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Articulating popular needs in British First world War Song

John Mullen

Talk given at

PopKongress 2019

11. Jahrestagung der AG Populärkultur und Medien in der Gesellschaft für Medienwissenschaft

Passau, Germany.

First of all, I would like to thank the organizers very much for inviting me.

This talk is building on my previous work on a corpus of over 1 000 British wartime songs, (no doubt around a quarter of the total repertoire), and I will present an analysis of the role of wartime popular song in the lives of its working-class audiences. I will propose a view of song in particular as a ritualized response to popular anxieties and dreams.

To speak of “articulating popular needs”, we need to be sure of what we mean by “needs”, “popular”, and by “articulation”.

In 1914 Britain, popular means working-class: the peasantry has long been marginalized as enclosures and urbanization swept the country. As early as 1850, a majority of people in England lived in towns. In 1914, 69% of the population lived in towns bigger than 5 000 inhabitants.¹

The question of the nature of popular “needs” opens up debates about material needs and social needs, alienation and possible false consciousness. Should we consider compensatory validation and collective relaxation as social needs of the period? I shall come back to this?

And what about the process of articulation? : the dictionary give as a definition of the verb “to articulate” “to express (an idea or feeling) fluently and coherently”, but I am taking up a slightly wider sense here of taking and

¹ https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/68656/10.1080_00420988620080351.pdf

transforming social-psychological demands and placing them in the public sphere in a coherent structure (in this case on the stage).

Such articulation does not only have its effect in the words and melodies of the songs, but perhaps even more importantly in the processes and activities permitted by the songs. In different periods and different places dancing, karaoke or dress have been key vectors accompanying popular song.

A century ago in Britain, repetitive collective group singalong by the audiences was the main activity involved. As we shall see, the music hall song experience provides, to overworked and anxious audiences, a much appreciated elsewhere. Importantly, then, the articulation of popular needs does not take place in a vacuum: with a pile of popular needs on one end of the table, in the middle a hard-working artist transpiring while he or she struggles at articulating them, before adding them to a pile of articulated popular needs on the other side of the table. The needs are socially constructed, and the articulation takes place within a very specific material structure – in the case of Britain at this time, a music **industry**, within which a series of pressures make some articulations possible or likely, and others impossible or unlikely. These pressures can be social, economic, political, institutional, legal, commercial, musical or traditional.

This question of songs articulating popular needs has already been raised by scholars working on British music hall songs of the second half of the nineteenth century, in a debate sometimes referred to as “class expression” versus “social control”. Some writers emphasized the working class origins of singers and audiences and the everydayness of the themes sung about, and saw a “vox populi” in the music hall song. Robert Roberts, who grew up in a Salford slum before becoming, much later, a sociologist, was of a similar opinion. He refers to the music hall songs as ‘those earthy parodies ... true and

only folk songs of the industrial mass'.²

Other writers have emphasized the often conservative content of the few political songs to suggest that the “mass culture paradigm”, as Adorno would posit concerning a later period, was the most appropriate way of understanding the phenomenon: an entertainment industry making people want what was commercially profitable and politically reactionary.

The debate however was generally clouded by a complete lack of work on large archives of songs. Thousands of songs were produced each year, and work based on a small number of the best-known songs can be highly misleading. Similar mistakes have been made for First World War song, often presented simply as warlike and patriotic, which is absolutely not the general case, as we shall see.

People wanting to know of the work which I produced before the conclusions I am presenting today are invited to consult these books – the second of which we will be formally launching half an hour from now.

Slide two books

To see what popular song did, we first need to look at the multiple pressures and interests which formed it, which are far more complex than a face to face fight between working class consciousness and ruling class viciousness.

What then was popular song in 1914

As I have said, Britain was already a highly urbanized. The popular song which speaks to popular needs is not folk song, with its celebration of seasons, harvests and village fairs, but urban music hall song, up to date and racy, jolly and witty.

Slide folk song

² Robert Roberts, *A Ragged Schooling : Growing Up in the Classic Slum* (London: Fontana, 1978), 50.

A million tickets a week were sold for the music hall in London alone. Around the country, the programme was on the front page of the local paper, and in some factories the work groups sent a representative along on a Monday to see if the week's offerings were worth spending hard-earned wages on. Live music was central: gramophones were socially marginal (in 1916 for the price of a cheap gramophone, you could buy 200 tickets for the music hall).

