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The First World War in Popular Music since 1958

Peter Grant

Introduction

Since 1958 there have been over 1,400 newly composed songs 'about' the First World War in the different genres of popular music with numbers increasing significantly since the new millennium. By this I mean songs where the influence of the war is discernible, whether directly or through 'signifiers' or references, in the title or lyrics. Not surprisingly the largest number emanate from countries that were prominent in the fighting, with more coming from the victors than the losers, but there are also examples from as far afield as Armenia, Brazil, Colombia, Latvia, Malaysia, Mexico and Venezuela. The Great War was the first truly global conflict and its reflection in popular music has been equally universal.

National cultural perceptions of the First World War, which vary significantly, have a strong influence on popular musicians. The myth of the war as 'futile slaughter' persists in popular imagination in Britain and, though slightly modified, in the USA and Australia, greatly influenced by the war poets and the literature of the late 1920s. In Canada, whilst the Australian perception of 1914–18 as being the crucible of nationhood is shared, the war is not depicted as, to put it crudely, a British imperialist trick. Many Canadian songs are far more upbeat than those from either the United States or Australia. A good example is Bryan Adams's anthemic 'Remembrance Day' in which most of the soldiers, accurately, return from the conflict. In Germany it is the Second World War that is seen as senseless, the First 'as belonging utterly to the past', and in France, unlike in Britain, the idea of seeing the war through the eyes of war poets is a relatively new one.[1]

With notable exceptions, popular music often follows these dominant national cultural trends or myths which are, as Michel Tournier has observed, 'the history everyone already knows'.[2] Thus French songs about Verdun are as prolific as British ones about the Somme and the 1914 Christmas truce is a popular subject; best-selling examples include Jona Lewie's 'Stop the Cavalry' and the Farm's 'All Together Now'. Popular music thrives on references to popular imagination, although artists less interested in innovation simply endorse or reinforce myth by resorting to cliché whereas more creative ones approach myth in different ways: they add something new or different; they comment on myth or they directly refute it.[3] There are examples of all these approaches in popular music about the First World War.

French *Chanson*, a Political Narrative

Though English folk music has a long tradition of comment on war it was French *chanson* that first began to look specifically at the First World War.[4] Larry Portis comments that 'popular music in France differs significantly from that of Britain and the United States'. He notes that 'its most striking peculiarity [. . .] is the prominence of overt political criticism and social comment' so that significant events in French history have always been marked with popular songs.[5] *Chanson* is also more narratival in construction than English folk song and *chanson* singers 'effectively "talk" their tunes.'[6] Lyrics are foregrounded and *chansons* are well described as dramatic monologues accompanied by music. The three singers usually considered the pinnacle of the *chanson*, Georges Brassens, Léo Ferré and, though Belgian, Jacques Brel, all recorded landmark songs about the war.

Unlike many songs from the war itself humorous or ironic popular songs are rare. It is as if there is an unwritten rule that one has to adopt a solemn or reverential tone in depicting the First World War. The finest humorous song, Georges Brassens's 'La Guerre de 14–18', translated into English as 'The War of 14–18' by Michael Flanders and Donald Swann, dates from the early 1960s. Like his contemporaries Brel and Ferré, Brassens was highly political and socially aware in his songwriting and between 1952 and 1964 almost half of his songs were banned from the airwaves in France by state broadcaster RTF, which is one reason he turned to satire in songs like 'La Guerre'.[7] Nevertheless, in a spirit of national contradiction, Brassens was awarded the prize for poetry by the Académie française in 1967, virtually the equivalent of being designated France's National Poet. Brassens rattles through a comparison of wars from the Trojan to the Napoleonic, the war of 1870 and the (then) current Algerian conflict before deciding that his favourite war is that of 1914–18.[8] Utilising a simple acoustic guitar accompaniment, which at times mocks a trumpet fanfare, Brassens's jaunty style only helps to reinforce the irony.[9] Flanders's version rewrites the song from an Anglo-Saxon perspective with comments on both Suez and, in one of the first references in popular song on either side of the Atlantic, Vietnam.

Léo Ferré's songs draw on an eclectic range of musical styles including classical, jazz, Latin American and rock and he took an overtly anti-nationalist stance that critically examined French national identity.[10] A self-declared anarchist, this led him into conflict with both the authorities and the right-wing paramilitary Organisation de l'armée secrète (OAS) who threatened his life and bombed a venue where he was due to appear.[11] However, Ferré was not a propagandist; he 'did not advocate a specific political program, but rather other, more progressive values, such as dignity, liberty and social responsibility'.[12] The words of Ferré's 'Tu n'en reviendras pas' (from the album *Les Chansons d'Aragon*, 1961, Barclay) are by the poet (and committed Communist) Louis Aragon. It is a notable forerunner of Eric Bogle's 'And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda', being partly about a disabled veteran 'sans visage, sans yeux'. But it also addresses issues such as the inadequacy, or hypocrisy, of memorials with 'un mot d'or sur nos places'.

