

*‘Music while you work’ ... and play:  
Popular music c.1940-1955*

Mother dear, I’m writing you from somewhere in  
France,  
Hoping this finds you well.  
Sergeant says I’m doing fine, a soldier and a half,  
Here’s a song that we all sing, it’ll make you laugh.

Bud Flanagan & Chesney Allen, ‘We’re Going to Hang  
Out the Washing on the Siegfried Line’

THE SECOND WORLD war is commonly seen as a major turning point in the nation’s history, accelerating socio-economic change and creating a sense of determination not to return to the failed decades of the pre-war years of long-term unemployment, slum-housing and gross health inequalities. The extent of change can easily be overstated. In social terms, for example, the mobilisation of women on the home front saw many enjoying new freedoms ‘out of the cage,’ and unwilling to relinquish them after the war but, at the same time, there were many people who saw the war as disruptive and looked to the restoration of the nuclear family, complete with breadwinning husband and homemaking wife.<sup>1</sup>

The war created various problems for the purveyors of popular music. Mobilisation disrupted bands as members joined the armed forces, some venues were requisitioned, others damaged during the blitz. The blackout and reduced evening-time transportation impacted on the timing of leisure provision; the relocation of troops and the later arrival

of members of the armed forces from parts of Europe, the Empire and America, disrupted its geography. The latter greatly increased the influence of American popular music and dance, not least the jitterbug, and forced the BBC to modify its popular music policy. There were other positives. The growth of the war economy brought significant improvements in real wages, especially for key demographics, such as young, unmarried women, who comprised a large part of the dance hall audience. It was soon recognised that music had an important role to play in maintaining and enhancing morale and productivity as well as celebrating 'national' values. There were three distinct audiences to be entertained: members of the armed forces, including ancillary organisations, both at home and at the front; men and women at work, especially in those factories contributing directly to the war effort; and, housewives and younger household members, at home. Although found in very different geographical locations, there were commonalities in terms of the preferred music and song, which grew out of the changing tastes of the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> There was much that was nostalgic, for example in the songs of Vera Lynn and the continuing popularity of English bandleaders and their singers. For a decade after the war cultural continuity was the order of the day. Variety theatres and dance halls enjoyed a boom, seemingly returning to their heyday in the 1930s, and much of the popular music on radio and record, and later television, would have been more familiar to audiences of the 1930s than of the 1960s.

### ***The BBC and forces broadcasting***

The outbreak of war led to a significant structural change – the creation of a Home Service and a Forces Programme – and the consequent abandonment of the principle of mixed programming that the BBC had followed from its inception. Yet its immediate response had been modest and unimaginative, not least because of a poor understanding of its audiences and their tastes. The popularity of Radio Luxembourg, especially on Sundays, was well-known and yet it still came as something of a surprise at the BBC that troops were not enamoured of drama and religious broadcasting and much preferred to listen to Gracie Fields or Vera Lynn. Responding to listeners'

complaints, the Forces Programme began transmission in February 1940, initially from 11 a.m., later from 6.30 a.m., to 11 p.m. throughout the war, albeit in different format following the rapid build-up of American soldiers in the last months of the war. Renamed the General Forces Programme in February 1944, its audience extended beyond the troops to include many on the home front. Belatedly, it was recognised, in the words of the chairman of the governors, Sir Allan Powell, that 'the BBC is out to give the men [*sic*] the kind of entertainment that they want—not what others think is good for them to hear.'<sup>3</sup> The style became more relaxed, though some thought it smacked of an officer addressing his men informally. There was more comedy and popular music, including greater use of records, resulting in more American popular music. Gradually the Forces Programme took on many of the characteristics of the pre-war commercial stations, including the request programme format. *Forces Favourites* and particularly *Sincerely Yours*, *Vera Lynn* proved to be hugely popular. Lynn, already a successful stage performer and recording star, was both artistic and artless. As the iconic 'forces sweetheart,' her repertoire combined a generalised sentimentality ('Safe in My Heart,' 'I'll Walk Beside You' and 'Love's Old Sweet Song') with songs of the moment ('When They Sound the Last All Clear,' 'That Lovely Weekend' and 'We'll Meet Again') and of place ('The London I Love', 'A Nightingale Sang in Berkley Square') and songs of optimism ('It's A Lovely Day Tomorrow'). Her songs were carefully chosen to convey a message of reassurance to counter the siren-voiced 'Lili Marlene' and her allegations of soldierly infidelity, made on German broadcasts into Britain.<sup>4</sup> While many of her songs harked back to an idealised pre-war past, she also evoked a sense of community and held out hope for a better future. Undoubtedly feminine, but not glamorously feminine, she brought sincerity and sentiment, especially filling the emotional space of separation.<sup>5</sup> Some 20 per cent of the British population tuned in to her programme and yet there were only twelve episodes of *Sincerely Yours*. There were fears that her songs were undermining troop morale at a time when the Nazis were in the ascendancy, especially in North Africa.<sup>6</sup> Basil Nicholls, Controller (Programmes) was in no doubt. The BBC should excise 'crooning, drivelling words, and slush,' as

