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Historical Survey - Popular Song in Britain during the First World War

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Several thousand popular songs were produced in Britain during the war, and almost all of them have been forgotten. Fortunately, the British Library kept archives, and in addition to the sheet music, hundreds of recordings have survived.¹ The central institution in 1914 was the music hall: it sold over a million tickets a week in London alone. Fortunes were made and lost in what had become a veritable entertainment industry. In theatres seating 1000 to 3000 people, the twice-nightly show would feature ventriloquists, acrobats, animal acts, extracts from operas and clog dancing, among many other attractions. But a third of the acts would be the singers, of whom the best-known were popular heroes. They sang in working class accents about everyday life, mocking mothers-in-law, dreaming of perfect love or a hearty meal,² laughing at shy young men or drunkards, and celebrating individual working-class resilience. Humour was obligatory, and audience singalong was fundamental.

¹ For a full-length study based on a corpus of 1200 songs see John Mullen, *The Show Must Go On, Popular Song in Britain during the First World War*, London, Routledge, 2016.

² Hits included « Hot Meat Pies, Saveloys and Trotters » and « Bread and Cheese and Onions ».

The songs were generally written by freelance authors who sold them to singers in pubs for a one-off price. There was no system of royalties paid to a copyright owner, and authors would write several songs a week and sell half of them.

The arrival of war transformed the repertoire less than one might think. Hundreds of new songs on war themes were produced, but generally in the same style as previously, jokily or sentimentally resigned to the hardships of life (already tough and tougher still since the war).³ For a few months in 1914, patriotic recruitment songs flooded in, like “I Want to Be a Hero Too” “Tommy Is as Good a Man as any Knight of Old” or “Men of England, You Have Got to Go”. These helped build a volunteer army. Once the corpses started piling up, recruitment songs disappeared and gave way to pieces dreaming of the end of the war. The “Greatest Hits of the Year” collection of the biggest song publisher, Francis and Day, in 1915, contained no recruitment songs at all, even though the campaign to get more soldiers was in great difficulty (and joining the army would be made compulsory the following year).

Songs were not censored before being sung on stage, but the position of variety theatre owners as new members of local elites, and the mechanics of the music hall experience (if the whole audience did not sing the chorus to your songs, you might not have a job for very long!) ensured that consensual

³ One can find a few dozen original recordings of songs online at <https://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/>, although the website gives a « patriotic » view of the war and the selection of songs is not at all a representative sample.

material was the only type possible, and that “vulgarity” was banned.

The content of songs reflected some of the massive changes in wartime. Stars sang about rationing, about conscription, about coming home on leave, but fully two thirds of the songs did not mention the war in any way. Dozens expressed anxiety about the new roles available to women, who were driving trams, playing football, and working heavy jobs in agriculture or engineering. The debate was ferocious, and songs simply in favour of new roles for women, or against them, would not have gained consensus. But almost everyone agreed the change was worrying, and singing about this was cathartic. Songs such as “If the Girlies could be Soldiers”, “You’re Some Tram Conductor Girl!” or “Where Are the Girls of the Old Brigade?” explored the contradictory feelings around these transformations.

Interestingly, there are no British music-hall songs about hating Germans.⁴ Germans were among the closest peoples to the English before 1914, especially in popular music circles. Many of the three million pianos in Britain were made in Germany, and the “German Band” was a staple of street entertainment. Although people wanted to win the war, getting an audience to sing, in unison, hatred of Germans seems to have been impossible. Official views of popular feeling are often framed by the imperial project, but it turned out that for every song published in 1918 with the word

⁴ This is not the case for all of Britain’s allies, see John Mullen (Ed.) *Popular Song in the First World War, an International Perspective*, London, Routledge, 2018

“victory” in its title, there were ten with the word “home”, and the same was the case the following year.

The music hall songs also sometimes showed the dark side of Britain. Occasional racist songs such as “John Bull’s Little Khaki Coon” or antisemitic pieces such as “Sergeant Solomon Isaacstein” were sung enthusiastically.

For the soldiers, in France or Egypt, singing was an important activity, alongside endless football and cards. They sang the music hall hits, often assisted by the new portable gramophones. But they had two supplementary repertoires. Firstly, there were religious hymns. Pieces such as “Oh God, Our Help in Ages Past”, or “Eternal Father, Strong to Save” brought comfort beyond the jollity of music hall hits.

Secondly, there were the “soldier songs”, written by amateurs to existing tunes. These did not need to please theatre managers or markets, so they worked with themes missing from commercial repertoires, in particular vulgar themes and antimilitarist themes. The well-known “Mademoiselle from Armentieres” who had not had intimate relations “for forty years” is one rude example, as is the standard “Do Your Balls Hang Low”. The anti-militarist songs gave a sarcastic or murderous turn to soldier anger. Many songs say that joining the army was a stupid move, that seeing the Sergeant die would be amusing, and that the higher officers, well behind the lines, deserve contempt. “Hanging on the old barbed wire” is typical.⁵

There is, then, some division between commercial music hall songs and the soldiers’ dissenting repertoire. Nevertheless,

⁵ These songs were not recorded at the time, but have sometimes been covered since. See for example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DB3CM8LaRV0>

dissent could be expressed in the music hall, if it was widely felt. The song “The Military Representative” mocked a stupid recruitment officer and was a hit, and after the war, another hit, “Pop Goes the Major”, suggested finding one’s superior officer in civilian life, and killing him.

In conclusion, it is good to remember that popular song is not just an illustration of history, it is a series of mass activities carried out by the vast majority, which are very much a part of history.