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Introduction: Battles, Society and Entertainment

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Introduction:

Battles, society and entertainment

What were British people like when they went out on a Saturday night to have a good time during the Great War? The ordinary people of the time loved above all the music-hall: they knew nothing of exotic holidays, and radio and television were still a long way off. The British music hall was quite different from the more sophisticated Parisian version: it was more knockabout, with no room for tragic love themes and often taking inspiration from circus acts. The aim of this book is to give a taste of the atmosphere and a glimpse at the meaning of British entertainment during the First World War. It is a period very distant from us in two senses. First, so much has changed in technology, ideology and psychology over the last hundred years, and secondly, very few of us have lived the traumatic, extreme experience of total war.

I hope to be able to put across a little of the magic of the Saturday night out, as well as explaining the themes of the songs and why they were important to our ancestors. In order to do this, I have collected over a thousand songs and tried to analyse the reasons for their success. Their context: the life of British people during the war, in the trenches or in Britain, will also be presented. So as not to base my study only on a small number of emblematic hit songs, I will be quoting hundreds of songs in the coming chapters. The reader will be able to hear original recordings of several dozen of the most popular ones – almost all forgotten today - by following the internet links provided.

Our journey will begin (Chapter 1) with a portrait of the entertainment industry in Britain in 1914. We will meet the entrepreneurs who made and lost fortunes, the would-be singing stars, semi-

employed lyricists, overworked musicians and honest or dishonest showbiz agents. We will see how these groups reacted to the trauma of war.

Next (Chapter 2) I will be introducing each of the types of show that existed in the business: music-hall, revue, pantomime, 'blackface minstrelsy' and several others. We will also look at the thousands of touring shows entertaining the British troops in France, and at the amateur show troupes set up by each regiment to amuse and occupy the soldiers during a long and often immobile war.

Chapters 3 to 5 will be looking at the favourite themes of the songs, and what they can teach us about the life and the fantasies of the ordinary people in the audience. We will look at dreams of a lost rural paradise, novelty songs and xenophobic songs, songs protesting against a new law or a mean mother-in-law, almost all including a sing-along chorus. Chapter 4 will look at how women were shown in the songs, and how the image of women changed somewhat in parallel with the transformed roles played by women in wartime. Chapter 6 will deal with the hundreds of songs about the war and about life in wartime Britain.

The final chapter will look at non-commercial songs of different sorts: hymns and folk songs, for example. But most of the chapter will be dedicated to soldier songs, invented in their hundreds on the front line to express Tommy's particular view of the war, of the omnipresence of death, and of little-loved superior officers. Between chapters, the reader will find short portraits of popular music stars of the time, since sometimes a close-up view of one individual can give more depth to an analysis of a mass phenomenon such as popular entertainment.

Yet another book on the First World War!

The number of books published on the subject of the Great War is huge: there are tens of thousands of them. Every month, at the time of writing, three dozen new works are published in English on the subject. Military and diplomatic history account for many of them. Books of ‘military history from below’, which describe the life of soldiers on the front line, are the most popular, and a good number of collections of letters, diaries or interviews have sold very well. The arrival of the centenary has seen a rapid rise in sales for new and old books attempting to pin down the causes of the war.

In university history departments, military history is less dominant: social history, and even more than that, cultural history, occupies a good number of scholars. The types of source studied grow constantly, as historians work on postcards or medical records, cinema or readers’ letters to the press, battlefield archaeology or war monuments. The questions asked of the sources are also more and more varied. Recent books have dealt with the history of nurses, of conscientious objectors, of NCOs, of priests and of executions. Others have looked at the war in Africa, the soldiers from India and the youngest soldiers (some were only 13 years old). Much work has been done on memory, commemoration and cultural representations of war, both in high art and popular art. New thinking about gender has given rise to histories of masculinity and femininity in wartime.

