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John Mullen

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BRITISH MUSIC HALL IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR: MYTHS AND REALITIES

John Mullen

University of Paris East at Créteil , France

Abstract

Victorian music hall has been much studied, Edwardian music hall less so, and there is no comprehensive study of British music hall during the First World War. Mentioned in passing by writers at the time and historians since, the music hall of 1914–18 has been presented as evidence of universal war fever taking over the civilian population, far from the realities of massacre in the trenches. As part of my book project on wartime music hall, I have collected a corpus of over a thousand songs. By examining these, I will attempt to answer the following questions:

Was wartime music hall typically jingoistic?

Were anti-war songs or social protest songs possible on the music hall stage?

Who decided on the content of the songs and how?

What can wartime music hall tell us about popular attitudes of the time?

Keywords: First World War, Popular Music, United Kingdom, cultural history.

MITOS Y REALIDADES DEL MUSIC HALL BRITÁNICO DURANTE LA PRIMERA GUERRA MUNDIAL

Resumen

El music hall es la forma de entretenimiento más popular en Gran Bretaña de 1860 a 1920. Varios estudios han tratado el tema del music hall de la época victoriana. El de principios del siglo XX se conoce menos,

y no existe un estudio exhaustivo del music hall durante la primera guerra mundial. Los autores contemporáneos que han escrito sobre el music hall han visto en él la prueba de un entusiasmo chauvinista generalizado. Como parte de nuestro proyecto de libro sobre el music hall en tiempos de guerra, hemos recogido un corpus de más de mil canciones. Al examinarlas, tratamos de responder a las siguientes preguntas:

¿Puede el music hall durante la guerra calificarse de “patriotero”?

¿Era posible cantar en la escena del music hall canciones contra la guerra o críticas hacia el gobierno?

¿Quién decidió el contenido de las canciones y cómo?

¿Qué nos dice el music hall sobre las actitudes populares de aquella época?

Palabras clave: Primera Guerra Mundial, música popular, Reino Unido, historia cultural.

Victorian music hall in Britain has been the subject of some serious study (Bailey; Bratton). Edwardian music hall has attracted much less attention, and there exists as yet no comprehensive study of music hall during the First World War; indeed, a number of books on the music hall end their story in 1914 (Maloney; Russell; Summerfield). Yet the image of wartime music-hall is very much present in popular conceptions of the war. Mentioned in passing by writers at the time and historians since, music hall has been presented as evidence of universal war fever taking over the civilian population, far from the realities of massacre in the trenches. A more careful examination can surely shed some additional light on that thorny and controversial subject: the nature of apparent working class enthusiasm for the war drive.

The objectives of this paper are to examine this question of jingoism in the halls, as well as two wider questions, viz: whose voices can be heard in the music hall songs, and what can historians learn from this kind of mass cultural production? As part of a wider project, I have collected a corpus of around 1,300 popular songs from the war years, which probably constitute a quarter of the total production, with the more successful songs being very much over-represented. Most of these

songs are in the form of sheet music scores, but a few hundred hits were recorded on cylinders or gramophone discs, and so can still be heard today. This corpus gives a solid basis to study song themes and characteristics.

Music hall is the dominant form of musical entertainment for ordinary people in 1914. Radio is a long way off, and the gramophone is for a privileged minority: for the price of a gramophone you can go 200 times to the music hall! Most people only ever hear live music: around the piano at home,¹ in the streets or on the stage. More than a million tickets a week are sold for the music halls in London alone. The week's programme is on the front page of local newspapers around the country: in some of the mines in Lancashire, workers even send along a representative from each shift to the music hall on a Monday, to tell everyone if the week's programme is worth seeing.

At the music halls, or variety theatres as the larger ones are now called, people go to watch a tremendously varied evening of entertainment. Acrobats, trick cyclists, "Siamese twins" and other "freaks", trained animals, ballet, and extracts from Shakespeare could all be seen. Novelty was a key element: Fred Dyer "the famous Welsh boxer and singer" competed for top of the bill with "the handcuffed violinist", extracts from Verdi's operas, or "the ugliest woman contest". But no doubt around half the acts involved singing, and getting the audience to sing along.