well as innuendo, in favour of ‘marches and cheerful music of every kind.’<sup>7</sup> Lynn was not the only victim. Male crooners were deemed to lack the necessary ‘virility’ and, continuing a longer-standing concern with ‘Americanization,’ dance music was closely scrutinised. In summer 1942, the BBC decided to ‘encourage a more virile and robust output of dance music.’<sup>8</sup> Victor Silvester was held up as a paragon of virtue. Geraldo was deemed too American and was replaced by the more British Jack Payne. Harry Roy’s 1944 tour of the Middle East demonstrated that dance music was very much in demand by the troops. The BBC responded by introducing *Variety Cavalcade*, alongside the longer-running *Variety Bandbox*, featuring Ted Heath and Joe Loss and singers, including Helen Clare, an ENSA performer, best known for songs such as the mawkish but defiant ‘Coming In On A Wing and A Prayer’ and the oft-sung ‘I’ll Walk Beside You.’

### ***Music While You Work***

Maintaining civilian morale and improving productivity were central to the war effort and politicians, notably Ernest Bevin, and broadcasters alike looked to devise suitable programmes. *Workers’ Playtime*, first broadcast in 1941 ‘from a factory canteen, somewhere in Britain,’ was a one-hour variety programme, offering light relief at work. Better known for its comedians, it also featured singers such as Anne Shelton, Betty Driver, Eve Boswell and Julie Andrews. More innovative was *Music While You Work*, which ran from summer 1940, as part of a wider campaign to improve productivity. Initially two thirty-minute programmes were broadcast daily, at 10.30 a.m. and 3 p.m. with a third added at 10.30 p.m. for night-shift workers. The guide-lines were clear. The emphasis was to be on rhythm and repetition, even monotony, rather than subtlety or artistic merit. A jig or a quick-step was deemed the most suitable in terms of rhythm. Volume was a key consideration and singing, to be included sparingly should be well-known and of a sing-along nature without breaking up the overall tempo of the show.<sup>9</sup> Denis Wright, the show’s co-producer was unambiguous. There was no place for slow foxtrots, tangos, or waltzes. There would be no ‘dreamy numbers of any sort’ and ‘no vocals of the sob-stuff order.’ Instead there was to be ‘PLENTY OF SNAP

and PUNCH; RHYTHM of a straightforward kind; CLEAN CLEAR-CUT MELODY [and] BRIGHTNESS of all sorts.<sup>10</sup> But some songs could be too up-beat. The Ken Mackintosh band, from Halifax, made only one appearance. Their rendition of 'Deep in The Heart of Texas' was deemed unacceptable when an enthusiastic drummer's 'rim shots' sounded like bullets being fired when played through loud-speakers. In all some 500 bands appeared, the majority performing more than once. There was considerable variety – dance bands, brass bands, military bands, light orchestras, and instrumental ensembles. Big name band leaders, such as Victor Silvester and Joe Loss appeared several times, but the most featured ensemble was Trois and His Banjoliers, whose career had started in the mid-1920s and continued until his death in 1957.<sup>11</sup>

*Music While You Work* was deemed to be most appropriate for factories characterised by low-skill and repetitive manual labour, especially munitions factories. It was essentially a top-down imposition of music, at best a paternalistic intervention, with no consultation with workers or their representatives. Nonetheless, the programme was popular, with workers, which spoke more of the tedium of much factory work than anything else. It remained a mainstay of BBC radio throughout the war and remained on air until September 1967.

### *Dancing (and singing) the war away*

After an initial downturn in September 1939, within weeks dance halls enjoyed an unprecedented boom in popularity, notwithstanding the disruptions brought about by the blitz, the black-out and the restrictions on public transport.<sup>12</sup> Across the country, local authorities granted more licences for dancing and new venues were found to meet the growing demand. Seaside towns, Blackpool, in particular, were transformed into all-year resorts.

The wartime boost to purchasing power, especially for young, unmarried women, enabled thousands of them to indulge in one of the most popular of working-class leisure activities and at a time when the dance hall was one of the few opportunities for pleasure.<sup>13</sup> There was also a psychological dimension to the attraction of dancing. The allure of peacetime dancing was enhanced during the war. There was something

defiant about going out dancing when there was a real risk of injury or death during air-raids. There was a morale-boosting sense of collective solidarity in the face of hardship and danger. And with an awareness of the risk of an early death, there was a 'live for the moment' mentality, which further enhanced its popularity. The dance boom was well under way but received a further boost from the arrival of American troops and their music from 1942 onwards. The American Forces Network and later the Allied Expeditionary Forces Programme, though intended solely for a military audience, brought new sounds to the ears of the civilian population. The AEF programme reflected the makeup of the allied forces. Around 50 per cent was American but 40 per cent British. The American Band of Supreme Allied Command, better known as the Glen Miller band, led the way. Although not considered by many to be a great bandleader, he appeared frequently on a range of BBC programmes and was responsible for numerous popular instrumental and vocal numbers: 'In the Mood,' 'Chattanooga Choo Choo,' 'American Patrol,' 'Pennsylvania Six Five Thousand' and 'String of Pearls' among others. However, the music and dances of the 1930s remained popular. As well as the old favourites, the waltz, the foxtrot and the quickstep, there was also a boom in Old Time dances, such as Quadrilles and the Lancers.