Historians do not agree on many aspects of this war. In France, where I work, debate goes on about different ways that people ‘refused’ the war, and about the meaning of the mutinies, unofficial ceasefires, and other ways of avoiding fighting. In Britain a series of historians, some of whom name themselves ‘revisionists’ criticize what they see as an anti-militarist consensus in history books, school textbooks and television series about the Great War. In particular, they defend the thesis that British First World War generals were much more talented and praiseworthy than has generally been thought, and that, far from being a criminal waste, the Great War was tragic, but necessary and useful. The political positions of these writers and their critics are obviously very significant in understanding

these debates. With the beginning of the centenary some politicians have chosen to intervene directly in these debates. But the commemoration of the First World War has always included clearly political content. In Britain, the Poppy Day campaign, organized by the Royal British Legion, has succeeded in building up a wide consensus around this symbol of commemoration. Millions of people wear poppies in the weeks leading up to the 11th of November, and public figures who do not wish to wear a poppy are subject to real media pressure. The campaign in recent years included billboard posters in the London Underground praising British soldiers presently in Afghanistan, while the poppies themselves were often sold by presently serving soldiers detailed to do so by the Army.¹

In France, the government announced in 2011 that the day of commemoration of the 1918 armistice, the 11th of November, should henceforth be used to pay homage not only to those who died in the Great War but to all soldiers killed on the French side in any war since. The political use of commemoration, it seems, is unavoidable.

History from below

For any historian, the choice of an object of study and of the questions they wish to highlight cannot be neutral. I have chosen to study popular songs in the hope of better understanding the ordinary people of the time. Although, over the last fifty years the idea of ‘history from below’ has gained much ground, popular history books, films and TV documentaries still tend to concentrate on kings, queens and elites.

The difficulty of writing the history of ordinary people has often been underlined. Working-class families from the beginning of the 20th century leave far fewer written traces of their existence than do families of the elite. The majority of memoirs published are those written by the elite. What they have

¹ Their website <http://www.poppy.org.uk/> makes clear their priorities.

to say is important, but partial in every sense. In addition, there is an ever-present danger of considering the working class of a given period as a homogeneous bloc with one culture and one set of opinion, whereas in reality, ‘the ideologies of any period are diverse and contested’.²

One British historian, Gareth Stedman Jones, sums up the pitfalls of writing the history of working class people: the frequent lack of archival material, the danger of being anecdotal or making abusive generalizations, and, in the case of the history of leisure, the danger of looking at leisure activities out of their context.³ These are real difficulties, yet the project is an important one. Another historian of leisure activities underlines the fact that ‘To achieve a full understanding of twentieth century British history, it is as necessary to examine the impact of the everyday cultural experiences of the “majority” as it is to study specific political events.’⁴ Entertainment must not be studied in isolation. The First World War was a trauma which marked every aspect of life. And yet the population of all social classes wanted and needed to maintain some continuity with life before the war. Leisure activities helped with this.

It is true that music hall audiences changed during the war. There were far more uniforms in the house, since military men on leave had money to spend. The percentage of higher class people in the hall rose (officers had five times as much leave as rank and file soldiers did, and barriers stopping elite groups from going to popular musical shows loosened up during the war). But much stayed the same too, as we shall see throughout the present study.

Popular song

²Alexandra Carter, *Dance and Dancers in the Victorian and Edwardian Music Hall Ballet* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 4.

³Gareth Stedman Jones, *Studies in English Working-class History 1832 to 1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 80-88.

⁴James Nott, *Music for the People: Popular music and Dance in Interwar Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 9.

The definition of ‘popular song’ has given rise to a certain amount of debate.⁵ In this study, I have retained a very basic definition: simply the songs which were the most well-known and the most frequently sung at the time. In a highly urbanized country, the majority of these songs were communicated by commercial bodies: the variety theatres and the music publishers were the key actors.

Over the last few decades, popular music has become a subject of study for social scientists and historians, and even for musicologists, who had long limited their attention to art music. Previously, university researchers had considered popular music too ‘trivial’ for serious study, and even today such prejudices have not completely vanished. The present study is based on the assumption that these songs and musical activities can give a unique insight into popular attitudes during the Great War, provided naturally they are not considered as the unmediated voice of a homogeneous working class, but as documents of which one can analyse the content, the reception and the social meaning. Peter Bailey, the most influential expert on the history of music hall insists that the genre was constantly developing, but warns against a simplistic vision of music hall presenting a gradual and seamless move from some ‘authentic’ and gritty people’s culture to a commercialized and respectable mass culture. He calls for music hall to be examined in its social context, and in relation with other contemporary leisure activities. He regrets, moreover that many studies of music hall have been based on small numbers of songs, and that the period after 1914 has been generally neglected.⁶ Peter Bailey’s reflections were part of what made me decide to write the present book, in the hope of filling some of the gaps in our knowledge of musical entertainment of the time.

