment songs took different and complementary approaches. “They sang ‘God Save the King’”, for example, spoke of the importance of unity and mutual respect between the different nations of the United Kingdom, shoulder to shoulder together at last in a noble cause:

“Should auld acquaintance be forgot ”
The Scotsman sang with pride
“ Men of Harlech, march to glory ”
The gallant Welshman cried
“God save Ireland” sang a hero
With a real old Irish swing
Then every mother’s son proudly held a gun
And sang “ God Save Our King”!

This song is useful to the war drive and it carries out specific ideological work. It would soon become apparent that there were difficulties in recruitment in Wales, where local religious and socialist tradition identified little with Empire. In Glasgow the anti-war movement was stronger than anywhere else in mainland Britain, and in Ireland the population was torn three ways, between firstly supporters of the British Empire, secondly those who thought that fighting for the Empire would guarantee later rewards for the Irish nation, for example Home Rule, and those who felt on the contrary that Britain’s involvement in Europe was a chance for Ireland to strike out for independence.

Taking a more indirect part in the war drive is the song “Now You’ve Got the Khaki On” which emphasizes how a boy becomes a man, attractive to the girls, by joining the army.

I do feel so proud of you
I do, honour bright!
I’m gonna give you an extra cuddle tonight

⁸ A 1914 recording, with lyrics, is available here:

<https://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/yourkingandcountrywantyou.htm>

I didn't like you much before you joined the army, John.
But I do like you, cockie, now you've got your khaki on!⁹

This is powerful propaganda. Marie Lloyd and her stage persona represents an attractive working class woman with confidence and worldly knowledge, who knows how to enjoy life and expects her men to be up to standard. Her singing that joining the army will seduce the sharpest girls could have been very effective. And in any case these propaganda songs would be likely to be very useful for the war drive. It is one thing for people to read in newspapers Lloyd George talking of "The stern hand of fate has scourged us to an elevation where we can see the great everlasting things which matter for a nation — the great peaks we had forgotten, of Honor, Duty, Patriotism, and clad in glittering white, the great pinnacle of Sacrifice pointing like a rugged finger to Heaven."¹⁰ It is quite another to hear "one of our class" on stage praising the war.

Here are the titles of some more enthusiastic war songs:

Three Cheers for the Red White and Blue
Be a Soldier, Lad of Mine
Won't you Join the Army?
For the Honour of Dear Old England
Boys in Khaki, Boys in Blue
Men of England, You Have Got to Go
You Ought to Join
Our Country's Call
Let 'em All Come, We're ready
March on to Berlin!

We should note that the existence of this category of song does not mean that the government was able to directly use music hall song as a vector for recruitment. Governments are not skilled at writing entertaining songs nor at commissioning them. These songs came from the attitudes within the music hall milieu: as a respectable milieu, it was bound to be mainstream and patriotic.

But this "building the attitudes which will allow us to defend the empire" was very far from being the only usefulness of the songs, as it has often been considered to be. Universal enthusiasm was not the reality. It is often forgotten that the majority of British soldiers who fought in the First World War were compelled by law to do so: the campaign for volunteers was given up in 1916 and replaced by conscription. In any case, the large numbers of volunteers

⁹ A recording from the time is available online:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zypW6YhJ4bM>

¹⁰ David Lloyd George, *The Great Crusade: Extracts from Speeches Delivered during the War*, New York, George H Doran 1918, p. 289.

included many who had little choice (the authorities practically emptied the workhouses and many of the prisons), and, despite the massive campaigns, millions of ordinary people took no notice. When conscription came in, 2 500 000 men were compelled to join up; of these, 750 000 men asked to be exempted (generally with little success). In this situation, how could the music hall, the main place of popular entertainment, be monolithically enthusiastic about the war? The answer is that it was not.

The key to understand this is to look at the quantitative analysis, and not remain focussed on songs which speak of the war. The vast majority of the songs in the repertoire mentioned neither war nor the hardships of life in wartime. And the enthusiastic songs waned after only a few months. Indeed, the Greatest hits collection of 1915¹¹ contained not one recruitment song, although the recruitment campaign was desperate for more men.