The disruptions caused by blackout requirements and increased shift work led to more afternoon dances at the local palais, which may have encouraged greater social mixing. More women were to be found as mobilization increased and younger girls, some barely in their teens, appeared in the dance hall. The movement of men and women because of the war effort impacted on social diversity. Army camps expanded, bringing together men from different parts of the country. Young women in the land army or ATS, found themselves far from home and there a growing number of people from across the world. Most attention has focussed on African American GIs, but they were but the most high-profile element in a highly varied mix of nationalities. Dancing was seen to be important, for them, and dances, either with local, semi-professional musicians or gramophone records, were organised in various venues. The outcome was not some happy melting pot. There were real tensions. There was suspicion of and hostility towards

outsiders 'stealing our women,' there were tensions between the different armed forces, and there were internal tensions, most notably along racial lines in the American army, but also along class lines particularly in the RAF. Nonetheless, there was a greater awareness of differences in customs and culture and an acceleration of the rate of cultural diffusion. The speed with which people came to know of the Andrews Sisters or Glen Miller owed much to the peculiar circumstances of the war.

Looking more specifically at dances, two trends stand out: simplification and diversification. The former was largely due to an influx of essentially social, rather than serious, dancers, for whom mastery of steps was a secondary consideration. The drop in standards, as seen by dancing teachers, was exacerbated by the sheer numbers on the dance floor and the subsequent development of 'crush' dancing, which limited the scope for properly executed steps. In addition, novelty nights and novelty dance competitions became more common. 'The Hokey Cokey,' known in pre-war years, became a hit as a music-hall song and dance routine from 1942 onwards. The actions were easy to learn, and any number could join in, likewise, 'Knees Up Mother Brown.' Similarly, the conga, popularised by American troops, required little in the way of dancing skill. Its simple format – 1, 2, 3 kick – was easy to master and, again, the communal nature of the dance allowed for mass participation. Not for nothing was the catch phrase of the day: 'I came, I saw, I conga'd.' Other popular dances encouraged mass participation while, at the same time, offering the possibility of greater artistry. The Big Apple was essentially a circle dance for couples, performing, to the cry of a caller, steps such as 'Spank the Baby,' 'Pose and a Peck' and 'Truckin'.' The most spectacular but controversial dance was 'The Jitterbug,' which was derived from the 1930s 'Lindy Hop.' It was quickly condemned as yet another primitive dance, in which the exuberance of the participants demonstrated a lack of control that was, at best immodest, at worst, immoral. To make matters worse, for older critics at least, it had its own dress code and language. This, of course, added to its attraction to the young. Some dance halls banned the jitterbug, some dance teachers sought to tame it but, as with the Charleston a generation before, the response from below was crucial. The jitterbug was not universally

popular. Indeed, on the crowded war-time dance floors there was limited space for more flamboyant steps and the real risk of retaliation at anti-social dancing. Nonetheless, the jitterbug survived but was transformed into the jive, which proved to be one of the lasting legacies of these years.

Song, like dance, was a morale booster. Shortly after the outbreak of hostilities, Radio Luxembourg (September 1939) went off air, shortly followed by Radio Normandie (January 1940). This strengthened the position of the BBC but added to its responsibility to entertain and reassure. Part of the response, an emphasis on continuity, was well exemplified by the continued broadcasting of *The Kentucky Minstrels*, a show that dated from the early 1930s.<sup>14</sup> It fitted well with BBC notions of respectability and family-oriented entertainment. Its sentimentalised and idyllic 'other' world, where songs were 'crooned by the plantation darkies,' was both nostalgic, harking back to a day when things were (allegedly) simpler, certainly less urban, and happier, and reassuring, offering 'proper' songs that contrasted with the American monstrosities of the present. The inclusion of hymns (notably 'Abide With Me') and quasi-religious and uplifting songs (for example Sullivan's 'Lost Chord') strengthened these appeals. It was a format which fitted well in a new world in which a different barbaric enemy threatened. The recording stars of the 1930s also appeared in several BBC variety programmes, and the concerts organised under the auspices of ENSA. The songs they sang during the war were predictably varied, combining themes of love and marriage that had become so dominant in the 1920s and 1930s with more specific recognition of the present day and its problems.<sup>15</sup> Heroism, the determination to fight on, was captured in 'Coming in on a Wing and a Prayer' and the American, 'Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition,' written in response to the attack on Pearl Harbour. Others made fun of the conflict. The transition from civilian to army life was mocked in Irving Berlin's 'This Is the Army Mr Jones' and 'Kiss Me Goodnight Sergeant Major,' with its plea: 'Sergeant Major be a mother to me.' Limited army fare provides the inspiration for 'The Quartermaster's Stores,' while George Formby invited people to 'Imagine Me on the Maginot Line,' and assured them that 'I Did What I Could With My Gas



Mask.' The latter enabled him to exploit his successful formula of silliness and suggestiveness.

