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Singing Through the War

_____What could be more enchanting than a crooner's voice? Is it the slow tremor of Bing Crosby's baritone vocal chords? The trombones swinging in the background of Frank Sinatra's band? Or is the the way that they simultaneously steal the hearts of their listeners while reminding them to buy war bonds to support the American military effort in World War Two? Hitler's regime is characterized by spewing propaganda to the German people through the radio, yet Americans used the radio just as often to propagate support for the war effort.

Music broadcasted during WWII served two patriotic purposes: To sell war bonds that would fund to war effort and to create a comical or emotional atmosphere to better help American listeners relate to the war effort. Jeffery Wood, a professor of Music at Austin Peay State University, wrote: "In a very real sense, American popular music was the popular music of World War II." (Wood) Music was paralleling the values of America. Some music, like that of Walt Disney's Donald Duck cartoons during the war, served more as propaganda to poke fun at Axis ideology, while other music simply served as a medium for which to convey the atmosphere and beliefs of wartime America. Star-power, moreover, was heavily utilized during the war as singers such as Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby sing songs about wartime or urge listeners to buy war bonds. It was their way of contributing to the war effort.

The American involvement in WWII is categorized as "total war." Such a title indicates that each American needed to contribute to the war effort in some sense, including businesses such as radio and music. It is important to recognize the power of radio in the 40s. The

revolution of American television did not occur until 1955, thus radio was a major form of communication and entertainment for Americans during the 40s. (Young, 28) A simply historical indication for such would be Franklin D. Roosevelt's fireside chats, where he created a comforting atmosphere for Americans during the chaos of the Great Depression, and WWII. People looked to the radio for comfort, and WWII took advantage of such.

A prime function of wartime music was to supply American listeners with directions. In 1943 Robbins Music Corp released , "Coming In On A Wing and A Prayer." The song depicts a warplane carrying on through a bombing mission, regardless that one of the plane's motors and wings are damaged. It is the prayers of the men onboard, and their devotion to their American military duty, that carries them through the flight even hurting, or "limping,":

What a show, what a fight!

Boys, we really hit our target for tonight

How we sing as we limp through the air

Look below, there's our field over there

With our one motor gone

We can still carry on

Comin' in on a wing and a prayer (Robbins Music Corp.)

The song was most famously sung by The Song Spinners for Decca Records, and is the only war song to reach number one on *Billboard*. (Billboard) Household names at the time, such as Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra, sang their own versions of the tune. Bing Crosby was even introduced as a "co-pilot" by a radio host before singing the song live, clearly solidifying a militaristic tone. It is Eddie Cantor's, a renowned in the 1940s for his radio acting and comedy,

rendition, though, that is the most unique in 1943. Cantor's version included directions for listeners on how to purchase war bonds. After the first chorus, Cantor is heard charismatically stating these directions as the band plays: "Folks, this is Eddie Cantor telling you that everyday our boys are coming in on a wing and a prayer.... Surely the least we can do to help on the home front is to give Uncle Sam our dollars for war bonds. Figure out the total of your family income, the money you need for family living expenses and the extra for more war bonds. Yes, figure it out yourself and you'll see that you can increase your expenses for war bonds every week and every pay day. Your investment in victory and peace!" (Cantor)

Cantor is directing Americans on how to help the war effort. He makes the task extremely easy, an American must simply calculate their weekly expenses and the rest will go to help fight the war. Cantor then explains that the money for war bonds will help Americans invest in victory and thus peace, creating a moral obligation to Americans. The war bonds that Cantor describes will help the American military from "limping" through their air missions. Moreover if the American air force is strong enough to carry through a successful mission damaged, the investment of war bonds suggest that the air force will be even more protected and victorious. Assessment of Cantor's song can also be carried into the instrumentation of the song, where the band's brass mimics the sound of war. The trilling instruments parallel the fear of a war planes as it flies through a war zone, the strong chorus though, suggests that the plane will persevere. All in all, music served as a vital way for Americans to learn how they could personally contribute to the war effort at home. Directions from singers to purchase war bonds drew a direct correlation between an American balancing their finances and giving money to repair airplanes for missions.

Similar to the directions on how to help the war effort, music also served as a more strict form of propaganda. Music during WWII created an opportunity for Americans to be warned against fascist ideologies. It is important to recognize that music is a very cerebral process, unlike a poster or drawing, it has the ability to stick into one's head, leading to the mind repeating and repeating the lyrics. During WWII Walt Disney was recruited to animate American propaganda against the Nazis and Japanese that would support the purchase of war bonds. Disney nominated to use solely Donald Duck in their films, and in 1944 created the short film *Der Fuehrer's Face*. (Walt Disney) The film went on to win for Best Animated Short in the 15th Academy Awards, and remained played separately on radio stations.