The same, not-very-political, singers performed in 1915 as in 1914, in venues run by the same patriotic theatre owners, so why were the enthusiastic war songs infinitely rarer? This was down to the power of the audience, which was exercised through a specific mechanism in this period. The songs of the music hall generally included a singalong chorus. This allowed the audience to be collectively and physically involved in the show, and it intensified the music hall experience, as one singer without a microphone¹² in a theatre seating three thousand was grateful to have some volume from the audience. Singalong was central to the show. If only half the audience sang along, the singer might well find their contract was not renewed. So the chorus of the song had to be consensual. After the first huge casualty lists hit home, it was no longer possible to get the whole house to sing along enthusiastically about joining the army. This situation will continue for the rest of the conflict. Even in 1918 for every song with the word « victory » in the title there were ten with the word « home », and the same was true for the following year.

For similar reasons, I believe, there are almost no music hall songs which express hatred of Germans¹³ – the nearest one comes to it is mockery of the Kaiser in songs such as “The German’s Are Coming, So They Say” (in which the narrator’s wife humiliates the Kaiser by throwing her puddings at him, before giving him a spanking)¹⁴ or “The Kaiser’s Little Walk to France”.

¹¹ *Francis & Day’s Annual*, London, Francis & Day 1916.

¹² Microphones arrive on stage in the late 1920s.

¹³ I found only two: “The Khaki Tramp”, which demanded “Wipe out those Huns! / Remember we’re proud of the empire’s brave sons! / Make no mistake, the Germans will quake! / Kaiser and Moltke their armies you’ll break!” And “John Bull” which attacked German immigrants with the words “Who gives his hand to the strangers as they come? John Bull! / Who opened the door to the horde of German scum? John Bull!”

¹⁴ A later recording of this song can be found here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMGCuwjRBQo>

However, in the music halls there were often sketches¹⁵ which were extremely xenophobic; and declarations by churchmen also are often so. Finally, jingoistic newspapers such as *John Bull* had some popularity, and German-owned shops and businesses were frequently attacked by angry crowds;

How then can we account for the almost complete absence of xenophobic music hall songs? The German people were among the closest to the British before 1914, and nowhere more so than in the world of music, where the “German Band” was a popular institution – it is even mentioned in a music-hall hit still known today “Down at the Old Bull and Bush”¹⁶ (a song adapted from the 1903 US hit “Under the Anheiser Bush”). However, to organize an attack on a German shop, only dozens of people are needed, but to sing along in a music hall one needs thousands, and the singalong words must be consensual. It may well be that it was not possible to get the crowds to sing in unison xenophobic anti-German songs. In addition, the unfailingly jolly tone of the British music hall repertoire may well have made such songs unsingable. This is in contrast with the French repertoire, which includes such pieces as the 1882 song, revived for the First World War, “le Fils de l’Allemand”, in which a patriotic French woman refuses to allow a dying German baby to drink milk from her breast.

Dissenting songs

Let us now look briefly at dissenting songs. The most radical of these were the anti-war songs which existed during the conflict in Britain,¹⁷ of which the most well-known was “I didn’t raise my boy to be a soldier.”

I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier
I brought him up to be my pride and joy
Who dares to put a musket on his shoulder
To shoot some other mother's darling boy ?
Let nations arbitrate their future problems
It's time to lay the sword and gun away
There'd be no war today
If mothers all would say
“I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier”¹⁸

This song was tremendously popular in the United States in 1915, and is listed as one of a couple of dozen most influential popular songs in Britain that year in

¹⁵ The term “sketches” was used at the time, but these were short plays of up to forty minutes long.

¹⁶ What seems to be a later recording of this song can be heard here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZlkScbpwbg>

¹⁷ For an in-depth look, see Clive Barrett “The Music of War Resistance in Britain 1914-1918” in John Mullen (Ed.) *Popular Song in the First World War – an International Perspective*, London, Routledge 2018.