The lady living next door, Mrs. Hicks  
 She heard the sirens blow one morn at ten to six.  
 She dashed outside in nothing but her nicks,  
 But she knew what to do with her gasmask.

Others, 'Roll Out the Barrel' or 'Bless 'Em All' were cheerful sing-alongs that owed much to music hall tradition.\* In different vein were the rousing numbers of the Andrews Sisters, who appeared on the Forces Programme and the BBC Home Service, notably with 'Boogie-Woogie Bugle Boy' and 'Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree.' Despite worries about the impact on army morale, sentimental songs were popular, from the more upbeat, 'You Are My Sunshine' to the more wistful, 'I'll Be Seeing You' and 'White Cliffs of Dover.' The poignancy of separation was captured by Vera Lynn. 'Even though we're parted,' she sang in 'Lili Marlene,' 'Your lips are close to mine... Your sweet face seems to haunt my dreams.' And, as ever, there were nonsense songs. 'Mairzy doats and dozy doats' crossed the Atlantic and lightened the mood and survived as a party puzzle before transmuting into a children's song.

Images of patriotic factory workers, singing along to *Music While You Work*, plucky Londoners singing in the underground as they escaped German bombs, and of Vera Lynn singing to the troops in Burma have become part of a foundation myth of contemporary Britain, which obscures more than it reveals of wartime conditions. However, when due allowance is made for the less glorious side of wartime – the less than whole-hearted commitment to factory production, even in industries contributing directly to the war effort and the black market, to take but two obvious examples – morale on both the war and domestic fronts held up well, even during the difficult months between Dunkirk and El Alamein. The reasons were many but singing and dancing were among them. The BBC prided itself on 'a good war,' but, according to *Mass Observation*, music halls, pubs and clubs had a better one.

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\* 'Bless 'Em All' was also widely parodied as 'F\*\*\* 'Em All.'

### *The BBC and popular music after the war*

The BBC was never a monolithic institution but there were many influential figures, not least the new director-general, Sir William Haley, who believed in the Reithian creed of improvement, within a cultural pyramid that had the (newly formed) Light Programme as its broad base and the Third Programme as its narrow peak, and who saw 'Americanization' as a threat to be resisted.<sup>16</sup> The BBC had built up a mass audience during the war but without knowing much about it beyond a generalised image of a largely uneducated, 'low brow' mass, comprising ex-soldiers, returning to work, and their wives, returning to home.<sup>17</sup> Many radio producers remained uninterested in popularity, even viewing it as a sign of failure, but there was no returning to pre-war practices, rather a stumbling, often reactive, response towards a new future. There was a gradual acceptance that radio was often simply background to other activities and many people simply wanted to be entertained.<sup>18</sup> Of necessity, and with varying degrees of enthusiasm, certain features of mass culture had to be adopted. In its annual report for 1951/2 it was conceded that 'the Light programme is designed for those who enjoy the most popular kind of entertainment,' still clung to the notion that it could 'interest its listeners in more serious matters.'<sup>19</sup> In the first decade after the war, the BBC saw itself primarily as a family-centred, domestic leisure activity, which brought the best of music hall or the working man's club but without the vulgarity and innuendo. The long-running *Kentucky Minstrels* (again) fitted the bill to perfection.<sup>20</sup>

In a period when much attention was focussed on seeking to restore the patriarchal nuclear family after the disruptions caused by the upheavals of war, the BBC played its part particularly in programmes such as *Housewives' Choice*. It ran from March 1946, had a large audience (over eight million at its peak in the 1960s) and generated over 3000 requests a week, giving it a quasi-democratic flavour. The actual selection was made by the overwhelmingly male compères, who fronted the programme. The first tune played, and a recurring favourite, was 'Greensleeves,' but the selections offer a partial reflection of changing tastes. The Andrews Sisters were oft-requested in the late 1940s but by the mid-1950s local favourites, such as

Ruby Murray or Jimmy Young, vied with American stars, such as Perry Como.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, *Family Favourites* was unremittingly family-centred, to such a degree that, initially at least, there no rude or offensive songs (and certainly not 'noisy jazz') and no mention of fiancées, let alone of girlfriends. Certain songs were played on a regular basis. Pat Boone's 'I'll Be Home' and Ella Fitzgerald's 'Every Time We Say Goodbye' had an obvious appeal; as did Anne Shelton's somewhat more suggestive, 'Lay Down Your Arms (And Surrender to Mine).'

The records selected for play on air cannot be seen as an accurate measure of popular taste, but they do indicate some broad trends. There was an element of wartime nostalgia (Vera Lynn, Flanagan and Allen and the Andrews Sisters), a hint of pub-based entertainment (Russ Conway) but also of the new (Elvis Presley). There was also a strong suggestion of the 'entertain and educate' mentality. Kathleen Ferrier, singing 'What Is Life to Me Without Thee?' from Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, gave yearning a classical form. Although recorded in 1929, the Manchester Children's choir's version of Purcell's 'Nymphs and Shepherds' remained a firm favourite. Other, more accessible 'high-brow' pieces included the finale of Bruck's violin concerto, the intermezzo from Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* and the duet, 'Au fond du temple saint,' from Bizet's *Pearl Fishers*.