The film's plot is as follows: Donald Duck has a nightmare that he is trapped in the terror of the Nazi state, working all day, and surviving on one piece of stale bread while under constant surveillance by the Nazi regime. At the end he wakes up in America, and kisses a small Statue of Liberty while dressed in Uncle Sam pajamas. The ending still states, "Help keep em' flying! Buy war bonds NOW." (Movie To News Inc.) The film is most notable, however, for its use of Spike Lee's song, "Der Fuehrer's Face." Characters such as Joseph Goebbels, Heinrich Himmler, Hideki Tojo, Hermann Göring, and Benito Mussolini compose a marching band, that force themselves into Donald Duck's quarter's singing:

Is this Nazi land so good

Would you leave it if you could

Ja this Nazi land is good

We would leave it if we could

We bring the world new order

Heil Hitler's world to order

Everyone of foreign race

Will love der fuehrer's face

When we bring to the world disorder (Spike Lee)

The Axis Power marching band is using irony to convey that that, regardless of how often the Axis Power may say they are happy in Hitler's Germany, "[they] would leave it if [they] could." (Spike Lee) The song's lyrics go on to outline the false promises of the marching band's members, saying that their "master race, owning all time and space," will only be finished when "bringing the world disorder." (Lee) Spike Lee's lyrics also go on to push off the confidence of the might of Hitler's military. The lyrics state: "Göerring says they'll never bomb this place, we heil, heil, right in the Fuehrer's face." (Lee) When the lyrics state, "heil," it is as if America is saying, "yeah right," to Hitler's power. Coupled with Donald Duck throwing a tomato in Hitler's face, it shows that America simply thinks Hitler's threats are a joke. Such an image, created through the song's lyrics, is very compelling as propaganda: the Nazis need to be saved, as they would leave Germany if it were their choice, and to do that we must not be afraid to bomb Hitler. How does one help? By buying war bonds.

Closely related to the technique used by Disney, were songs simply based on comedy that were meant to dismiss or minimize the heartbreak of war. The infamous song, "I'll Be Home for Christmas," was recorded by Bing Crosby in 1943 for Decca Records. The song was recorded to honor soldiers in WWII and the homesickness they were feeling during the holidays. (Young, 198) In the song, the soldier writes to his family, saying that he wants to see the snow, mistletoe, and presents on the tree. (Bing Crosby) The song ends with Crosby crooning, "I'll be home for

Christmas, if only in my dreams.” This song rose quickly in the *Billboard* charts, staying at number three for eleven weeks, signifying that much of America was either experiencing the longing for the loved one at war, or soldiers dreaming of home. (Collins) It parallels the national heart at the time, and the thoughts on the minds of money. (Rose) Moreover, songs like the “Goodbye Mama, I’m Off to Yokohama,” use comedy to dismiss the traits and culture of the enemy, and to garner comfort for Americans sending their family’s off to war. The song was first written and composed by J. Fred Coots and published in 1941 by Chappell and Co. The lyrics go as follows:

*The land of Yama-Yama,
Until April, I guess
Will be our address.
Tell dad I plan a big surprise, nobody knows
I'll bring him back a Jap valet to care for his clothes
We're learning jujitsu, where you kick with the feet
We'll Kick Em in their Tokyo and watch em retreat (Coots)*

The song makes fun of Yokohama as some, “la la” land not worthy enough to be called the right name, and then suggests that the Americans have a huge secret plan to defeat the Japanese by April, and return home with Japanese servants. Suggesting that the Japanese are inferior. To go even further the song degrades Japanese culture to “jujitsu,” something the Americans can easily master to shove in the face of Japan’s capital Tokyo. In 1942, another version of “Goodbye Mama, I’m Off To Yokohama,” was recorded by Teddy Powell and his

Orchestra, where the lyrics changed. In this version the Mama sings to her soldier to go to Japan to fight for her and Uncle Sam, to knock the “Japs on their Japan-knees.” (Powell) The song remains comical to lighten the mood of war, yet now becomes more emotionally compelling as Uncle Sam’s sons are being called on to protect their mothers. The shift is important, for it shows that even one year after Pearl Harbor, the war in the Pacific was carrying on longer than planned, and required more men. The upbeat sound of the lyrics, however, help Americans to maintain positivity in the war effort from home.

During World War Two, the generation relied heavily on the radio and film for entertainment. When the atmosphere of total war was forced on American radio, the radio was used as a major source to garner support and push for the purchase of war bonds. Essentially, the radio covered all steps of propaganda. With Spike Lee’s comedic music Americans, mainly the young, would learn what is wrong with fascism, with Eddie Cantor’s “Comin’ In On A Wing and a Prayer,” Americans would learn how they could help the war effort, and with music such as Bing Crosby’s or Coots, Americans could comfort themselves that by knowing that the feelings of anxiety for sons at war or heartache, they were not alone. Moreover it is important to realize that all of the music places an emphasis on positivity that the war will end. The comedy helps to downplay the threat of Hitler, and the music assured that American military, supported by the war bonds, would be victorious. The war’s end was near near, if Americans would support the war effort. Nonetheless, by assessing music broadcasted during WWII, one may learn an extreme amount about the temperature of America and how music brought the war home.

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