¹⁸ A recording may be heard here

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Didn%27t_Raise_My_Boy_to_Be_a_Soldier

the authoritative catalogue put together by Kilgarriff.¹⁹ As it was not consensual, it was not sung in the music hall. It was useful in the anti-war networks, to build morale, and in 1916, the only moment when the anti-war movement became sizeable across the country, it could be heard at meetings in every town.

Dissenting songs were, then, naturally, useful for dissenters. Yet sometimes aspects of dissent became consensual within the working class and so could be expressed in music hall songs. The introduction of conscription from 1916 on was a time when there was widespread sympathy for opposition to some empire war aims and methods. A few songs deal with this, some of which were smash hits. The song “Exemptions and Otherwise”, for example mocked how difficult it was to avoid military obligations.

A hit from 1917, “The Military Representative” mocked the civilian tribunals, on each of which sat a military representative, tribunals whose job was to rule on the cases of those who had requested exemption from conscription. The representative in the song is shown as staggeringly stupid as he insists that a 91 year old man, another man with a wooden leg and a third man who is already dead, should not be excused from military obligations.

They called upon the next case
Then a woman rose and said
“I’m very sorry, gentlemen,
but my poor husband’s dead”
The chairman said “Well, he’s exempted
He needn’t come again!”
“Oh, thank you!” said the widow, as she ran to catch a train
But the military representative got up and shouted “Hi!!
How dare your husband die!
He was A1 in July!
What say ma’am he’s in heaven now?
Well you just let him know
I’m sending a Sergeant to fetch him back
For of course he’s got to go!”

There are a number of other songs which dissent from establishment views in different ways. I do not have time to analyze them here, but their very presence on the music hall stage, which is a place of singalong consensus, is of significance. Naturally, once the war was over, it was easier to express dissent, and there were a number of examples of which I shall mention only one, about a group of soldiers who planned to find the man who had been their superior officer during the war, and kill him. “Pop goes the major” was a hit – so much

¹⁹ Michael Kilgarriff, *Sing Us One of the Old Songs: A Guide to Popular Song, 1860-1920*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 1999.

of a best seller that it was reprinted in the greatest hits album published by Francis and Day at the end of 1919.

Some chaps we knew spent two weeks leave
In hunting Sergeant Major Reeve
They all had something up their sleeve - a bayonet or gun!
He thinks he's been forgotten quite
He'll soon see us in a different light
We're going to set fire to his house tonight!
Pop goes the major!

Other songs demanded revenge on profiteers, who had made a fortune from the war while so many young men had lost their lives. The most explicit title was from 1920: “What Shall We Do with the Profiteers? Shoot Them All!”.

During the war, but outside the music hall, there were other songs which served to denounce the war. The Irish nationalists published songs – often set to traditional tunes – in their press every week;²⁰ the conscientious objectors produced songbooks, mostly made up of late nineteenth century pacifist anthems,²¹ and the soldier song repertoire (which is not really my subject today) included many antimilitarist songs, often murderous in tone.²²

The usefulness of the majority of the songs

We have looked briefly at the uses of enthusiastic war songs, and of dissenting songs. These categories have understandably attracted the most attention. However, if one is interested in the status of songs as part of the expression of popular wartime anxieties and priorities, the question of the representativity of the examples quoted is crucial. We have tried to take this into account by noting when a song was a best-seller, but quantitative analysis of a large corpus allows us to go much further and affirm that the vast majority of British wartime songs are neither pro-war nor dissident.

Indeed the majority of the repertoire shows tremendous continuity with pre war songs, and its use is to deal with ordinary people’s dreams, anxieties and difficulties, to replay them as comic or as collective (nobody suffered alone at the music hall) and thus in some way reduce the fear attached to them.

If we look at this table of words appearing in song titles in Britain during the war, we will see what the main priorities were.

²⁰ *The Irish Volunteer* and *The Liberator* for example, though their political positionings were complex and changing.