The music hall audience is mostly working class in its widest sense, and even more so outside London. In Glasgow, the Panopticon has its first show at ten in the morning for the workers coming off the night shift. Although the industry has been working hard to become more respectable and attract middle class audiences into the more expensive seats and boxes, it cannot do without its core working class audience. Further, many of the "aspiring" office workers, civil servants and shop assistants, who believe themselves a cut above the working class, are in material terms close to poverty, as histories of office and shop trade unions of the time amply illustrate (Brown; Wigham; Richardson), and thus they have much in common with the rest of the working class.

¹ In 1914, there are three million pianos in Britain: one for every 15 inhabitants.

Since the 1890s, the music hall industry has become more dominated by powerful theatre chains, able to organize block booking of stars and mobilize more impressive special effects, more luxurious theatres, and more systematic advertising. These theatre chains run large venues. The 1,400 seat Alhambra theatre, opened in Bradford in 1914, is a typical example, while in the Northern textile town of Burnley, the two music halls could sell up to 7,000 tickets a night: enough to seat more than 5% of the total population of the town!



The Alhambra in Bradford, opened in 1914 and still used today.
Photo: J. Mullen

The reputation of wartime music hall

Music hall in general has often been idealized as classless entertainment rumbustiously enjoyed in warm and cheery authenticity, but First World War music hall has the reputation of being joyously jingoistic and warlike, proof of unanimous popular imperialist enthusiasm. The novelist J. B. Priestley, in his acerbic memoirs of the First War, roundly criticizes songs in the halls:

The first war, unlike the second, produced two distinct crops of songs: one for patriotic civilians, like that drivel above; the other, not composed or copyrighted by anybody, genuine folk song, for the sardonic front-line troops ... without patriotic sentiment of any kind (Priestley 111).

The “drivel” referred to is a patriotic 1914 song where women’s seductive discourse, sung in operetta voices, is used to argue for recruitment to the army.² Its chorus ran:³

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!⁴

The war poet, Siegfried Sassoon, expresses, too, bitterness about music hall jingoism in his poem “Blighters”, written in February 1917 (Sassoon 68):

The House is crammed: tier beyond tier they grin
And cackle at the Show, while prancing ranks
Of harlots shrill the chorus, drunk with din;
‘We’re sure the Kaiser loves our dear old Tanks!’

I’d like to see a Tank come down the stalls,
Lurching to rag-time tunes, or “Home, Sweet Home”,
And there’d be no more jokes in music halls
To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume.

The 1963 anti-war musical comedy, made into a film in 1968, *Oh what a lovely war!* (Littlewood) reinforced this image and immortalized some of the jingoistic music hall songs, which were presented in just the way Priestley had mentioned, as the reactionary warmongering contrast to gritty and truthful soldier songs.

A few examples of songs will show the tone which was possible in jingoistic music hall. The piece cited above “We don’t want to lose you” was one of a number of recruitment songs, each taking a slightly different tack. The following hit speaks of the importance of unity and mutual respect between the different nations of the United Kingdom, shoulder to shoulder at last in the noble cause of defence of the empire:

² The reader unfamiliar with the period may need to be reminded that the British Army from 1914 to 1916 is solely made up of volunteer soldiers.

³ All quotations from songs in this article are of course extracts, generally, but not always, the sing-along chorus.

⁴ The song is entitled “Your King and country wants you” and can be heard online here <<http://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/1914.htm>>.

“Should auld acquaintance be forgot”
 The Scotsman sang with pride
 “Men of Harlech, march to glory”
 Gallant Welshmen 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”.

An everyday anecdote of what the narrator says he saw “the night before the war” is used to communicate what is “right and proper”. The narrator claims to have been present when a Scotsman, a Welshman and an Irishman each sang proud patriotic songs from home, before joining together to sing the UK national anthem.

Effective propaganda

This propaganda song was no doubt useful, as national sentiment outside England could be very problematic for the war drive. Recruitment in Wales would prove to be difficult (Lee 25); in Glasgow a strong trade union movement would have an ambivalent attitude to the war drive, very much attentive to the huge profits being made by industrial firms, and to the abandonment of traditional safeguards concerning working hours and conditions (Gallacher, *passim*). Meanwhile, in Ireland, the important nationalist movement would be deeply divided with a significant level of opposition to involvement in “England’s war”. So this song attacks a genuine problem for the dominant ideology.

