

Sounding the Somme – Kit Bag

Fact File: Music During WW1

The Role of Music in the War

- Music played an important role during the war both in the trenches and back at home.
- It was extremely important for the troops, who would sing for solidarity, to boost morale, and prepare for the battlefield. They would also sing whilst marching for miles and miles to the front line.
- Music served as entertainment for the soldiers during the evening, when away from the front line and to relieve boredom in between battles.
- Many soldiers turned to song and lyric writing, as well as poetry and artwork, to express their feelings, frustrations and emotions about the war and what they were going through.
- Back at home, music was used to keep up morale amongst those left behind.
- People filled the Music Halls of the time to come together and sing songs.
- Music played a vital role in recruiting soldiers and many songs written at the time were to entice young men to sign up.



Examples of recruitment posters and wartime music.

- Certain songs of the era were written to help those back home keep in good spirits, such as *Keep the Home Fires Burning* by Ivor Novello.

The Music Hall Genre

- Music Hall describes a type of music entertainment prevalent in Britain from 1850-1960. During this time, music halls sprung up all over the country: there were about 300 alone in London to supply the increased demand for this type of entertainment.
- The genre began as simple entertainment in public houses, but soon moved to purpose-built halls with a stage for entertainment and seating around tables where audiences could eat, drink and smoke tobacco whilst watching the acts.
- Composers and songwriters wrote specifically for this genre, covering many subjects that would appeal to the general public and working classes.

- Characteristics of the style include catchy songs with simple lyrics, rousing choruses (for joining in) as well as a whole host of other forms of entertainment from comedy, to gymnastics and ventriloquism and many more in between.
- Music Halls served a useful purpose during the war by housing recruitment events and holding charity concerts to raise funds for the war effort.
- One of the great wartime hits was *Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag*.

The Trouble with Pack Up Your Troubles

- This song was written by brothers Felix Powell (music) and Geroge Asaf (lyrics) who were already stars of the Music Hall at the time.
- They didn't like the song to begin with, and it lay in a drawer before they re-scored it and entered it into a marching song competition in 1915. It won and the song went viral!
- At home, people flocked to the Music Halls to hear the song, or crowded around the parlour piano in individual homes to sing and play it. On the front line, it served its purpose, and soldiers marched along singing the "stiff upper lip" words with gusto.
- Why was it so popular? It was easily sung and played, thanks to its simplicity, had comforting lyrics with an upbeat message that soldiers could relate to. Its 2/4 time signature was easy to march to, with that 'omp-pah' feel, and it had a really catchy memorable chorus.
- The song was translated in to many different languages, including German, and it was said that soldiers even sang it on opposing sides of the front line.
- Sadly, over time, the song and its success caused the brothers upset, as thousands of men would have marched to their deaths singing their song. They also benefitted financially from the commercial use of the song, whilst thousands were dying, another factor which troubled the brothers.
- Like many pop stars of today, the brothers were eventually only known for that song, they found it difficult to write in future years, and tragically Felix Powell took his own life in 1942.

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