As the war was fought on French soil, songs set behind the lines are more prevalent in French than in British songs. Born into a Parisian Jewish family who had to go into hiding during the German occupation, Barbara, whose real name was Monique Andrée Serf, recorded a version of Léo Ferré's 'Tu n'en reviendras pas' (on the album

Barbara 1962, Polygram). She also included the poignant 'Le Verger en Lorraine', devoted to all those who had shed their blood in Lorraine (not just in the First World War). One of her first recordings, in 1958 (re-released on the expanded *La Chanteuse de minuit*, EMI, 2001), was Marcel Cuvelier's song 'Veuve de guerre' which has a claim to be the earliest post-Second World War popular song about the First. Told from the point of view of a young widow it is a universal comment on both the tragedy of war and how life needs to go on despite its horrors and loss of life. Ultimately the song is one of fatalism and irony and yet there remains a strength to the narrator's character. As such it is something of an antidote to another well-trodden myth of the war, that of the 'lost generation'.

Jacques Brel is one of the few *chansonniers* to have made a lasting impact outside the francophone world. His songs have been recorded by a wide variety of English-speaking artists including Frank Sinatra, Ray Charles, David Bowie, Tom Jones and Marc Almond. Brel's 'La Colombe' ('The Dove') is based on a traditional French children's song, 'Nous n'irons plus au bois', and a poem by Théodore de Banville.[13] Recorded in 1959 it was covered several times in the context of opposition to the Vietnam War, notably by American singers Judy Collins and Joan Baez. Brel echoes the words of Wilfred Owen and 'the old lie' relating this to some of the grandiose memorials to war.[14] In line with Brel's less revolutionary political stance in comparison to Brassens the song suggests no positive solution; it views war as a depressing inevitability. One of Brel's last songs was 'Jaures', released in 1977 on his final album *Les Marquises* (Barclay/Universal). Jean Jaures, the anti-militarist leader of the French Socialist Party, was assassinated on 31 July 1914. The song asks why he had to die and, by implication, whether he might have been able to mitigate some of the war's excesses. However, it is primarily about the fate of the oppressed working classes Jaures represented. Brel suggests that though not slaves they were certainly not free. If they survived their terrible working conditions they got sent to war to die on the battlefield. Accompanied by a simple accordion tune 'Jaures' is a powerful and emotional song but again has a fatalistic tone, especially as Brel was already gravely ill with the lung cancer that killed him less than a year after the album was released. In comparing Brel to Brassens Larry Portis's criticism is that the latter was a 'tolerant anarchist' whereas Brel was a 'crusading preacher' whose songs are, at times, 'almost wearingly serious'.[15] Despite this there is no doubting either Brel's outstanding use of language or his emotional commitment, which evoke a politicised version of Leonard Cohen.

Protest in Folk and Rock

As with many other subjects of protest and political comment, at least in the English-speaking world, Bob Dylan was one of the first to record an anti-war song that addressed the First World War. 'With God on Our Side' comes from his seminal 1964 album *The Times They Are A-Changin*' (Columbia). It set a tone that many others have followed and begins with a condemnation of the United States' genocide against Native Americans, before moving through verses about the American Civil War and the Spanish-American War to a verse about the First World War which has again been a model that many have copied, especially its ironic comments on religion.

In Britain songs appeared in the late 1960s featuring two of the country's most intellectually stimulating rock bands. The first was the Zombies' 'Butcher's Tale (Western Front 1914)' which, rather like the album on which it appeared, *Odessey and Oracle* (CBS, 1968), is slightly mistitled. As the lyrics make clear, with references to Gommecourt and Mametz Wood, it is set in 1916, not 1914, during the Battle of the Somme. The narrator, symbolically a butcher in civilian life, is a victim of shell shock and, though open-ended, its tone makes it clear that he did not get his wish of going home. Like the Dylan song, 'Butcher's Tale' takes issue with religion, specifically pro-war Anglican clergymen familiar from the poems of Siegfried Sassoon and the portrayal of the conflict in both stage and screen versions of *Oh! What a Lovely War*. The music is significantly different from the soft, psychedelic rock of the rest of the album. The most prominent instrument is an old-fashioned harmonium, the kind often used at battlefield services, and the song is sung not by their usual lead singer Colin Blunstone, but by the much harsher voiced Chris White, who also wrote the song.[16]

