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Resisting war priorities in song: a comparison of Britain and France

To understand the expression of dissent or the lack of such expression in wartime popular song, we need to put the song back into the society and the social circles where it was performed. I'm going to look first at British music hall song, then British soldier songs, before going on to compare them with their French counterparts.

Music hall was the most popular entertainment in Britain in 1914, and the centre of gravity of the musical experience of the mass of the population. Much cheaper than the theatre, much more raucous than the ballad concert or the classical concert, it was the solid favourite among factory workers whether men or women, soldiers on leave, domestic servants, office clerks and shop assistants.

It is well known that the very word « jingoism » was invented in reference to a 19th century music hall song, and first world war music hall has been much criticized for supposedly having a glorious or trivially enthusiastic view of war. Siegfried Sassoon wrote a poem denouncing this, J B Priestley attacked it fiercely in his autobiography, and the influential musical show « Oh What a Lovely War », written in the 1960s but much revived for the centenary, also shows music hall as naively warlike and patriotic.

It is understandable that we expect a lot of information from looking at music hall. Large numbers of working class people singing along in unison in one of their favourite places, along with their very own stars, who were often themselves brought up in poverty - Harry and Ernie and Marie and Florrie - singing in working class accents on neighbourly themes: surely what they were singing will tell us much about popular attitudes to the war?

In some ways dissenting expression in the music hall faced the same problems as dissent outside: once a solid majority of trade union leaders, church leaders, intellectuals and feminist leaders had decided to support the war drive, most dissent among the people was bound to be muted, not really theorized, and often individual. In addition, music hall artistes, unlike modern singer songwriters, did not expect to be expressing their personal opinion or philosophy in their songs.

But people found ways of avoiding war priorities. Work like that of Tony Ashworth (in his book « Trench Warfare ») shows the hundred ways soldiers avoided fighting, without being caught. When conscription was brought in in 1916, 750 000 men applied for exemption (usually unsuccessfully). Meanwhile workers in Britain refused to be the only ones paying for the war: Indeed, Britain saw far more strikes during the war years than did France or Germany: between 1915 and 1918 there were 3,227 strikes, making a total of almost 18 million strike days.

So what kind of dissent was possible in the music hall?

British music hall is dominated by the large theatres and the theatre chains. The turns have to fill the theatres and also to get the whole audience to sing along. And the audience has come for a varied evening of entertainment – not just to hear one particular artiste. This is why content must generally be either consensual or ambiguous. In the first case everyone agrees, in the latter each can take the meaning they

prefer. The songs then tend to celebrate everyday experience and everyday fantasy (the perfect girl or Good Old rural Ireland).

This requirement for consensus, as well as the circus like mentality of many music hall singers, happy to sing what they felt people wanted to hear and not expecting to express their personal opinions in their songs, made sure that directly anti-war songs were practically unknown on the variety stage once the war had broken out.

There is more work to be done: were there exceptions. Collective opposition to the war and to imperialism in general were strongest in Glasgow, and some of the music halls there were solidly working class: the Panopticon had its first show at ten in the morning for workers fresh off the night shift. A rough music hall: steel rivets were sometimes thrown from the balcony at turns which did not find approval. But even these music halls concentrated on national touring acts, acts who, even if they had wanted to, could stray little from the consensual.

Before the war was declared, anti-militarist songs were possible. One of Little Tich's hits in 1911, 'The Twenty-Third', has the form of a regimental anthem expressing pride, but it describes a regiment filled with drunks and idiots, most of whom end up on the gallows. Another example of anti-militarism in popular commercial song is given in the autobiography of a socialist activist in Glasgow:

*Just prior to the outbreak there was a music hall song which really caught on – You could hear it sung everywhere, in the workshops and on the streets. It went: 'Little man, little man
You want to be a soldier [...]
You are your mother's only son
Never mind about the gun
Stay at home
Fight for her all you can.'*
In the socialist movement we were surprised and delighted by the song's popularity. But the day war was declared that song just died; it was amazing the way that nobody was whistling it.

During the war anti-war feeling as such had to remain ambiguous. So the hit song « The Conscientious Objector's lament » has verses which mock the effete effeminate conscientious objector Other. But the singalong chorus allows the audience to temporarily stand in his shoes and sing refusal « send out the baker or the bloomin profit makers, but for Gawd's sake don't send me ! ».