Looking across the range of programmes on air, music for ballroom dancing and from big bands predominated. Although current hit songs featured on air, they were often packaged up in big band arrangements played by various regional orchestras.<sup>22</sup> Henry Hall, an established favourite, had a regular spot until the late 1950s. *Tip Top Tunes* featured Geraldo, while Victor Silvester provided strict tempo tunes in *Memories for You*. The revival of interest in old-time dancing found a response in *Those Were the Days* and *Time For Old Time*. One of the most popular shows, which ran for many years on radio before transferring to television, was *The Billy Cotton Band Show*. The programme encapsulated the BBC's determination to repackage (some) American music and make it acceptable for a British audience, much as earlier American dances had been civilized. Cotton was a successful band leader in the inter-war years, but he was strongly influenced by music

hall. His repertoire ranged from big band favourites (covering Paul Whiteman's 'It Happened in Monterey' and 'Play to Me Gypsy'), through sentimental numbers ('My Heart Belongs to Daddy' and 'Did You Ever See a Dream Walking') to music-hall nonsense ('With Her Head Tucked Underneath Her Arm') and American comic songs ('Smile, Darn Ya, Smile' and 'Eleven More Months and Ten More Days'). Cotton's cheery cockney persona (complete with trademark opening call: 'Wakey, Wakey') was of a piece with earlier music hall. His band played a range of American tunes but in a style that would have been recognised by Jack Payne, and this was enhanced by the singing of Alan Breeze, Kathie Kay, and Alma Cogan. In many respects the programme highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of the BBC's approach. Its long-standing opposition to 'crooners' and the unwillingness to name band singers made it difficult to promote band music at a time when personalities were coming more to the fore. The determination to resist creeping 'Americanization' reinforced this problem. There was a growing disconnect between this type of show and the musical tastes of younger generations born in the 1940s. And yet, as the viewing figures bear witness, there remained a considerable audience for this type of music throughout the 1950s and even into the early 1960s.

### ***Radio Luxembourg***

The emergence of commercial radio stations located on the continent and broadcasting English-language programmes was a problem for the BBC in the 1930s. Their content and style were effectively a critique of BBC programming. Radio Normandie, which broadcast to the whole of the south coast, adopted American-style programmes (hit records and soap operas) and American-style presentation; as did Radio Luxembourg adopted a similar approach but had a greater geographical reach. The competition was greatest on Sundays. Advertising Institute survey figures suggest that Luxembourg attracted a large audience, especially among lower wage earners and their families.<sup>23</sup>

Radio Luxembourg had been a significant rival to the BBC before 1939 and the rivalry resumed in 1946. In 1951 its English programmes switched to medium wave (208 metres) from where as, 'the station of the stars', it broadcast from 6 pm each

day. Although its claim of a four million audience in Britain was probably an over-estimate (and the BBC counterclaim of one million an underestimate), anecdotal evidence suggests it was eating into the core Light Programme audience, women in particular. As early as 1949 it had broadcast a Sunday evening *Top Twenty Show*, hosted by Pete Murray, which was based on record sales rather than sheet music sales.<sup>24</sup> However, he also hosted a more conventional hour-long Saturday-night dance music programme, featuring the Russ Morgan Orchestra. There were also programmes devoted to the ballet, Irish and Scottish requests as well as several regular doses of religion.

The substantial family audience that Luxembourg built up in the first decade after the war was lost in the mid-1950s as television, and particularly commercial television, moved into variety. A rethink was required, which fortuitously coincided with the transformation of American popular music. In 1956 it introduced a half-hour slot of taped rock 'n' roll music, compèred by Alan Freed. Later Benny Lee fronted *Record Hop*, which featured the latest records from Columbia and Parlophone. From 1960 Luxembourg became more heavily focussed on the teen market. Within a few years it had switched almost entirely to programmes playing pop records. Unlike the BBC, which was constrained by the needle-time arrangement with the Musicians' Union and the record companies' licensing agency, Phonographic Performance Limited, Luxembourg had no limits on record time. Even in the mid-1950s, and more so afterwards, the BBC was seen not so much as 'Auntie' but as 'Grandma.' Yet, despite its undoubted appeal to a youth market, Luxembourg found itself facing stiff competition from other pirate radio stations, notably Radio Caroline, which played chart hits unconstrained by the company links found on Luxembourg. From a consumer point of view, the transformation of Luxembourg and the appearance of Caroline offered access to a range of music that was less frequently played on terrestrial radio and television.