²¹ For example, *The C.O.’s Songbook*, Manchester, No Conscription Fellowship 1916.

²² See John Mullen, “War Memories in British Soldier Songs of the First World War” in Stéphanie A.H. Bélanger et Renée Dickason (Eds), *War Memories: Commemoration, Recollections, and Writings on War*, McGill-Queens University Press, 2017.

Words appearing in song titles, in a corpus of 1 143 song titles issued or sung from 1914 to 1918²³

Home 57 + Blighty²⁴ 12 = 69

Girl 62 + lass 6 = 68

Boy 31 + lad 26 = 57

Love 44

Soldier 33 + Tommy 9 = 42

Song 28 + sing 13 = 41

Ireland 6 + irish 30 = 36

War 18

Mother 18

King 10

Rag or ragtime 8

Dixie 9

Kaiser 8

Fight 7

Wedding 7

Empire 6

Scotland or Scottish 5

Lancashire 6

God (Dieu) 4

Germans or Germany 4

Victory 3

Hun²⁵ 2

By far the most popular title word is “home”, followed by “girl”, “boy” and “love”. As one may imagine, “girl”, “boy” and “love” were already very much present before the war, and “home” is the big wartime addition. In the song titles that refer directly to the war experience, “soldier” and “Tommy” are immeasurably more prevalent than “war”, “King” or “empire”.

When our large corpus is analyzed for main theme (once we have eliminated 1914, since it was not possible to identify dates sufficiently precisely to be sure which were wartime songs), we find the following results.

Main theme of song (base 921 songs 1915–1918)

War and life in wartime 25.0%

²³ The corpus was constituted using the collection of sheet music in the British Library, and the trade press of the war years. It is difficult to be precise, but it is likely that the corpus makes up around a third of the songs published at the time, with a strong bias towards those which sold more.

²⁴ “Blighty” is an affectionate slang word for “Britain”.

²⁵ “Hun” is an insult word for “German”.

Love 16.0%
 Ireland or the Irish 4.7%
 Other geographical locations (Lancashire, Yorkshire, Kentucky, Dixie etc.) 9.9%
 Women's role in society 4.5%
 Type of music or the life of the artiste (fox-trot, ragtime, jazz, etc.) 2.3%
 Food and drink 1.8%
 Comic songs not in the above categories 12.5%
 All other songs 22.8%

The comic tone was far more common than is visible in this categorization, since songs in all the categories were very frequently comic, such as the songs about rationing “Sugar!” and “Never Mind the Food Controller (We’ll Live on Love”) or the love songs “My Little Red Cross Girl” and “If You Can’t Get a Girl in the Summertime”.²⁶

The centre of singalong pop music at the time, and this is perhaps not so far from the centre of rock, rap and other more recent genres, was helping people live, both by giving a leisure experience far from the daily grind, and by replaying re-imagining and fantasizing around very real anxieties, allowing people pieces of an imaginary life where worried are re-worked collectively, fears are minimized or ridiculed. We will look at a few groups of songs to see how this can work.

Sometimes the content is mainly playful, such as in these popular wartime tongue-twister songs. Even where they mention the war one can’t help thinking it is a singalong game to help forget the war. Here are a few examples

Sister Susie’s Sewing Shirts for Soldiers 1914
 Patty Proudly Packs for Privates Prepaid Paper Parcels 1915
 Pretty Patty’s Proud of Her Pink Print Dress 1915
 You Can’t Get Many Pimples on a Pound of Pickled Pork 1914
 Which Switch is the Switch, Miss, for Ipswich ? 1915
 I Can’t Do My Bally Bottom Button Up 361 1916
 I Saw Six Short Soldiers scrubbing six short shirts 1916²⁷

In the music hall these songs would be subjected to vigorous presentation (“Let’s see if the ladies can do better than the gents!” etc). Other types of song refer to real life. A series of songs refer to good food:

Boiled Beef and Carrots (1910)

²⁶ A 1915 recording can be heard online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gaR6cbS7wfo>

²⁷ A 1916 recording can be heard online here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ZK9yWVIOHY>

Bread and cheese and onions
Bread and Marmalade (1915)²⁸
Brown Bread Well Buttered (1917)

It might be argued that these songs are particularly appropriate for audiences where most of those present will have known hunger at some point in their lives, which would be typical of working class audiences a century ago.