This doesn't mean that the music hall milieu was any more pro-war than other groups. The music hall milieu was following. The music hall trade union newspaper expressed artistes' attitude at the start of the war :

We have been good friends with the International Artistes Lodge of Germany for many years [...] If Fate places us in different camps, it is for each to do his duty to the State to which he belongs, trusting, when it is « all over » to renew the friendships of the past. It is neither « ours » nor « theirs » to reason why – and neither would respect the other who did not put his duty to his country before everything.

Protest and Censorship in each country

Songs were not censored by the authorities in Britain before they were performed, although a singer or theatre manager could find themselves hauled up before the local magistrates and fined after a performance (generally accused of « vulgarity »). There were a lot of informal pressures : theatre managers had only in the previous twenty years been considered respectable members of local elites and were keen to be respectably patriotic.

So as has been noted elsewhere, music hall may have been an important place to express class identity (defending working class lifestyle against bourgeois pretention, and showing individual sympathy for the underdog and an accepting attitude to the whole range of popular eccentricity), but it was not a place where the songs generally defended working class interests. Thus, before the war, during the huge waves of strikes in 1911-14, one did not see a series of songs defending the strikes, which must nevertheless have been very popular among the audiences.

Where shall we look for dissent in the music hall. First of all in the absences.

The enthusiastic recruitment songs disappeared permanently after only a few months. In 1915, a year of an all-out recruiting campaign whose relative lack of success led to conscription, there was not one recruitment song in the Twenty Greatest hits of the year collection published by Francis and Day. There were almost no songs about hating Germans (in contrast with French and US repertoires). And most of all, three quarters of the song did not talk about the war in any shape or form. War was a terrible hardship for ordinary people (even though wages rose and hunger fell) . But they were used to hardship...

And if music hall demanded consensus, but occasionally consensus was oppositional. It was generally agreed that the conscription laws and medical tests were ridiculously voluntaristic, and a 1916 hit song mocked a committee on which the imbecilic « Military representative » approved for service a 91 year old man, and a man who was already dead. Another hit song, « 49 and in the army » mocked the recruitment of older men.

And once the fighting was over, it was possible to please audiences with songs about profiteering such as « What should we do with the profiteers ? Shoot them all ! ». Tom Clare had a hit with the sarcastic song « What did you do in the Great War Daddy ». And in 1920 a hit song « Pop Goes the Major » described the joy of finding and killing the Sergeant Major one had served under in the war.

If we turn now to Soldier songs, those short anonymous ditties sung by soldiers on the march or in the estaminet, do we find more determined opposition to war priorities ? Certainly such is their reputation.

And from one point of view, this is very much true : the black humour and mutinous emotion in soldier songs , and their tendency to denounce military hierarchy, the war itself, and even show fellow feeling with German soldiers, bring joy to the heart of every opponent of war.

Soldier songs seem practically never to have war priorities in mind, but carry rather such titles as the following :

« Hanging on the old Barbed Wire »

« I want to go home »,

« Bombed last night, bombed the night before »

« My little wet home in the trench »

« Fred Karno's Army »

« I don't want a bullet up my arsehole »

« We haven't seen the sergeant »

or « That Shit Shute »

The soldier songs have consistently proved both attractive and worrying for conservative commentators on the war. On the one hand, the atmosphere of soldierly life and nostalgia no doubt encouraged the conservative Daily Telegraph to constantly republish collections of soldier songs. On the other hand the murderous cynicism they contained had to be explained away as Tommy « letting off steam ».

But any huge contrast between civilian attitudes revealed in the music hall and Tommy's attitudes revealed in soldier songs is based on a sort of optical illusion. Soldier songs don't need to be approved by theatre management or sung in chorus by a socially mixed crowd : they only need to please the immediate audience of the lower ranks. This is why they can be cynical and tinged with black humour, but it's also why they almost never express an anti-imperialist view or a call to collective mutiny : such sentiments would not be sufficiently consensual for a singalong. The second important point is that soldier songs are a supplementary repertoire, sung in addition to music hall songs and hymns. This is why they don't include love songs or songs of trusting in destiny. They are made up of what is missing from the other repertoires : essentially vulgarity (Songs such as « Do your balls hang low ?) and dissent.

My main point then is that songs- whether music hall songs or soldier songs are proposals for group singing, and to understand their meaning we need to understand the nature of the group and the rules for the choice of song in their particular set-up

How does all this compare with the situation in France ?