### ***Popular music and television***

Television was a major challenge to variety theatre and radio. In the first decade after the war the BBC had shown relatively little interest in developing television, though it broadcast *Come*

*Dancing* from 1949 onwards, turning it into a competition in 1953. Parliament's decision to allow the licensing of commercial television created a very different environment. Both channels looked to variety. ITV with its *Sunday Night at the London Palladium* and BBC with its Saturday night *Billy Cotton Band Show* and *The Black and White Minstrel Show*. These were immensely popular shows that attracted audiences of 20 million or more. Both were a manifestation of a music-hall tradition that can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century, but by the third quarter of the twentieth century music hall was no longer subversive. Like minstrelsy, it had been domesticated and was being served up to a middle-class and middle-aged audience. On both channels televised variety seemed to be modernizing. Cliff Richard topped the bill on *Sunday Night at the London Palladium* and Tom Jones appeared on *The Billy Cotton Band Show* but, particularly in the case of the latter, there was a touch of desperation as they looked to rock 'n' roll to give new life to a tired and dated format. *The Billy Cotton Band Show* finished in the mid-60s, *Sunday Night at the London Palladium* at the end of that decade. Despite complaints at the time, it was almost a further decade on before *The Black and White Minstrel Show* was taken off screen.

There was an opening for programmes specifically aimed at the buoyant teen market. Reflecting concerns with the preservation of live music, the earliest programme, BBC's *Hit Parade* was a series of covers by its in-house musicians. The more innovative *Six Five Special* still had a backing band comprising session musicians. On ITV's *Oh Boy!* original performers appeared live, but reflecting their growing importance, records were at the centre in *Juke Box Jury* and *Cool for Cats*. Even when bands or soloists appeared in their own right in *Ready Steady Go* and *Top of the Pops*, they mimed to their records.

### ***Dancing and dance halls in the 1950s***

The wartime boom in dancing continued for more than a decade after the end of the war. The harshness of 'austerity Britain' has been well rehearsed, but these years also saw greater security of employment and a modest rise in real wages. The nature of the recovery meant that this increased purchasing power was spent on traditional leisure activities. These were boom years

for the cinema, football matches and the dance hall. Demand exceeded supply as the crowded dance floor bore witness, but this was not a deterrent. Indeed, as the country left the harshest years of austerity behind, the early signs of mass affluence provided a further fillip to dancing and the dance industry. The number of licensed venues increased in almost every city and large town, the number of professional and semi-professional musicians grew, and the numbers participating on the dance floor almost certainly reached an all-time high. The standard dances remained popular but there was a revival of old-time dancing, especially in the north of England. Square dancing was introduced from America in the early 1950s and the jive proved itself resilient in the face of attempts to ban it. The dance hall retained its importance in terms of social interaction, while the emergence of a jive culture, complete with a dress code and jargon of its own, enhanced opportunities for self-expression and emergent independence from adults. Old and new co-existed with relatively little friction. In shared venues, half the evening could be devoted to standard dancing, half to jive; or the dance floor itself could be (informally) divided to cope for quick steppers and jivers alike. Even when different halls catered for different dancers there was little sign that the bubble was about to burst. Yet, in a short period of time things changed dramatically – the local palais had indeed been turned into a bowling alley, or worse. Ballroom dancing, even in its very modest form of ‘crush dancing,’ was increasingly seen as old-fashioned. There were new, more exciting venues – night clubs and discotheques. There were more exciting (and more solo) dances to do – ‘the twist, the stomp, the mashed potato too. Any old dance that you want to do, but let’s dance,’ as Chris Montez sang. And there was a wider range of venues in which to socialise. The local hop, especially in the village hall or school assembly room, was simply square. Milk bars and coffee bars, with their juke boxes full of new music, much from America, were cool. Even hanging out at home, listening to the latest record on the new portable, Dansette, record player was preferable. The dance floor was now the preserve of the serious ballroom or sequence dancers.

### *The record industry*

The post-war record industry was dominated by four major companies. EMI, Decca, formed in the 1930s, Philips and Pye. Recorded music was to be heard in the streets and in the dance halls, especially during the war years when there were fewer musicians available. It was also to be heard on the juke boxes found in 1950s arcades and coffee bars and, increasingly, on the radio, especially the commercial stations.<sup>25</sup> The 1956 Copyright Act was an important relaxation of the law which led to a rapid growth in the use of records in a variety of public places.<sup>26</sup> The post-war years saw important technological changes in the record industry. The old 78 rpm shellac records were replaced by 33 or 45 rpm vinyl over the course of the 1950s. The quality of recordings was transformed by the development of stereophonic systems from the middle of that decade. The price of records fell at a time when portable record players came on to the market.<sup>27</sup> Youth purchasing power was also increasing and record sales soared. Total production quadrupled between the mid-1950s and the late 1970s. The rate of change was greatest in the years 1955-62.<sup>28</sup>

Table 1: UK Record Production (million units by type)

	78s	45s	33s
1955	46.3	4.6	9
1962	1.9	55.2	20.4

Source: S Frith et. al. *The History of Live Music in Britain: 1950-1967*, Routledge, London, 2013, p.149

Although majority British owned, the major companies were part of large, multinational entities and this was an important element in the American dominance of popular music in the late 1940s and early 1950s. American records probably accounted for two-thirds of the 1950s hits in Britain.<sup>29</sup> The list of successful American singers is impressive – Doris Day, Jo Stafford and Teresa Brewer as well as Perry Como, Frankie Laine, Nat ‘King’



Cole and Guy Mitchell, not to mention Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra. But there were important British figures. Vera Lynn, 'the Forces sweetheart,' remained popular as did Alma Cogan and Anne Shelton. Among male singers Jimmy Young and particularly David Whitfield were the most successful.