A more sophisticated recruitment number is Marie Lloyd’s cockney love song, “Now You’ve Got Yer Khaki On”, of which the chorus is:

I do feel so proud of you
 I do, honour bright
 I’m going to give you an extra cuddle tonight
 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!⁵

This song is a powerful one. Marie Lloyd, like a number of music hall stars, was incredibly popular. She represented for working class people “One of us who has made it”, and was generally referred to as

⁵ Can be heard online here <<http://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/1916.htm>>.

“Our Marie”. A hundred thousand people would attend her funeral in 1922. She came from a poor family, sang “down to earth” songs with a working class accent, and communicated a complicity with her audience which was key to the music hall experience. A Marie Lloyd song may well have been more useful to the war drive than many speeches by politicians or bishops. There is a particular force in hearing one of our own, in our place of relaxation on a “sweet Saturday night” among friends, supporting the recruitment campaign. Indeed, the army were not slow to appreciate the emotional force of the location, and recruiting officers were sometimes allowed on the music hall stage itself, in a “half a crown for the first man who joins the army here on stage in front of the audience” extravaganza (Quigley 25).

The form of the music hall performance reinforced further its power. The choruses are sung in unison, the song uniting the audience as the war is uniting the nation; singing together is a far more engaging experience than listening in silence.



Marie Lloyd

I have quoted three songs. There are many more, which, even in their titles, show the sentiments expressed. Here is a select list:

Won't You Join the Army? 1914
For the Honour of Dear Old England 1914

Boys in Khaki, Boys in Blue 1914
 Men of England, You Have Got to Go 1914
 Your Country's Call 1914
 Let 'em All Come, We're ready 1914
 March on to Berlin! 1914
 Be a Soldier, Lad of Mine 1915
 Ten Million Germans 1915

Does all this mean that we need to follow Priestley's lead, and put the music hall down as overwhelmingly jingoistic? This would presumably involve accepting the idea that the working class in general were enthusiastic warmongers. How could this fit in with other evidence which might lead us to play down the alleged enthusiasm?

For, after all, the majority of British soldiers who fought in the First World War were conscripts.⁶ By March 1916 the flow of volunteers had dried up and the government made joining the army compulsory. Despite the unprecedented massive recruitment campaigns of 1914 and 1915, millions of ordinary men had taken no notice. Even when conscription came in, 750,000 men asked to be exempted (most of them unsuccessfully [Ellsworth-Jones 64]).

In this situation, how could the music hall, the main place of popular entertainment, have been so massively in favour of the war?

Is jingoism typical?

In fact, the jingoistic songs are not typical. First of all, they are practically all released in the first few months of the war. Once the reality of war sinks in (remember that ordinary people at the time did not know the details of war through the mass media as we do today), the jingoism disappears. In 1915, when the government is even more desperate for volunteers than it was the previous year, there are practically no recruitment-oriented songs in the music halls. There are songs praising "our soldiers" and hoping for victory, but it is no longer possible to get the crowd to sing along for recruitment. Indeed, a small number of ironic songs began to appear, such as Frank Leo's "When the Bugle Calls", which includes the lines:

⁶ The conscripts have been less well studied than the volunteers, but see Bet-El.

When the bugle calls we shall march away

As we did in days go by....
 When the bugle calls we shall march to war
 And not a man will fear it
 I don't care how soon the bugle calls
 So long as I don't hear it!

Once one looks at a large corpus, the jingoistic songs, impressive though they are, are revealed as atypical. The table below shows the most common words which appear in the titles of popular songs from 1914 to 1918.

Occurrences of certain words in popular song titles, 1914–1918

Corpus: 1,143 song titles

Home 57 + Blighty⁷ 12 = 69

Girl 62 + lass 6 = 68

Boy 31 + lad 26 = 57

Love 44

Soldier 33 + Tommy⁸ 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 4

Germans or Germany 4

Victory 3

Hun 2

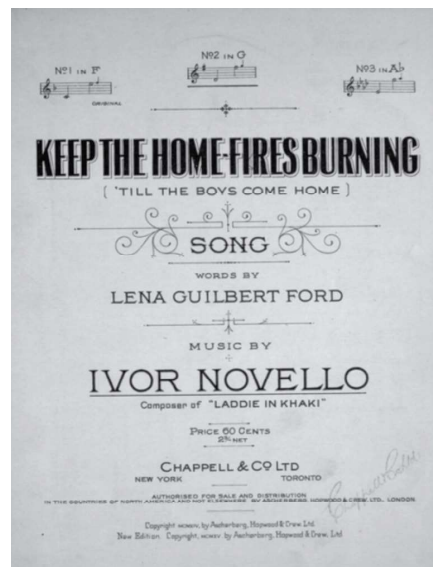
Of course, there is something approximate about analysing key words in song titles. Nevertheless, songs of the time told stories which were often announced in the title. It is immediately clear from this data

⁷ "Blighty" is an affectionate slang term for England.