Slide alhambra Bradford

The evening's entertainment at the music hall was made up of a wide variety of acts, of around 15 minutes each – sharp shooters and animal imitators, ventriloquists and acrobats, dancing dogs and illusionists. But a third of the turns were singers, some of them by then genuine pop stars, adored by their fans.

Slide singing stars

The centre of the audience was the working class. In Britain just before the war there were a million domestic servants, a million miners and a million agricultural labourers, to name but three huge groups. Millions more shop and office workers joined them at the singalong music hall. Higher social classes **were** present, in the more expensive seats, often accessed by a separate staircase, but the theatres could not do without the core working-class audience at the twice nightly shows.

Audience

If millions came to hear the songs and sing along, and then continued singing along with street singers at the markets, in the pubs, or around one of the three million pianos present in Britain at this time (one for every fifteen people in the

country, babies included), it is because they were responding to popular desires, though it is important to note that, as one commentator said at the time “Noone had the magic touch”, and someone producing a hit might well follow it up with a turkey.

Slide pianos

So, what kind of popular needs could be adressed by the music hall and what kind cannot? To approach this question, we need to examine the faisceau of influences that form the repertoire.

The songwriter and singer had to have a song everyone would sing along to. The collective experience of singalong was central, as I have said, and singalong was helpful to the singers who worked on stage in front of one to three thousand spectators without a microphone. The singers were on very unstable contracts. If only half the audience sang the chorus to their songs, the performer might not have a job the following week, and most of them were not stars. But were just about making a living, playing in a different town every week and staying at specialized and rather basic boarding houses.

This meant that only consensual or ambiguous material can work in the music hall.

The lack of a microphone also ruled out intimate voicing, and this, combined with the social rules of the time which banned almost everybody from delving into deep personal feelings in public, ensured that the song content had little in common with popular songs from sixty or a hundred years later.

This list of typical song title may help to clarify what I mean by this.

- He Misses His Missus's Kisses
- Do You Always Tell Your Wife?
- What's the Use of Ringing on the Telephone?
- Men of England, You Have Got to Go!
- Are We Downhearted? No!
- I Wish I Could Find a Sweetheart Like My Dear Old Dad
- The Germans Are Coming, So They Say.
- When We Want What We Know We Can't Have
- I've Been Out with Johnnie Walker
- All the Boys in Khaki Get the Nice Girls
- Be a Soldier, Lad of Mine!
- Bread and Marmalade
- Cheer Up, Little Soldier Man!
- Dance with Your Uncle Joseph
- Don't Say I Ever Made You Love Me
- Follow the Sergeant!
- Give Me Your Answer, Dear, Before I Go.
- Hearts Are Sometimes More Than Playthings
- I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier
- I Like Your Town
- I'm Glad I Took My Mother's Advice
- I've Only Come Down for the Day!
- If you Can't Get a Girl in the Summertime
- Just We Too and the Moon
- Keep Your Hands in Your Trousers Pockets

The texture and content of urban popular song was very different from later periods when rock decreed that musical activity should be recentred around youth, energy and the body.

The 1914 songwriter needed a song which did not take long to write. There was no royalties system and the song was often sold by the songwriter to the singer for a fixed sum in a pub. As one star of the time noted, you had to buy twenty songs to get one good one.

The house orchestra needed a song with straightforward music, not too complex. Every Monday morning the orchestra learned the songs of the new acts which were going to perform for the first time on the Monday night. Excessively complex or innovative music was not welcome. And the economy of the music hall meant that the singer could not afford to tour with his or her own instrumentalists.

The theatre owner or manager, only recently able to join local social elites, had to have a song which was not vulgar or radical. Every year the music licence to the theatre had to be renewed, and local magistrates, under pressure from small but vocal moralist associations, were very much opposed to vulgar content.

The audience needed a song they could pick up and sing along to easily. They needed a song which would appeal to young and old alike – girls went into domestic service and boys into industry at the age of 12, and they listened to the same songs as their parents. There was no teenage market.

Given then all these constraints which make certain perceived needs unlikely to be articulated, how could we say that song did articulate popular needs in 1914?

If we first look at music hall before the war, it becomes clear that Music hall song expressed working class identity, but did not defend working class interests.