The war and its aftermath largely explain the popularity of 'The Homing Waltz' and 'Auf Wiedersehen Sweet Heart' (both by Vera Lynn) and Anne Shelton's 'Lay Down Your Arms,' and also 'The Happy Wanderer,' the international hit by wartime orphans, the Obernkirchen Children's Choir. The pre-war preoccupation with love and marriage continued – literally so in the title of one of Alma Cogan's hits – with Mario Lanza ('Because You're Mine'), Guy Mitchell ('Truly, Truly Fair') and Al Martino ('Here in My Heart' and 'Spanish Eyes') at the forefront. But there was also a strong element of frivolity in several novelty songs, including 'Nellie the Elephant' (Mandy Miller), 'The Runaway Train' (Michael Holliday) and 'Never Do a Tango with an Eskimo.' (Alma Cogan).<sup>30</sup> There were, however, signs of change. American singers, such as Slim Whitman, Jim Reeves and Frankie Laine hinted at the greater changes that would come from the 'discovery' (and commercialization) of country and western, blues and gospel music. Also hinting at a new world of celebrity and star-struck fans, 'The Prince of Wails,' 'The Nabob of Sob,' the unlikeliest of stars, Johnny Ray, made his name with the aptly titled 'Cry' in 1952.

### *Some concluding observations*

Despite the disruptions and change caused by war, popular music continued along familiar lines. Dance halls enjoyed a boom as more people than ever before took to the dance-floor, whenever they could. The bands of 1930s and their singers remained popular and gave a reassuring sense of continuity and community at a time of great uncertainty. ENSA concerts and new radio programmes brought familiar names and familiar sounds to both war and home fronts. Although easily mythologised in retrospect, popular music contributed to the maintenance of morale and productivity and helped to create a sense of a common purpose and a shared culture. There were changes. The position of the BBC was strengthened and its

approach to popular music modified, even though its response was often cautious and out of touch with popular opinion. Pre-existing trends, notably the growing influence of American music, were accelerated.

In broad terms, in the post-war years, there was a determination not to return to the failures of the early 1930s, but in terms of popular music there was no fundamental break with the past. There was something very familiar about the 1950s, whether it was the big bands on the BBC, the big stars in variety or just the local palais or pub. Richard Hoggart noted how many of the older songs lived on (and had meaning) decades after they had first appeared. His account of club singing, where working-class people enjoyed the music they wanted, makes this clear.<sup>31</sup> As in *Worktown*, 'an evening's playing will comprise a majority of songs from the last twenty years ... but will include a substantial sprinkling of earlier tunes.'<sup>32</sup> The latter included 'the seriously emotional,' such as 'Silver Threads Among the Gold,' 'Lily of Laguna' and 'My Old Dutch' and 'the amused and mocking,' such as 'Hold Your Hand Out You Naughty Boy,' 'Any Old Iron' and 'Yes, We Have No Bananas.' Reluctantly, Hoggart concedes that more recent songs have become an accepted part of an evening's entertainment: 'Shepherd of the Hills' and 'Auf Wiedersehen' having been joined most recently by 'Oh, My Papa' and 'How Much Is That Doggy in the Window.' Old and new co-existed but, perhaps more importantly, there was a process of selection whereby songs 'gain complete entry into the canon,' and these were songs, which 'touch old chords ... [and] values which people still like to cherish.'<sup>33</sup> However, in the mid-1950s, there were signs of a new mass culture – skiffle and rock 'n' roll – that so worried Hoggart and which will be the subject of the next chapter.