⁸ "Tommy" is the popular nickname for the British soldier.

that jingoism is not the dominant tone. By far the most common key word is “home”, followed by “girl”, “boy” and “love”. In the song titles that refer directly to the war experience, “soldier” and “Tommy” are found four times as frequently as “King” or “empire”. That is, even in songs about the war, the experience of the ordinary combatant is the priority.

Other words connected to home are well-represented —“Ireland”, “Mother”, “Scotland”, “Lancashire”, and “Dixie”, this last occurring in nostalgic Dixie songs where Dixieland acts as a stand-in for a peaceful rural homeland.



Perhaps the most popular song of the war.

The derogatory term for a German, “Hun” is very rare indeed (despite the fact that it rhymes easily with words like “won” or “gun”!). This reflects the almost total absence of xenophobic anti-German songs. One can find a number of songs mocking the Kaiser, and one mocking the German military medal (“My Old Iron Cross” by cockney songster Harry Champion),⁹ but practically no songs against the German people as a race.¹⁰

⁹ Can be heard online here <<http://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/1915.htm>>.

¹⁰ In contrast, once the US is engaged in the war, we find a number of anti-German songs published in New York, with titles such as “Hunting the Hun”, and “Don’t Quit till Every Hun is Hit”.

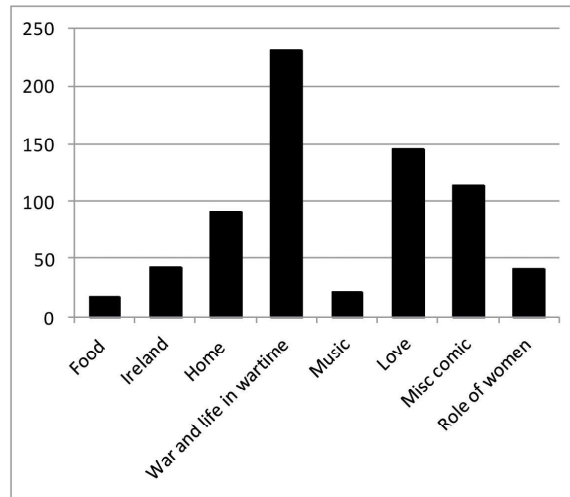
I was able to back up this basic quantitative analysis by looking at the few dozen most successful songs of the war years. Two sources made this possible. Firstly, a longstanding professional of the music hall produced a catalogue of music hall songs from 1860 to 1920 (Kilgarriff). He includes in this catalogue only those songs which he feels were very influential, and considers that about forty songs for each year enter into this category. This is clearly a subjective judgment, but is nevertheless extremely useful, since sales figures for the songs are not available.

Another, contemporary source which helps distinguish hits from other songs is the collection of annual “Greatest Hits” albums of sheet music, published at the end of each year by major music publishers such as Francis and Day. Both of these sources confirm our conclusions that jingoism was exceptional and short-lived in the music hall song repertoire. The Greatest Hits album from Francis and Day for 1915 contains no recruitment songs at all.

Economic constraints

The explanation for this situation lies in the economics of music hall, which is quite different from the economics of the record industry some decades later. The record industry allows the establishment of niche markets. If in 1970, one produces a very radical political song, it can be economically viable if, say, ten per cent of the buying public agree with the sentiment and like the song. But in music hall, such a niche is impossible. The music hall artiste, rolling onto the stage after an acrobatic act and before an animal imitator, say, must please practically the whole audience. If only a quarter sing along, the song is a failure, and even the sharpest star in show business at this time is, as the saying goes, “only two flops away from disaster.” The music hall artiste needs the audience to sing along—a passive acceptance of the song’s sentiment is not enough to assure on-stage success. So only highly consensual opinions are normally found in music hall, and, after the first few months of the war, jingoism was very rare. Similarly, pacifist sentiments, never consensual during wartime, are not found on the music hall stage. The songs which mention the war deal with consensual feelings, like the desire for the end of the war, the grief of separation or the desire for victory.