The following year the Kinks released their concept album *Arthur (or the Decline and Fall of the British Empire)* (Pye) which, as the title suggests, charts the story of post-war Britain. The songs describe the England that Arthur once knew, the promise of a new life in Australia for one of his sons, the emptiness of his superficially comfortable life, the resolve of the British people during the Second World War, the privations of austerity Britain and, in 'Yes Sir, No Sir' and 'Some Mother's Son', the death of his brother in the First World War. The former tells of the individuality that is left behind when the soldier volunteers, or is called up, but also displays a typical 1960s contempt for authority and hints at the supposed indifference of the higher command. The music has both a militaristic (drum rolls) and old-fashioned (a brass band backing) ambiance. 'Some Mother's Son' is a much more impressionistic, less direct or angry song than 'Butcher's Tale' or even 'Yes Sir, No Sir', concentrating on the theme of loss: the lost innocence of the soldiers; the sense of loss felt by their families and their memories of the deceased. As such it matches the overwhelming theme of nostalgia of both this album and that of the Kinks of this period more generally, being strongly evident on their previous release *The Kinks Are The Village Green Preservation Society*.

Following Dylan many other artists have written songs that are more specific in their engagement with the First World War. A notable example is the Scottish-Australian Eric Bogle whose songs 'And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda' and 'No Man's Land' (also known as 'The Green Fields of France' or 'Willie McBride') have been covered countless times.[17] 'And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda' is deservedly considered 'one of the greats, a song that has dug itself so far into the Australian consciousness in such a short time that it [. . .] feels like a memory'.[18] Conceived in 1971, it was meant as an anti-Vietnam War protest rather than a direct critique of the First World War and is the account of a young Australian volunteer in the ANZAC Corps, his experiences during the Gallipoli campaign where he loses his legs and his reflections many years later on what it means.[19] The reference to Banjo Paterson's original song (Australia's unofficial national anthem written in 1895) is a masterstroke. It acts as a refrain to the action, being played when the troops set sail, when they bury their dead after battle, when he returns from the war and at each ANZAC Day. The song concludes with a minor-key transposition of the original song and there is no doubting

the overall tone of bitter irony. Despite this, the song is not without humour, particularly in its description of the speaker's being 'knocked [. . .] arse over head' ('tit' in the Pogues' version) by 'a big Turkish shell', a sense of comedy that makes 'And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda', along with the two versions of Brassens's contribution, conspicuous among modern songs about the war, displaying similarities with the 'black humour' of the trenches (see George Simmers's chapter). At the time he wrote the song Bogle was probably right that the veterans were 'forgotten heroes from a forgotten war' but since the 1970s interest in the war and participation in its remembrance have grown significantly in both Australia and Britain. Of all versions of the song it is the Pogues' 1985 recording (from *Rum, Sodomy and the Lash*, MCA/Stiff) that best captures its spirit. Shane MacGowan's loutish approach perfectly reflects the song's bitter tone, with some of the vocals almost spat out. Their arrangement begins with a simple phrase on the banjo, building to include other instruments and, ultimately, a brass section, giving a more epic, universal feel than Bogle's simple folk arrangement.

In comparison 'No Man's Land' is a more straightforward song. It reflects on the fate of a nineteen-year-old soldier, Willie McBride, who fell during the Battle of the Somme, told from the perspective of a battlefield visitor who sits down by his grave to reflect.[20] Bogle has told audiences that it is the favourite war poem of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and that, although Blair knew the name of its author, he thought Bogle had died in the war. Bogle's Blair anecdote here serves as an example of how misinformation and myth can begin.[21] The chorus makes reference to two famous pieces of military music, 'The Last Post' and the Scottish lament for the dead of Flodden, 'The Flowers of the Forest'. It is one of many 'remembrance' songs, like 'Battleship Hill', but it is less complex than Harvey's and prone to cliché in places, as well as being unashamedly sentimental. These features make it less of an achievement than 'Waltzing Matilda', but they also serve to explain why it has been covered far more often; its clear statement that 'it was all done in vain' is a simpler idea to project and sits more comfortably with popular memory of the war as a futile conflict.