There is a difference in society : France is less urbanized and soldiers are more likely to be village farmers than not. Singalong seems to be a somewhat less established tradition.

There are political differences : The war is being fought on French territory, so resisting war priorities is more difficult, and tends to require a rejection of the whole idea of the nation state (whereas in Britain one might defend a position simply of keeping Britain out of the conflict). **Other political differences** : Conscription is brought in from the first day of the war. Long military service has been in place for decades, and there is a tradition of anti-German songs going back fifty years, since Germany got Alsace and Lorraine in 1871.

There are differences in the music industry :

The Paris café concerts are smaller venues than British music halls (though have a similar social mix) and they allow more artistic control by the songwriter ; unlike British songwriters, who often sell all rights to a song in a pub for a fiver, French songwriters, after 1851, get royalties for each performance of their songs and so their songs are more reflective, more political and less likely to be churned out at high speed. Songwriters are from more educated classes than in Britain, and there are more women songwriters than in Britain.

There are differences in government policy

The music halls and café concerts were closed for nearly a year by decree.

All songs had to be submitted to the censor before performance (this is very handy for the researcher since there are 30 000 wartime songs at the police headquarters, categorized as approved, approved with modifications, or refused).

There are similarities too : similarities in the industry (millions of scores are sold for people to sing at home or in bars) . Similarities in politics : the majority of left and feminist organizations support the war drive.

As for the content of the songs

The real emotional experience of ordinary people is explored in far more depth in the French café concert repertoire : we hear the anguished wife waiting for news from the front, the soldier discovering in a letter that his wife has been unfaithful, the pimp swearing he will deserve his military medal by taking up honest employment after the war.

AN OFFICIAL REPORT from 1915¹ declares that French soldiers are fed up of listening to songs on patriotism and sacrifice. From 1916 on, the censor allows songs with soldier narrators who say they are fed up with war, and many songs express soldier worries about infidelity, while others present female narrators happy to be flirted with but refusing to be unfaithful to their soldier love. Other songs discuss the fate of women who have had children after being raped or having relationships with German soldiers ; some narrators kill the babies involved. Several songs about fiancées welcoming back their mutilated or disfigured soldier boyfriends. (We should remember there were 60 000 French soldiers who had limbs amputated, and 16 000 were blinded).

The patriotic repertoire in France seems much more sophisticated, dealing with the need to have more babies to rebuild France etc., the unity of different classes in the trench experience

[couldn't stand the toffs, I couldn't/ but seeing them take it just like us./ is really great

Plenty of songs about beautiful nurses, about waiting for the postman, about going on leave and the large amounts of sex and alcohol which will be involved. One song speaks of making love in the Parc Montsouris in Paris. But many songs mentioning contraception and abortion don't get through the censor.

Very occasional signs of dissent : a mother narrator hoping her son will not desert.

An occasional song about sorrowful mothers includes an anti-war verse, which is censored.

¹ Anne 142

Don't tell her her dear son/ was only cannon fodder/ Get rid of all your wars / so Mother's every one/ can keep their children home/

And another censored song

Qu'a jamais maudite soit la guerre

Gouge qui fait verser tant de pleurs aux mamans

En fauchant , sans pitié, par milliers leurs enfants.

One song managed to get through the censor despite its words. It said

My little Pierre, my lad/ I said goodbye to you/ before this damned war/ And now I have on all this earth/ only my own crying eyes.

This might not have got through the censor except that they entitled it « the mad woman of Mulhouse ».

French soldier songs

There was less of a tradition of inventing humorous ditties in the French army. One of the reasons was the existence of an established repertoire of excellent songs for soldiers to sing together : drinking songs, comic songs about the country lad a bit lost coming into the army for military service, songs

Chanson de Craonne

This song was anonymously created, though surely by many authors. The song constantly evolved during the course of the war

Adieu la vie, adieu l'amour, Adieu toutes les femmes C'est pas fini, c'est pour toujours De cette guerre infâme. C'est à Verdun, au fort de Vaux Qu'on a risqué sa peau

La Chanson de Craonne The final version, "The Song of Craonne" was written in 1917 during the French Army's Mutinies. The village of Craonne on the plateau of Calonne was the site of bloody fighting on 16 April 1917 during Nivelle's failed Offensives.