Although war and life in wartime is the most common single theme in the repertoire, the majority of popular songs during the war do not have the war as a major theme. Here is a chart of the main themes covered in our corpus of songs from 1915 to 1918:¹¹



Songs from 1915-1918: numbers of songs for each theme

The number of food songs, which are also common well before the war, are no doubt quite simply connected to the widespread experience of hunger, though they also tend to defend in song working class foodstuffs and attack bourgeois ones. Nostalgic songs about Ireland allow both Irish and non-Irish to dream of an ever more distant idealized rural past. The miscellaneous comic songs, of which typical examples are “I can’t do my bally bottom button up” and “Where did Robinson Crusoe go with Friday on Saturday Night?” form an important part of the repertoire, and indeed many songs in other categories are also comic. And the large number of songs dealing with the new roles of women in wartime¹² express real unease with the new social order. Titles include

¹¹ Since it is often only possible to identify the year of publication, 1914 was eliminated from this corpus, because it contained a mix of pre-war songs and wartime songs.

¹² Millions of women stopped being housewives or domestic servants to work instead in agriculture, in factories and in offices, a development which shocked many, men and women alike.

“Women’s work”, “Where are the Girls of the Old Brigade?”, “Tilly the Typist” and “The Editress”.

Coming back to those songs where war is the main theme, the vast majority of them are not jingoistic or even patriotic per se. Here is a selection of titles:

1. The Germans are coming so they say
2. Send him a cheerful letter
3. Lloyd George’s beer
4. Sugar !
5. My meatless day
6. In these hard times
7. Never mind the food controller (we’ll live on love)
8. Keep the home fires burning
9. Mother’s sitting knitting little mittens for the navy
10. Sister Susie’s Sewing Shirts for Soldiers
11. Pack up your troubles
12. Every Tommy’s got a girl somewhere
13. All the boys in khaki get the nice girls
14. Goodbye
15. Oh what a lovely war!
16. If You Were the Only Girl in the World
17. Broken Doll
18. Sing Sing, Why Shouldn’t We Sing?
19. We Must Keep on Keeping on

The comic tone is very much dominant, and approaches are varied. Songs 4, 5, 6 and 7 deal with rationing; 9 and 10 take up a tradition of comic tongue-twister songs, with the war theme arbitrarily tacked on; 2, 11, 12, 13, 18 and 19 are cheer-up songs, which also praise the ordinary soldier (rather than the war or the war aims). Songs 14 and 15 are remarkable, ironic, black humour songs of a type one sees much more often in soldier songs than in the music-hall, but they were extremely popular towards the end of the war. We are a long way from songs of twenty years earlier such as “We carved our way to glory”, written in 1892.

Occasionally, music hall songs are distinctly and deliberately distanced from jingoism. There is the 1917 song entitled “We Don’t Want a Lot of Flags a-Flying (When We All Come Marching Home)”, and a 1914 chorus which insists that it is homesick songs, not patriotic ones, which help soldiers most:

Hear the military band a playing to you
 “Rule Britannia” and “God save the King”
 But there’s one tune only
 Cheers us when we’re sad and lonely
 In the trenches boys will think
 Of the wenches they have left far over the foam
 When Johnny O’Morgan
 On his little mouth organ
 Is playing “Home Sweet Home”.

Singing about everyday life

Often the experience of working class people in wartime is treated as comic subject matter, just as in pre-war music hall songs the pawnshop or homelessness could be. The 1918 hit “Coupons” deals with rationing:

You’ll find the coupon system
 Ruling all your daily life
 And went into the barber shop you’ll go
 If you haven’t got a coupon he’ll refuse to cut your hair
 But he’ll make you give him three to let it grow!

“A Bit of a Blighty one” by Vesta Tilley¹³ presents a soldier, delighted to be wounded and to be being mollycoddled in a convalescent hospital. The soldier has received “a Blighty one” —that is, a wound serious enough to get him sent back to Britain, but not serious enough to disable him permanently:

When I think about my dugout
 Where I dare not stick my mug out
 I’m glad I’ve got a bit of a Blighty one!
 ... When they wipe my face with sponges
 And they feed me on blancmanges
 I’m glad I’ve got a bit of a Blighty one!