Lancashire folk singer Mike Harding has contributed two powerful songs about the war, recorded nearly thirty years apart. First, released as a single in 1977, came 'Christmas 1914', which looks at the famous truce between British and German troops near Ypres. Harding's songs are extremely detailed and he describes the exchange of presents, the football match and the soldiers' sharing food, drink and stories of their sweethearts. In 2005 Harding returned to the subject with 'The Accrington Pals' (on *Bombers' Moon*, Moonraker, which also contains a version of 'And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda'). Accrington is close to Harding's home town of Rochdale and provided perhaps the best-known of the 'Pals battalions' that formed part of Kitchener's New Army. Harding's song relates the innocence of the pre-war pals and the ordinariness of their lives but goes rather 'over the top' in his adherence to the myth of the war. In songs like 'Butcher's Tale' the historical errors are forgivable, being used for 'scene setting' and colour, but Harding ends up putting in too many clichés. In the sleeve notes and on his website Harding gives a wholly false explanation of how and why the Pals battalions were formed, saying that 'in 1916 the British Army, running out of cannon fodder for the trenches, introduced a policy of recruitment based on enticing men into the army from the same towns'.[22] The song concludes with Harding reading some of the names of the men who died and a brass band arrangement of the 9/8 retreat march 'The Battle of the

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Somme'. Written by Pipe Major William Laurie of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders in 1916, this has been recorded many times including by Fairport Convention, on *House Full* (1977), the German 'krautrock' band the Peter Rübsam Group (1972) and the Albion Band (on *Battle of the Field*, Island, 1976). Another line-up of the Albion Band memorably incorporated the tune in their musical accompaniment to the National Theatre's 'promenade' adaptation of Flora Thompson's *Lark Rise to Candleford* in 1978 which also included a listing of local war dead, suggesting this was the source for Harding's idea. The listing of names is a technique often utilised to achieve psychological connections with the unknown dead. It is one also adopted by John Adams in *On the Transmigration of Souls* (written to commemorate the 9/11 attacks) and in *The Time Is Now* by Everybody's Children (a 1970 anti-Vietnam War single). The psychological impact of this device, giving individual reality to otherwise nameless victims, can provide closure and 'a conflict-averse path to catharsis in an age of instant gratification and short attention spans'.[23] It is clear that the link between folk song and the war is extremely strong. As part of their centenary commemorations the BBC have commissioned fifty new songs from 'the cream of British folk songwriters'. The idea of widening the remit to cover other genres appears not to have occurred to them.[24]

Heavy Metal: The Unvarnished Truth?

Heavy metal began in the late 1960s in the English Midlands, notably Birmingham, from a fusion of blues and psychedelic rock with Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath as its pioneers.[25] Confounding what many critics have suggested, it has proved an extraordinarily durable and flexible musical form, popular throughout most of the world, including much of the Far East and Latin America.[26] In the context of metal music and the First World War two subgenres are especially prominent. Collectively termed 'extreme' metal, death and black metal emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s. They typically employ atonality, heavily distorted down-tuned guitars, tremolo picking, double-kick and blast beat drumming, and minor keys, and they often disrupt conventional ideas of musical development by rejecting the drive towards climax or resolution.[27]

In heavy metal the ensemble sound is privileged over any of its components and the voice is utilised more as an instrument than being distinct from the rest of the band, and this tendency is even more pronounced in extreme metal. Extreme metal lyrics also frequently emphasise the grotesque, a concept Kristeva explores as part of her interest in the 'abject', which disturbs identity, systems and order.[28] However, even though the specific meaning of extreme metal lyrics is often less important than their imagery they still play a significant role.[29] This is of particular relevance in songs about the First World War where there are so many recognisable symbolic images available to the lyricist. War is a significant theme in heavy metal and there are now distinctive strains of folk, Viking and battle metal based on the history, conflicts and mythology of northern Europe. In the mid-1980s together with bands such as Napalm Death and Carcass, Bolt Thrower 'combined punk and early death metal to develop an extreme sound that has been widely influential' and more than any other band built their career around songs relating to war in its varying forms, in both fantasy and history.[30] Laura Wiebe

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Taylor suggests that they offer a '[c]oncentrated line of socio-political commentary, taking on the issue of widespread violence and the horrors of war, not in celebration but as a way of confronting and criticizing untamed aggression, lust for power and social and political oppression'.[31]

Two albums in particular, *For Victory* (Earache, 1994) and *Those Once Loyal* (Metal Blade, 2005), focus on the First World War.[32] Both contain highly graphic, though stylised, point-of-view songs, but with no identified protagonist and no sense of the ability of the individual to influence events. The title track of *For Victory* depicts the plight of battle survivors in no man's land, whereas 'At First Light' from *Those Once Loyal* describes the prelude to going over the top. Karl Willetts, the band's lyricist and singer, confirms that 'waiting and anticipation is a recurring theme throughout the music we create [. . .] It's about the psychological effects, the feelings.'[33] Both songs evoke the terrors and horrors of war, immensely magnified by the music, but paradoxically adopt a sober, neutral stance that does not condemn war outright, instead presenting the listener with its impact:

> We don't say war is a good thing, we don't say war is a bad thing, we don't glorify it [. . .] It's easy to go down that line to condemn or point fingers but we're not there to do that [. . .] We just say it as it is and try and put war in perspective.[34]

Bolt Thrower's contemplation of war in general and the First World War in particular is complex and distinctive. They avoid simple stereotypes and instead express the ambiguities of warfare: it is both horrifying and glorious, both insane and necessary. Similar ambiguities occur in the works of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, who both wrote of their utter contempt for the mindlessness of war but remained with their regiments and fought with distinction. Taylor also connects Bolt Thrower's vision with the works of authors such as H. G. Wells, Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, reading their songs in the context of a broader dystopian discourse.[35]

Over the last ten years Swedish power metal band Sabaton have rather assumed Bolt Thrower's mantle as commentators on war. Their songs cover all historical periods from ancient times through both world wars to modern conflicts including Iraq and the Falklands. 'Angels Calling' from *Attero Dominatus* (Black Lodge Records, 2006) is an impressionistic song, whose lyrics are like phrases from a memoir rather than a coherent narrative about a specific event. However, their next album, *The Art of War* (Black Lodge, 2008), which takes its title from Sun Tzu's military treatise of the same name, develops both musically and, especially, lyrically into a more comprehensive meditation on war and its impact. Each song is constructed around one of Sun Tzu's chapters, illustrated by reference to more recent conflicts. 'Cliffs of Gallipoli' is a song about the dead, with foe turning to friend in death.[36] In the booklet notes for the album, the band agree that the expedition was a badly planned disaster; however, they also praise the outstanding 'courage and competence' of some of the commanders, Monash and Chauvel on the Australian side and Mustafa Kemal on the Turkish. 'The Price of a Mile', like P. J. Harvey's 'On Battleship Hill' or the paintings of Paul Nash, describes the rape of the countryside as well as the fate of the soldiers, scarring 'fields that once were green'. It is a fascinating song in that it is one of very few that describes the actual fighting, but the listener has no idea which side is being depicted. Set during the Battle of Passchendaele, it describes the horrific conditions from which

the men have no way out. Both songs are set to Sabaton's driving, epic style of metal with stylistic flourishes including elaborate keyboards, guitar solos and female backing vocals that supply a high degree of drama, suggesting there is excitement in war among the death and destruction even though 'no glory has been won'.[37]

In its various forms heavy metal has made a highly distinctive contribution to songs about the war. By its very nature the music lends itself to a 'warts and all' depiction of war's brutalities and in its more extreme forms this verisimilitude is at its clearest. Phillipov emphasises the strength of extreme metal in approaching such complex and multifaceted subjects, highlighting the genre's 'emphasis on musical and lyrical disruption' which 'offers listeners fractured, ambivalent listening positions [. . .] in which [they] can explore alternative responses to, and experiences of, ordinarily contentious subject matter'.[38] As Karl Willetts puts it, 'the idea that there is no one version of the truth goes throughout my lyric writing; there are always alternative perspectives.'[39] Far from being the 'mindless' music many critics suggest, metal can be seen instead as a genre of depth, subtlety and intelligence in its complex portrayals of the First World War.

Let England Shake

Polly Jean Harvey's *Let England Shake* represents a considerable effort. Written over a two-and-a-half-year period, she researched the history of war, notably the Gallipoli campaign, as well as more recent first-hand accounts from Iraq and Afghanistan.[40] The album marked a milestone in the history of popular music in the way it was received as a serious commentary on England's military past. Greeted with virtually unanimous acclaim, it went on to win the prestigious Mercury Prize in 2011.[41] At least three of its songs make general reference to the First World War whilst three others refer specifically to Gallipoli. 'All and Everyone' is one of the album's most explicit tracks, describing in detail the horrors of ANZAC Cove and Bolton's Ridge, using repetition to invoke the image of the relentless sun and its linkage to death. 'On Battleship Hill' describes the emotions of battlefield tourists. In a Proustian turn the song connects the scent of wild thyme with the recognition that the destruction wrought by the war is being eradicated by nature. It links time and remembrance in a complex dialectic: should we remember or make a conscious decision to forget? The song has a powerful resonance as it challenges the motives of such 'pilgrimages'. Do we visit the sites of former conflicts for positive or negative reasons? Are we 'bearers of the flame' or mere ghouls? Remarkably Harvey herself never visited the battlefields of Gallipoli, reflecting the ways an artist can 'think their way' into a subject.[42]