Long hours, dangerous work, little help when one is sick unemployed or too old to work. The still-present threat of the workhouse. The music hall responded to the needs of the worker by being an elsewhere where things were different. Where we were elevated and validated. We were elevated sitting in plush velvet seats between gilded pillars. This time the frills of luxury were for us. There were extracts of operas and ballets, as well as the best of circus acts and our favourite chorus songs.

We were validated in that these songs were sung in working class accents, and sang about our everyday lives, which here were worth looking at.

The stars come from our class, they are what is precious for once. And we are together, we are part of the show as we all sing collectively. The songs are generally cheerful, but even when they are not, no one suffers alone in the music hall.

The singers have working class names, sing in working class voices, the songs often mock pretentiousness and are posed in a neighbourly tone. They sing of the everyday: annoying wives, ridiculous husbands, good hearty food and beer, holidays. Or they sing of the “exotic” of the elsewhere one might dream of.

This need for validation is articulated, but we can say that collective working class interests are not defended in the music hall. There is no wave of songs in 1912-14 to correspond to the enormous wave of strike action known as The Great Unrest. This despite the fact that many people in the audience would be involved in the strikes.

In general the workplace was absent as a topic of song. The domestic (nagging wives and dangerous mothers in law, saintly mothers, pretentious neighbours and ridiculous fathers) the romantic (perfect girls and wedding bells, ridiculous shy men), the leisurely (holidays and dreams of exotic elsewhere) the topical (new gadgets like the telephone, the gramophone or the pocket camera), and the suggestive were dominant.

And the dominant tone is jolly.

What about the war?

I have used up most of my time before really speaking about the war itself. This is because the elements of continuity are immeasurably more numerous than the elements of rupture.

Throughout the war years, the songs continued to express popular desires, sung in a neighbourly tone. At least two thirds of the songs do not mention the war or the effects of the war in any way at all.

Nevertheless, whether speaking of the war or not, they respond to popular anxieties and fantasies.

Slide breakdown of song themes

Many songs involve dreaming of the end of the war, or of being far away. Others speak of questions of sex and gender, or of hardships and Rationing. A few express dissent about the running of the war, in particular a feeling that the sacrifices are not being made equally across society.

Dreaming of being far away in a simpler world – rural Ireland or Dixieland are two favourites.

Slide dixie songs

Slide Irish songs

In 1914, a flood of enthusiastic war songs and recruitment songs hit the market; Indeed in the trade press, one could pay to have a “war verse” added to any existing song!

But the enthusiastic songs did not last long. Once the casualty lists came in, it was no longer possible to have the audience sing in unison about the glory of war. *The Greatest Hits of 1915* published by major music house Francis and Day contained no recruitment songs at all, although the recruitment campaign was at its most energetic (and indeed its weaknesses would lead to the introduction of compulsion in 1916)

Killarney, Killarney, the place that I love
With the lakes clear and pure as the great sky above
Where we told our love story and vowed to be true
I am sighting tonight for Killarney and you

Contradictory is the word you are looking for

Rarely expressed working class interests.

The empire’s war was not carried out in the interest of the British working class (of whom the majority did not yet even have the right to vote). The interest of ordinary workers was for the war to stop.

Yet this could not easily be seen in popular song. Anti-war songs were not consensual enough to appear on the music hall stage (even if the madly patriotic owners had accepted the idea)

- they were reserved for anti-war meetings (especially in 1916, when the Stop the War Now movement was strong enough to organize meetings in many dozens of towns around the country).

But if anti-war songs had almost no place in the music hall, neither did anti-German songs. There are no British music hall songs about hating Germans.

There could be some dissenting songs about specific aspects of government policy.

49 and in the army

Lloyd George's Beer

And after the war songs about how dreadfully ex-soldiers were treated and about desires to fond one's ex-commander from wartime and burn him alive could be the stuff of hits.

Stoney broke in no mans land

The unpalatable

. Mocking Black people, Jews, Irish people or women was occasionally at the centre of the entertainment experience.

John Bull's little khaki coon

Sergeant Solomon Isaacstein

In conclusion, singalong is the centre of the musical experience of the time. It allows repetitive, ritual, collective airing of anxieties and dreams in a cathartic form of role play.