Jingoistic civil society

All in all, despite its reputation, music hall was no doubt *less* jingoistic than many more respectable institutions of the time. Practically the entirety of civil society dedicated itself to the cause of the Empire. On behalf of the government, Lloyd George spoke of “the

¹³ Online here <<http://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/1917.htm>>.

great peaks we had forgotten, of Honour, Duty, Patriotism, and, clad in glittering white, the great pinnacle of Sacrifice, pointing like a rugged finger to Heaven” and he claimed the war would purify the country.¹⁴ He was rapidly joined by leading voices from sometimes unexpected quarters. Union leaders, such as Ben Tillett, a friend of Eleanor Marx who had led the great dockers’ strikes of 1889, threw themselves into the war effort. Sir John French, Commander-in-Chief of the British army at the beginning of the war, praised Tillett publicly for all he had done for the empire. Other union leaders, such as Tom Mann, took similar stands. The young Labour party supported the war too, with very few exceptions, such as Keir Hardie. Ramsay MacDonald stated opposition to the war, but did not campaign against it; on the contrary, he visited the front and praised the courage of British troops (Elton 269).

The most prominent feminist leaders, Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, who, until then, had been running radical campaigns of direct action for women’s votes, declared an end to their campaign and swore loyalty to the Empire’s cause. Suffragette prisoners were released, and the name of the newspaper of the Women’s Social and Political Union was changed from *The Suffragette* to *Britannia*. It went on to print fiercely xenophobic anti-German articles and to campaign for military conscription for men (Purvis 281). The more broadly-based suffragist organization, the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, also supported the war in its great majority, hoping this hour of imperial need would give women a chance to demonstrate their capability to contribute to the economy and society in new ways.

The leading intellectuals of the age lined up, almost to a man, to join the struggle. Rudyard Kipling had always been a passionate imperialist, and he was joined in the work of writing pro-war pamphlets for the government by, among others, G. K. Chesterton, Arthur Conan Doyle and six professors of history from Oxford University. Even those writers who maintained a reputation as peace-lovers, and who criticized certain aspects of the war, such as H. G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw, desired victory for the Empire (O’Leary and Wisenthal 5). In 1916, the only time when the peace movement in Britain gained significant public support, H. G. Wells denounced it fiercely in the national press (*Herald* 27 May 1916).

¹⁴ Quoted in *The Times* 20 September 1914.

The established Church of England, for its part, saw the war as a sacred duty. The following comment by the Reverend Basil Bourchier was not exceptional:

This truly is a war of ideals; Odin is ranged against Christ, and Berlin is seeking to prove its supremacy over Bethlehem. Every shot that is fired, every bayonet thrust that gets home, every life that is sacrificed, is in very truth 'for His Name's sake' (Wilkinson 254).

Anglican voices against the war proved to be exceedingly rare.

What protest is possible on stage?

It was possible for protests against aspects of the war to appear on the music hall stage, providing the artiste and the theatre manager considered that consensus would go along with the song. The only time that anti-war arguments made a deep impact on the population was in 1916, with the campaign against conscription, and subsequently the widespread criticisms of the committees set up to decide who should be exempted. A 1916 song opposed conscription directly

The shirkers may be weeded, but conscription is not needed,
We only want the king to say "Come on, sirs!"
Then you'll find we've quite enough
Of down right bulldog stuff
To double up at least a dozen kaisers

Two very popular songs sung by Ernest Hastings take up the question of exemption committees: "Exemptions and Otherwise" (1917) and "The Military Representative" (1918). Local committees of dignitaries to decide on exemptions from military service had to contain one military representative, who wielded disproportionate power. The 1918 song mocks this figure:

They called upon the next case
Then a woman rose and said
I'm very sorry gentleman
But my poor husband is 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!"

According to the trade newspaper *The Encore* (11 Jan. 1917) this song "took three curtain calls at the Coliseum." It seems reasonable to conclude that the success of the song reflects mass disillusionment with the tribunal system. The consensual force placed on music hall songs, as well as reducing the space for radical songs, means that those protest songs which do get through the net can really be taken seriously as popular causes.