Throughout the album Harvey interweaves the theme of war with that of what England means for her and how the country's present is inextricably bound to its past. She explicitly excludes the other British nations, situating England at the heart of a former empire and all the historical 'baggage' that entails. Harvey's emotions range from ironic xenophobia in 'The Last Living Rose' to critical reflection on the violence that made England 'great' in 'The Glorious Land'. But her lyrics are always multifaceted. As well as condemning its violent excesses she expresses a deep personal attachment to England, its landscape and its people.

Let England Shake is also an example of how problematic genre is in popular music. To what genre or category does it belong? Is it 'rock' music at all? Harvey has stated that among her influences were the work of Harold Pinter, the poetry of

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T. S. Eliot, the paintings of Salvador Dali and Goya, and music by the Doors, Velvet Underground and the Pogues.[43] For the album Harvey radically altered her image, a transformation at least as profound as that of David Bowie in the 1970s. Entirely absent was the husky-voiced, guitar-wielding 'rock chick' of the *Stories from the City, Stories from the Sea* era, replaced by a sombre figure playing an autoharp.[44] She also employs a high soprano which has a similar effect to other composers' usage of male countertenors. As in Philip Glass's *Akhnaten* or Thomas Adès's *The Tempest*, the high register evokes an unspecified past and an 'otherworldliness' helping to take the listener out of a specific time context. Harvey explained:

> If I used too much [. . .] breadth in my voice it made the songs too self-important, too dogmatic [. . .] So it was a very delicate balance to sing them in a way that was purely playing the role of a narrator and not trying to inflect the words with any particular bias.[45]

Her stance is perfectly demonstrated in the song 'The Words That Maketh Murder'. She never tells you what the words are, or who may have spoken them. For some they will be the orders of First World War commanders or those uttered in the pulpit by pro-war prelates; for others those of George W. Bush or Tony Blair, which is one reason she has been described as 'the first rock-and-roll war artist'.[46]

Let England Shake is an example of how popular music can approach the complexities of war. Its stance is undoubtedly anti-war even though its author has declared that 'I don't feel qualified to sing from a political standpoint'.[47] It memorably links the motivations behind and emotions within British conflicts of the last hundred years. It also evokes a positive picture of England and a lingering pride in the country's military achievements whilst questioning the role of memory and remembrance. It was little wonder that when Harvey premiered the work on *The Andrew Marr Show* in 2010 her fellow guest, Prime Minister Gordon Brown, appeared baffled by her performance.[48]

Conclusion

Despite claims to the contrary, song lyrics are not poetry.[49] They are designed to perform a different function and this holds true even for those songs whose words can 'stand by themselves' for, once music is added, new meanings are produced. As Simon Frith suggests, it may well be that the very best songs 'can be heard as a *struggle* between verbal and musical rhetoric, between the singer and the song'.[50] For this reason direct settings of war poems by popular musicians are relatively rare. However, others, whilst not directly quoting the war poets, clearly take indirect inspiration from them. Karl Willetts acknowledged this, saying that 'the war poets, Wilfred Owen and Sassoon, they have inspired me. Even if it's not the words it's the rhyming structure; it helps me formulate a plan and a pattern.'[51] There are distinct similarities between Eric Bogle's 'And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda' and Wilfred Owen's 'Disabled', a poem about a legless young veteran that describes the protagonist's carefree pre-war life and lack of any patriotic motivation for enlisting, though the Owen character's freedom is depicted through football rather than trekking through the Australian outback. 'He was drafted out with drums and cheers' is reflected in Bogle's band playing the Patterson song. On his return, just as in Bogle, the cheers are absent and the

women ignore him. He is left to 'take whatever pity they may dole' and 'spend a few sick years in institutes'.[52]

American indie band the Decemberists eschew the introspection common to modern rock for a more narrative approach and singer/lyricist Colin Meloy often paints 'historical scenes in faraway places, pluck[ing] literary references from dusty volumes and us[ing] multisyllabic words you may need a dictionary to define'.[53] In their 'The Soldiering Life' the easy-flowing indie-pop sound and Meloy's subtle lyrics conceal what is a ground-breaking song that updates some of Owen's themes in a modern context. Described by Meloy as a 'homoerotic love song', it has clear parallels with Owen's 'It Was a Navy Boy' and Meloy's 'bombazine doll' is at least as enticing as the poet's description of the young man he meets on a train.[54] 'The Soldiering Life' is arguably also the only popular song that has the temerity to suggest that, for some, the war was actually enjoyable and liberating, opening up new emotional experiences. As such it would be anathema to those who see the war as unremitting horror and its boldness does not simply confront the myth of the war but proposes an alternative, more human and radical interpretation.

