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“The last period when the performing arts were at the core of the music industry”: John Mullen’s *La Chanson populaire en Grande-Bretagne pendant la Grande Guerre 1914-1918*

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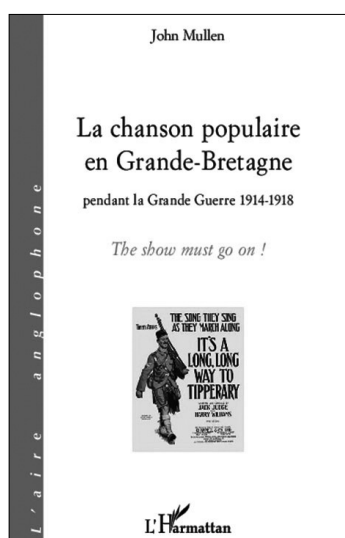
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L'auteur & les Éd. Mélanie Seteun

The show must go on!

John Mullen, *The show must go on! La chanson populaire en Grande-Bretagne pendant la Grande Guerre 1914-1918*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2012.



As its title indicates, John Mullen's book addresses popular song in Great Britain during the First World War (1914-1918). But what the title doesn't tell is that it was, in terms of research output, the keystone of the HDR thesis ("Habilitation à Diriger les Recherches") Mullen submitted in November 2012 at Paris-Est Créteil University – where he has been lecturing British Civilization for years. As such, *La Chanson populaire en Grande-Bretagne pendant la Grande Guerre 1914-1918* does comply with academic standards while drawing on the author's long-standing interest in British popular music (one of the two topics his research focuses on, along with the history of British

unions). From a historian's point of view, it also offers a not-so-common approach to the Great War period by actually using the popular song as a pretext "to try and understand the common people" (12). As Mullen admits, "researchers never address neutral issues" (12), and, in this respect, it is obvious his previous work on British working classes and unions contributed to shape these pages while usefully complementing his other field of expertise.

The book begins with a depiction of the "entertainment industry" in early-1910s Britain, Mullen providing a detailed analysis of the way British show business was organized back then. He first examines the networking of venues and large theatre chains that dominated the country, then he moves on to evoke the most popular forms of entertainment from that era – from musicals to music hall through early blackface minstrel shows – and the many different professions that were dependent upon the latter industry (artists, publishers, songwriters, scene shifters, ushers, etc.). For the reasons mentioned above, many of those pages are devoted to examining artists' actual living conditions, the unions that represented them (Music Hall Artistes Railway Association, Variety Artistes Federation, etc.), the strikes that succeeded during the years and months before the war broke out and, more generally, the way ideological conflicts and contradictions came to shape popular entertainment, with socialist organizations promoting what they called

"rational leisure" (which they regarded as a possible way to improve the working man's "cultural level") while their liberal counterparts encouraged some form of "respectable entertainment". Naturally, the war eventually settled all conflicts and transformed the British popular entertainment industry as it had been shaped by the country's history since the mid-19th century. As Mullen observes, the main consequences had less to do with economy ("a few months after the war broke out, it was obvious it would not stop people from going to popular shows – on the contrary", 47) than with the types of shows that were being produced (as in most Western countries, "lyricists began to write songs to keep up [the nation's] morale" and "publishing companies started publishing war songs" and "organising patriotic song contests", 47-48).

The following chapter consists of a survey of the genres that remained popular in Britain throughout the Great War (music-hall revues, the yearly pantomime, musical comedies, black minstrelsy and even several different types of shows *by or for* soldiers). The development of each genre is put in historical perspective and, as Mullen argues, even though they were all affected by the war in terms of the themes they addressed, their being affected might take on different proportions (for example, it appears that the mark the war left on music hall was much more profound than the one it left on musical comedies). He then concludes this part by observing that "the First World War was the last period when the performing arts were at the core of the music industry" (92). I found this idea rather appealing, even though it should be added here that the Great War symbolizing the end of an era in popular entertainment

was not, strictly speaking, connected with the subsequent development of the gramophone record and the radio that ended up revolutionizing the popular music industry during the following decades.

The remaining chapters consist of an extensive analysis of a corpus of British wartime songs in terms of lyric content. Taking the opposing view from Adorno's on the cultural industry and its products being "no longer also commodities, but [...] commodities through and through" (100), Mullen uses these lyrics to try and answer the following question: "If popular music has a history, then where do the war-time years appear to be located in the latter history?" (102). Given the reference to Adorno, many readers will probably find the author's lack of concern with the musical dimension of the songs he examines all the more surprising; still, as the following pages and chapters demonstrate, those songs' lyrics do say a lot in terms of the British response to the war while reflecting many of the evolutions then under way in the fields of men and women relationships, social class relationships, and even everyday life in Britain. In sum, as Mullen comments in the general conclusion to the book (and as many, many popular music scholars already observed before him), the popular song is "a form of entertainment that draws its social meaning from its relationship with other [fields of human] activity" (261).

As for my own conclusion, I would say this book is obviously the result of many years of research and reflection. Given its narrow historical focus and the author's aforementioned lack of interest in the musical parameters that contribute to define his corpus of songs, I doubt it

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will remain as a book whose influence will be compared, in years to come, with that of Derek Scott's pioneering work on 19th-century British popular music (1989, 2008). Nevertheless, it should definitely be regarded as a useful complement for that particular period in British history that came, in fact, to symbolize the end of the 19th century.

Olivier JULIEN

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Lionel Pourtau, *Techno 2 : une subculture en marge*, Paris, CNRS éditions, 2012.



Lionel Pourtau s'emploie dans *Techno : une subculture en marge* à inscrire sa réflexion à l'interstice entre une psychologie des participants et une sociologie des groupes, à l'exclusion d'une psychologie de masse ou même

collective, puisque le primat de l'individu et de sa quête de réalisation personnelle est maintenu d'un bout à l'autre de l'ouvrage. Ce parti-pris n'est pas gratuit, mais procède d'une attention portée aux témoignages des personnes participant à cette sous-culture.

De l'aveu de son auteur, (11) cette publication doit se concevoir comme le prolongement d'un travail antérieur déjà publié aux éditions du CNRS. Il s'agissait de *Techno : voyage au coeur des nouvelles communautés festives* (2009).

Le volume se divise en six chapitres équilibrés qui suivent un mouvement progressif. On y distingue trois grandes orientations critiques. La première, ainsi que l'auteur l'explique, vise à élucider les conditions de l'entrée des « teufeurs » dans la sous-culture de la *free party*, et elle est prolongée par des explications psychologiques, cependant que les chapitres trois et quatre adoptent une visée qui est plus spécifiquement celle du sociologue. Enfin, dans les