**Endnotes**

- 1 Welfare reform forward looking as it was, was predicated on a traditional model of family.
- 2 Sentimental songs from the Great War, such as 'Keep the Home Fire's Burning' were also popular.
- 3 P Rayner, 'When Radio Was King: The BBC Light Programme, Listenership and Taste, 1945-1955,' unpublished PhD, Cardiff University, 2001, quoted at p.129
- 4 S Barnard, *On the Radio: Music radio in Britain*, Milton Keynes University Press, 1989, p.22
- 5 C. Baade, 'Sincerely Yours Vera Lynn,' *Atlantis: A Women's Studies Journal*, 30(2), 2006, pp.36-49. Lynn portrayed the same image in a number of films, 'We'll Meet Again,' 'Rhythm Serenade,' and 'One Exciting Night.' K Guthrie, 'Vera Lynn on Screen,' *Twentieth Century Music*, 14(20), 2017, pp.245-70
- 6 Rayner, 'When Radio was King,' p.132. It was 18 months before she had another solo programme.
- 7 Rayner, 'When Radio was King,' p.133. The singing of female crooners generally was condemned by MPs and BBC moguls as the 'caterwauling of an inebriated cockatoo.' More appropriate was the lower, strong voice of Anne Shelton.
- 8 BBC internal memo cited in C Baade, 'The dancing front': dance music, dancing, and the BBC in World War II,' *Popular Music*, 25(30), 2006, pp.347-68 at p.357
- 9 M Korczynski & K Jones, 'Instrumental music? The social origins of broadcast music in British factories,' *Popular Music*, 25(2), 2006, pp.145-64 at p.149
- 10 Cited in Korczynski & Jones, 'Instrumental music?' p.149
- 11 Pasquale Troise was born in Naples in 1895 but came to London in the 1920s and joined the London Radio Dance Band. He then set up the Selecta Plectrum Mandoline Orchestra, a name he changed in the early 1930s. He was a successful stage performer and recording artist before the war and an obvious choice for 'Music While You Work.' I have been unable to trace a wartime performance. The following is from 1950. <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=troise+and+his+mandoliers&&view=detail&mid=FD-8577BAC0F24767A43DFD8577BAC0F24767A43D&&FORM=VRD-GAR&ru=%2Fvideos%2Fsearch%3Fq%3Dtroise%2Band%2Bhis%2Bmandoliers%26FORM%3DHDRSC3>
- 12 This section draws heavily on Nott, *Going to the Palais*, Oxford University Press, 2015, chapter 2
- 13 Cinema-going became less popular, according to *Mass Observation*, but the pub retained its attraction, albeit largely for a male clientele.
- 14 M Pickering, *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain*, Abingdon, Ashgate, pp.186-212
- 15 There was also an element of gatekeeping on the BBC to ensure that inappropriate songs were denied airtime. 'Santa Claus Is bringing You Home For Christmas' was one such victim.
- 16 The purpose of the Light Programme was to interest listeners in the world at large 'without failing to entertain them.' BBC Yearbook for 1947 cited in Rayner, 'When Radio was King,' p.37

- 17 Under Reith the BBC had shown little interest in audience research. The Listener Research Unit was only set up in 1936. This lack of concern was part of a mindset which saw the BBC providing what its audience needed rather than responding to what its audience wanted.
- 18 The concern with 'tap listening' dated back to the 1930s and was still going strong in some parts of the BBC in the 1950s.
- 19 Rayner, 'When Radio was King,' p.193
- 20 'Have A Go' hosted by Halifax-born Wilfred Pickles is the best example of capturing the atmosphere of a northern club.
- 21 Somewhat surprisingly, 'The Eton Boat Song' was also requested but whether it was truly popular is a moot point. Virtual none of the programmes have survived. <https://andywalmsley.blogspot.com/2015/08/on-light-part-4-when-housewives-had.html>
- 22 S Barnard, *On the Radio*, p.39
- 23 There was also Radio Paris, Radio Toulouse and Radio Hilversum. For details of the Advertising Institute's surveys see A Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting* volume 2, Oxford University Press, 1995, p.253 and p.337
- 24 The BBC viewed sheet music as music to play and, therefore, superior to records which were merely music to listen to.
- 25 There were c.15,000 juke boxes in Britain in 1959. A Horn, *Juke box Britain: Americanisation and youth culture 1945-60*, Manchester University Press, 2009, p.62 and chapter 3 for the concerns surrounding them.
- 26 See S Frith, et., al., *The History of Live Music in Britain, volume 1: 1950-1967*, Routledge, London, 2013, chapter 6.
- 27 K D Tennent, 'A distribution revolution: Changes in music distribution in the U.K. 1950-76,' *Business History*, 55(3), 2013, pp.327-47, at pp. 333-4. As Tennent makes clear there were a variety of factors involved, including the increased competition that followed from the removal of retail price maintenance.
- 28 T Gourvish & K Tennent, 'Peterson and Berger revisited: Changing market dominance in the British popular music industry, c.1950-80,' *Business History*, 52(2), 2010, pp.187-206 at p.191. In 1955 the total production stood at 60 million units compared with 250 million in 1979. In the early 1960s 45s accounted for c.70 per cent of production, by the early 1970s 33s accounted for c.60 per cent.
- 29 Gourvish & Tennent, 'Peterson and Berger, appendix 2, p.206
- 30 The list can easily be extended. Both Lita Rosa and Patti Page asked, 'How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?' Alma Cogan wondered 'Where Will the Dimple Be?' and Max Bygraves, when not singing about pink and blue toothbrushes, could set a twee love song in 'Gilly, Gilly, Ossenfeffer, Katzeneller, Bogen, By the Sea!'
- 31 R Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, 1st published 1957, reprinted Penguin, London, 2009, chapter 5, 'The Full Rich Life, c. Illustrations from Popular art - Club-Singing,' pp.129-44. See also the importance of family sing-songs for the Davies family in the 1950s, discussed in chapter 19.
- 32 Hoggart, *Uses of Literacy*, p.136
- 33 Hoggart, *Uses of Literacy*, p.144