One of the few books about music and the First World War, Glenn Watkins's *Proof through the Night*, concludes with an analysis of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* of 1961. Britten memorably fashioned nine of Wilfred Owen's poems into one of his greatest works and Watkins's concluding comment is that in the *War Requiem* 'the meaning as well as the meaninglessness of the Great War had found a new and resonant echo'.[55] This is, at best, an over-literal and incomplete interpretation of the work of both artists. Though Owen and Britten utilise the First World War in their imagery, they are aiming for a more universal message, an approach followed by many popular musicians. There is therefore more than a cursory link between popular music and the work of the war poets. Acknowledging this link, P. J. Harvey noted that in writing the songs for *Let England Shake* she thought herself into the role of an officially appointed war songwriter 'like war poets or like any foreign correspondent but trying to do it through song'.[56] Harvey thus emulates one of the key approaches of *chanson* which, as Peter Hawkins points out, often resembles 'a kind of poetic and musical journalism'.[57]

Another achievement of the disillusioned war poets in particular was their professed abhorrence of euphemism. Paul Fussell suggests that Sassoon, Owen, Rosenberg and others decisively rejected the 'high flown' language that many previous poets had employed when writing about war. The danger of euphemism, as Richard Floeckher has noted, is that 'euphemistic language turns war crimes into mere abstractions', transferring 'culpability away from the aggressor and onto the victims'.[58] Popular music has been guilty of employing euphemism when dealing with the war. Mike Harding and Sting's 'Children's Crusade', which clumsily compares the 'innocents' of 1914–18 with modern victims of drug addiction, succeeding only in patronising both groups, are prime offenders in this respect. But other examples mirror the approach of the war poets, and the musical genre that lends itself more than any other to a non-euphemistic depiction of war is heavy metal. Metal speaks very directly in its lyrics, often utilising 'street language' or swearing:

> Blunt, confrontational, visceral and often as obscene as the suffering they describe, heavy metal lyrics look war in the face. They are the camera rolling in the middle of combat – an honest, fearless witness.[59]

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Of all the metal bands who have recorded songs about the war, Bolt Thrower stand out in this regard. The listener is both horrified and fascinated by war and this ambiguity places them in a close relationship with the war poets. They quote from Kipling and, most memorably, Laurence Binyon. '. . . For Victory' ends with these newly composed lines prefacing those of Binyon:

> Now in death's glory
> Man's final destiny
> The final price to pay
> . . . For Victory

Despite the song's condemnation of the need for war and its terrible human cost there is recognition that there is pride as well. This is not at all a fashionable notion, but it has been part of the thinking of warriors throughout the ages and '. . . For Victory' is one of the few songs about the war that reminds us that, despite the bloodshed and horrors, Britain and her allies were victorious.

In the late 1950s in France and a few years later in Britain and the USA popular musicians began writing songs referencing the First World War. This timing corresponds with the emergence of new styles of music, the *chansons engagées* in the former, folk and rock protest music in the latter two countries. Moreover, they were written to reflect concerns and draw comparisons with contemporary political events – notably the wars in Algeria and Vietnam. Since then music about the war has spread globally and provides an ever-increasing source of inspiration. Many artists are seduced into repeating well-trodden myths, but others seek to bring a new perspective. Most recently the dub-reggae album *Empire Soldiers* was released as a two-CD set in 2013, with a live version recorded in 2015 (Yes High Tech/Jarring Effects). Representing one of the widest transnational collaborations to date in popular music about the war, the album's theme is that of the experience of Anglo-Caribbean and Franco-African soldiers and labourers. Its key collaborators are Steve Vibronics from the UK, Martin Nathan from France, Afro-Caribbean historian and poet Madu Messenger, British-born musician and DJ M. Parvez, who has Pakistani roots, Senegalese singer/lyricist Sir Jean, and French-Moroccan poet Mohammed el Amraoui. The collaborative range and inventiveness of this album demonstrates that in popular music the First World War shows no signs of losing its relevance.