Another tremendously popular series of songs spoke of a distant rural paradise (very long in the past for England, and imagined in Ireland or in Dixieland). It was (said to be) a place where life was simpler, in particular relations with women were simpler, it was often emphasized. Here are some song titles:

1914

I'm Off to Kelly's Isle

It Takes an Irish Heart to Sing an Irish Song

There's a Cottage in Ballymahone

1916

Ireland Must Be Heaven for My Mother Comes from There²⁹

I'll Be Back in Old Ireland Some Day

If she Has an Irish Way with Her

If You're Irish, You'll Remember.

When Irish Eyes Are Smiling

My Little Irish Cottage

1917

Oh, My Lily of Killarney

There are a number of other groups of songs providing solace, but I will look at just one more. The tremendous changes in the roles of women during the war, as far more married women went out to work in what had been considered "men's jobs" provoked much emotion, from joy to anger in the population of both sexes. As I have said, music hall song is consensual, so one does not tend to find songs defending or attacking the new roles. The consensual content is anxiety, felt by both men and women about the meaning of these changes. I found over forty songs, many of them hits, dealing with these roles. Here are a few of them.

Florrie the Flapper 1914

Kitty the Telephone girl 1914

Womanhood. A Musical Monologue 1914

The Editress 1915

The Ladies' Football Club 1915

²⁸ A recording from the time can be heard here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bMzKgQtcoNY>

²⁹ A US recording can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=he9Vpxili_g

The Modern Amazon 1915
If the Girlies Could Be Soldiers 1915
The Lady Bus Conductor 1916
The Girls Know as Much as You Know 1916
Tilly the Typist 1916
Women's work (a humorous song) 1917

Quite typically, this last song both mocks and praises women's involvement in new roles. There is something in the song for everyone. Some of the songs could be quite sophisticated in argumentative structure, like this one, entitled "where are the girls of the old brigade?"

Have you noticed what the girls are doing now
It's simply wonderful, simply wonderful
One will drive a motor, while another drives a plough
And one will chase a bullock
When she's told to milk a cow
The barmaid I used to flirt and frivol with
She's an ammunition maker, so I hear
Quite a lady since the war, for the wages she can draw
Must be more than she can draw for drawing beer!

Chorus: Where are the girls of the old brigade?
The girls of the once upon a time
I've been looking around
And there's only one consolation to be found
The old girl's still there, old girl new style
And whether it's the old girl or whether it's the new
It's the same piece of petticoat all the while.

The women are both mocked (with the classic joke about milking) and praised, and the singalong chorus reassures that the old position of women as sexually attractive has not changed. The communication involved, however, is more complex still, since this song was sung by Vesta Tilley, a woman who dressed as a man on stage, and, in this song, played an upper-class officer somewhat bemused by the social changes he saw around me. Is the narrator being mocked as much as the women are? Each listener can sing along while interpreting the roles as they wish, or indeed simply revel in the ambiguity involved.

Conclusions

Wartime music hall can tell us much about many aspects of working-class lives at the time, and not just about their attitudes to the empire's objectives. Each song represents the artist's or the creator's guess about what will "go down

well” (although, as one historian pointed out, « noone had the magic touch »³⁰). The centrality of singalong imposed consensus or ambiguity as almost the only viable content.

Our general conclusion is that further research on the most popular of popular music can help advance the history of society in general, provided that great care is taken about establishing the representativity of the corpus used, and about understanding the processes and activities which mould the communication and expression involved in popular song.

³⁰ Ronald Pearsall, *Edwardian Popular Music*, London, David and Charles 1975, p. 41.