Sources

⁵Richard Middleton (Ed.), *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990), 3-11.

⁶ Peter Bailey (Ed.), *Music-hall, the Business of Pleasure* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), xii-xiii.

Many different kinds of sources were used for this book: historical studies, published collections of letters and diaries, posters and photos. The reader will find them in the footnotes. The majority of the songs are kept in sheet music form at the British Library in London, though I have been able to listen to some 300 or so recordings of songs from the time. Published collections of songs, and a catalogue put together by a gentleman who had spent his whole career in music hall contributed the rest of my corpus.⁷ The trade press of the period was an indispensable source of information. *The Encore* published news from the music hall every week and served as a link between artistes and theatre managers. Another weekly paper, *The Era* dealt more generally with stage news – ‘legitimate’ theatre and music hall alike. *The Performer*, official magazine of the Variety Artistes Federation – the trade union of music hall performers - showed the entertainment world from the artistes’ point of view, often that of the poorer ones. *Phono Record* gave monthly news of newly released records and advances in technology for the fans of the new leisure activity, the gramophone. And of course daily newspapers such as *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Scotsman* were helpful, as was *The Herald*, the main regular publication opposed to the war.

Studies on music hall have tended to concentrate on the capital city, even if some books on provincial towns do exist. In order to help integrate information about smaller towns, I have studied in some detail one small textile town in Lancashire, Burnley, through its local newspapers. Frequent references to this town help to confirm whether or not general analyses also apply to this locality which we consider to be representative. At the end of the book, the reader will find a chronology of key events. This is a very personal selection, and follows my general intention to look at the war from the point of view of ordinary people, to the extent to which it is possible to do so.

⁷ Michael Kilgarriff, *Sing Us One of the Old Songs – a Guide to Popular Song 1860 – 1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Historians aim at writing truths, not just opinions, about the past, and yet a completely neutral book on the First World War is quite inconceivable. The choice of sources and of key questions to investigate reveal in every case a positioning by the author. It would be unfair to readers, then, not to indicate from the start that my own sympathies lie with those who feel that the end of the British Empire was something to celebrate, and that the First World War was a tragedy in which the interests and the lives of ordinary people were sacrificed for the sake of the projects and objectives of a wealthy elite.

- [Series : Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series](#)

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- Using a collection of over one thousand popular songs from the war years, as well as around 150 soldiers' songs, John Mullen provides a fascinating insight into the world of popular entertainment during the First World War. Mullen considers the position of songs of this time within the history of popular music, and the needs, tastes and experiences of working-class audiences who loved this music. To do this, he dispels some of the nostalgic, rose-tinted myths about music hall. At a time when recording companies and record sales were marginal, the book shows the centrality of the live show and of the sale of sheet music to the economy of the entertainment industry. Mullen assesses the popularity and significance of the different genres of musical entertainment which were common in the war years and the previous decades, including music hall, revue, pantomime, musical comedy, blackface minstrelsy, army entertainment and amateur entertainment in prisoner of war camps. He also considers non-commercial songs, such as hymns, folk songs and soldiers' songs and weaves them into a subtle and nuanced approach to the nature of popular song, the ways in which audiences related to the music and the effects of the competing pressures of commerce, propaganda, patriotism, social attitudes and the progress of the war.
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- Contents: Preface; Introduction: Battles, society and entertainment; Portrait of an industry: producing popular music 1914-1918; Focus on a star 1: Harry Lauder, Scottish ambassador?; A patchwork of genres; Focus on a star 2: Vesta Tilley, the woman who played men; The songs and their content; Focus on a star 3: Focus on a star: Marie Lloyd, 'Our Marie'; 'If you were the only girl in the world': women, men and love in music hall song; Focus on a star 4: Harry Champion: 'The spirit of the poorer parts of London'; Songs about the war: elite voices and people's voices; 'I want to go home': soldier songs and other non-commercial songs; Conclusions; Appendix; Bibliography; Index.
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- About the Author: John Mullen is senior lecturer at the University of Paris-East Créteil. He has published widely on the history of British popular music. Articles include a reflection on 'ethnic' music festivals and immigrant identity (1960–2000), and a piece on racial stereotyping in music-hall songs from 1880 to 1920. His website is www.johnmullen.net.