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The Show Must Go On! Popular Song in Britain during the First World War

JOHN MULLEN

Farnham and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2015

ISBN 978-1-4724-4159-1 (paperback)

262 pp., \$34.95

First published as *The show must go on! 'La Chanson populaire en Grande-Bretagne pendant la Grande Guerre, 1914-1918*, Paris: L'Harmattan, collection "L'Aire Anglophone", 2012

Studies of the music, especially the popular music, of the First World War period are few and John Mullen's book is a welcome addition to Regina M. Sweeney's *Singing Our Way to Victory*, on French popular music, published in 2001. There is also no one better qualified than John Mullen to have written this book. A senior lecturer in British studies at UPEC (Université Paris Est Créteil Val de Marne), Mullen has published extensively on the topic of popular music in Great Britain during the Great War, mostly in the French academic press. Mullen structures the book into six main chapters interspersed by four vignettes of major stars: Harry Lauder, Vesta Tilley, Marie Lloyd and Harry Champion.

The first sets the scene and describes the popular music industry of the period whilst the second covers the different settings in which one would have encountered the songs including music hall, revues and pantomime at home and the formal and informal performances for and by soldiers at the front. Mullen corrects some misconceptions about the period by, for example, reminding us that gramophones were an expensive luxury and that the vast majority of people 'consumed' their music live. By carefully describing the myriad ways in which this consumption took place he also indicates that any simplistic depiction of the music of the period as being that of a monolithic industry dictating popular taste is misconceived.

The third chapter discusses the songs and their content and Mullen makes some insightful observations about the way in which popular songs were received and perceived at the time and how these differ from today's usage. His categorisation and analysis provides valuable information for future studies and here he follows the ideas of Hennion and Vignolle in emphasising the centrality of the character of the singer in much of the music of the period and demonstrates how 'they sang more about Mother than about the Empire, and far more about Tommy than about Kitchener' (p. 89).

Chapter four looks specifically at the central themes of 'Women, Men and Love in Music-hall song' bringing in the way that the issue of women's role in society was having an impact on the content of popular song. Though Mullen suggests that the war was a 'watershed' in British history he somewhat corrects himself in his conclusion that though 'progressive ideas about women were not rare in wartime society' they 'remained the beliefs of a minority' and were therefore rarely explored in music hall (p. 140). One gem of information he reveals concerns one of the most popular of all wartime songs 'If You Were the Only Girl in the World' from the hit musical *The Bing Boys are Here*. Until a few moments before going on stage at the premier George Robey had intended to sing it in his inimitable comic style but instead at the last minute decided to sing it 'straight'. Perhaps, as Mullen suggests, the war induced a more serious and melancholic approach but it remains a deeply effective song in which Robey's genius is clear even after the passage of a hundred years.

The final two chapters turn to consider songs about the war itself. Chapter five looks at professionally composed songs whilst the final chapter turns to soldier's own songs on the topic.

A book that examines the popular music of a specific historical event needs a clear thesis on both music and period, underpinned by a thorough understanding of current academic thinking on both issues. Mullen succeeds in offering the reader a unified thesis on his topic

but his conclusions are damaged due to a selective, and incomplete, analysis of the war itself. He is at his best where he demonstrates that professionally composed songs during the war were far from the 'gung ho', pro-imperialist stereotype suggested by Joan Littlewood's *Oh, What a Lovely War!* or Arthur Marwick's 1965 book *The Deluge*. Mullen shows that they were far more varied and subtle than this. Recruiting songs such as 'Your King and Country Need You' were quickly eclipsed by more subtle or humorous compositions and by songs that simply looked forward to a time when the war had ended. However Mullen interprets the reasons for these changes, and others, based on a questionable understanding of the period. Very early on he sets out his stall by saying that his view is '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' (p. 5). This is a defensible conception of the First World War but Mullen takes it too much as a given rather than making any argument in support and it leads him to make a number of assertions that are more problematic. There is an over-reliance on out-dated or flawed sources. Marwick's book gets nine citations and Steve Humphries and Richard van Emden's *All Quiet on the Home Front: An Oral History of Life in Britain during the First World War* (2004), a sensationalist account produced to accompany a TV series, four. A key recent study which updates Marwick, Adrian Gregory's *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (2013) gets a solitary mention whilst Dan Todman's *The Great War Myth and Memory* (2005) which makes many points crucial to Mullen's arguments is not referenced at all.

Mullen contends, against all current evidence, that everyone thought the war would be 'over by Christmas' and that recruiting fell during major battles when the reverse is true in both cases (pp. 159 and 187). He appears surprised that the priorities of the higher command and ordinary soldiers diverged as if this was a problem unique to the First World War (p. 191) when it is an issue faced every day in every war. Perhaps the least defensible 'allegation' is

that officers cared so little for their men and were routinely cruel that this led soldiers to express a view in their songs that they wanted to assassinate their superior officers (p. 216). If this were the case then discipline would quickly have broken down, especially in a citizen army made up of non-professionals and the reality has been covered by many recent authors including Gary Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches* (2000) and Helen McCartney, *Citizen Soldiers* (2005) and is abundantly clear in one he actually cites, Richard Holmes' *Tommy* (2005).

Mullen's interpretation of the history leads to some questionable interpretations of several of the songs themselves. Mullen cites a verse about General Shute as an example of a 'soldiers' song' that supports his contention that superior officers were hated (p. 209). This was not a soldiers' song at all but a poem written by Sir Alan Patrick Herbert, a product of Winchester and Oxford and, at the time, a junior officer. He claims that 'Pop goes the Major', a song that suggests that a Sergeant Major would 'pop' if burned to death, 'says much about the inexpressible suffering of ordinary soldiers under their superior officers' (p. 174). Songs of this kind have been written about every war, they are no more indicative of the true feelings of ordinary soldiers about than any other manifestation of the 'black humour' and hyperbole indulged in by soldiers. Mullen believes that NCOs and officers were attacked in song because of their oppressive actions when it is their role that is being ridiculed. At one point Mullen states that 'the sergeant is the officer most insulted in the songs' (p. 208). Sergeants are not officers, they are simply the authority figure with whom ordinary soldiers come into contact most frequently. Strangely when discussing the bawdy use of hymn tunes in songs such as 'When this Bloody war is Over', Mullen agrees with Alan Wilkinson that these songs mocked authority as a coping mechanism for the men. This point was strongly emphasised by Les Cleveland in his study of war in song and popular culture, 'Dark Laughter' (1994). Cleveland's main point is that the songs of any war are very similar, varying little between

the two world wars and Vietnam. Cleveland's is another important source not referenced by Mullen.

These issues of historical interpretation are regrettable as, whilst remaining critical of a war that was undoubtedly waged at a time of imperialism and class antagonism, Mullen could have avoided them and still maintained his main purpose of demonstrating the crucial role popular music played in the lives of both soldiers and civilians. However if one skirts round the historical analysis, *The Show Must Go On!* is an extremely valuable addition to a still underrepresented area of the study of popular culture and its wealth of examples provides a good starting point for anyone with an interest in the historical study of popular music.