Once the war was over, it was easier to have songs on stage critical of the war drive or of the army hierarchy. Tom Clare's hit from 1919¹⁵ satirized the propaganda slogan "What Did You Do in the Great War, Daddy". Each verse mocks a character, several of whom more or less dishonestly profited from the war in some way—from the grocer who waived rationing rules for the woman whose husband on the committee managed to get the young grocer excused from military service, to the munitions workers making a handsome bonus from war work. The song ends with the words:

And all the profiteers
 Who had lived so long in clover
 Fell a-sighing and a-sobbing
 When they heard the war was over
 For they'd all made their bit¹⁶ in the Great War, Daddy!

A hit from 1920, included in the "Greatest Hits of the Year" collection of the publishing house Francis and Day, was "Pop Goes the Major". This song speaks of ex-soldiers, after the war, trying to find and kill the Sergeant Major who had been in charge of them during the war:

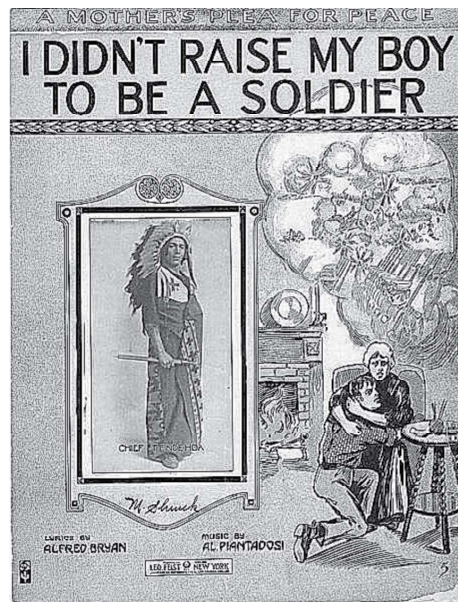
Some chaps we knew spent two weeks leave
 In hunting Sergeant Major Reeve
 They all had something up their sleeve
 —a bayonet or gun ...
 He thinks he's been forgotten quite

¹⁵ Online here <<http://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/1919.htm>>.

¹⁶ This is a play on words. "To do one's bit" means to do one's duty, and was a frequently used expression during the war. "To make one's bit" is to make a profit.

He'll soon see us in a different light
 For we're going to set fire to his house tonight
 —Pop goes the major!

Other songs immediately following the war demanded revenge on profiteers, who had made a fortune from the war while so many young men had given their lives. “The Profiteering Profiteers” in 1920 is one example, as is the more explicitly titled song from the same year, “What Shall We Do with the Profiteers? Shoot Them All!”.



A popular US song which in Britain was not sung on stage

Anti-war songs

It was not possible, during the fighting, for anti-war songs to be sung on the British music hall stage. Such songs existed, and could be sung in political meetings or demonstrations. In the United States, before the decision to join in the war, a song “I Didn’t Raise my Boy to Be a Soldier”¹⁷ was a real success:

¹⁷ Online here <<http://www.archive.org/details/MortonHarvey-IDidntRaiseMyBoyToBeASoldier1915>>.

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."

This song became the anthem of the small anti-war movement, from Britain to Australia.

Just days before the war in Britain, in 1914, another anti-war song was very popular, as a Glasgow socialist notes in his memoirs:

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.

Conclusions

What conclusions can we draw from this brief re-examination of wartime music hall songs? Firstly that the music hall was not more jingoistic than other institutions, and warmongering enthusiasm was short-lived. The main thrust of music hall song reflected consensual ideas about the war —first and foremost a desire for it to end, and for the soldiers to come back home, even if a desire for a British victory continued to go without saying.

It is the singer who chooses their songs. In general, love songs and comic songs reign supreme, but topical songs can succeed if the singer feels they will catch the spirit of the audience. The music hall of this time can only present protest or radicalism if discontent is

very widespread indeed, as it was concerning the conscription system and concerning profiteering. Minority ideas cannot be expressed: the theatre managers are too much under pressure in a highly competitive industry with high levels of capital investment to take any risks by upsetting any significant section of the audience. The need for active participation of the full audience in singalong choruses reinforces the importance of consensus.

Music hall song during this period maintained, however, its ability to talk about ordinary people's trials and tribulations, albeit in an atmosphere heavily loaded with cheery fatalism, and far from political radicalism.

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