Notes

1. Rainer Rother, 'The Experience of the First World War and the German Film', in Michael Paris (ed.), *The First World War and Popular Cinema: 1914 to the Present* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 217.
2. Michel Tournier, *Le Vent Paraclet*, quoted in Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring* (London: Black Swan/Bantam, 1990), p. 415. Comments by Christophe Didier, Deputy Director of the Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire, Strasbourg, 'War in the Archives' event, Institut Français, London, 19 June 2014.
3. John Street, *Music and Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), p. 103.
4. There are several surviving songs from the Thirty Years War of 1618–48; see Dorian Lynskey, *33 Revolutions Per Minute: A History of Protest Song* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), p. 686. 'Babylon Is Falling' (recorded by the Home Service on *I'm Alright Jack*) is

a song of the English Civil War, as is ‘The World Turned Upside Down’ (recorded by Leon Rosselson and Billy Bragg among others); ‘Lillibullero’ dates to the seventeenth century; ‘Heart of Oak’ and ‘The Girl I Left behind Me’ to the eighteenth.

5. Larry Portis, *French Frenzies: A Social History of Pop Music in France* (College Station: Virtualbookworm Publishing, 2004), p. 3. See also Peter Hawkins, *Chanson: The French Singer-Songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the Present Day* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), p. 3.
6. Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 170.
7. Chris Tinker, ‘Anti-Nationalism in Postwar French Chanson’, *National Identities*, 4 (2002), 133–43.
8. Chris Tinker, *Georges Brassens and Jacques Brel: Personal and Social Narratives in Post-War Chanson* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), p. 157.
9. Ibid., p. 13.
10. Chris Tinker, ‘A Singer-Songwriter’s View of the French Record Industry: The Case of Léo Ferré’, *Popular Music*, 21 (2002), 147–8.
11. Ibid., pp. 148–9.
12. Portis, *French Frenzies*, p. 150.
13. Tinker, *Georges Brassens and Jacques Brel*, p. 158.
14. Wilfred Owen, ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, in *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. Jon Stallworthy (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), p. 117.
15. Portis, *French Frenzies*, p. 119.
16. The instrument used on the album is a mellotron, but in their reunion shows in 2008 Rod Argent played a real harmonium.
17. Though crowd-sourced and hence likely to be incomplete, Wikipedia lists a minimum of sixty-four recorded versions of the latter as of the date of access; see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No_Man%27s_Land_(Eric_Bogle_song)> (last accessed 9 January 2017).
18. Jon Casimir, ‘Secret Life of Matilda’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 April 2002. His article includes an extensive interview with Bogle; see <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/04/19/1019020705613.html> (last accessed 15 November 2016).
19. Ibid. There is some ‘poetic licence’ in the lyrics which say he enlisted in 1915 but was present at the Suvla Bay landings, which would mean he must have enlisted in 1914. They also refer to the troops being issued with steel helmets on enlistment, although steel helmets were not introduced until 1916.
20. The song was written following a trip Bogle made to the war cemeteries in 1976 and research has suggested that the real William McBride was a private in the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers buried in Authuille Cemetery near Beaumont Hamel. See Commonwealth War Graves website, <http://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/66101/AUTHUILE%20MILITARY%20CEMETERY> (last accessed 15 November 2016).
21. Eric Bogle concert at Weymouth, September 2009, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqVGshDc-CM> (last accessed 15 November 2016).
22. Mike Harding’s personal website, <http://www.mikeharding.co.uk/recordings/bombers-moon> (last accessed 15 November 2016).
23. Michael Kimmelman, quoted in Peter Tregear, ‘For *alle Menschen*? Classical Music and Remembrance after 9/11’, in Jonathan Ritter and J. Martin Daughtry (eds), *Music in the Post-9/11 World* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), p. 161.
24. ‘World War One: Marking the Centenary of World War One across the BBC’, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/mediapacks/ww1/arts#heading-the-ballads-of-the-great-war> (last accessed 15 November 2016).
25. Critics dispute Led Zeppelin as being direct precursors of metal with Americans generally favouring their role and Britons dissenting. Deena Weinstein, *Heavy Metal: The Music and its Culture*, 2nd edn (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000), pp. 14–15.

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26. Michelle Phillipov, *Death Metal and the Critics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2012), p. xi; Weinstein, *Heavy Metal*, p. 113; Jeremy Wallach, Harris M. Berger and Paul D. Greene, *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music around the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
27. Phillipov, *Death Metal and the Critics*, p. 64.
28. Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). Phillipov relates Kristeva's ideas to death metal (pp. 107–13).
29. Phillipov, *Death Metal and the Critics*, p. 89.
30. Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), pp. 109 and 36–7. Bolt Thrower also have one of the relatively few female members in a death metal band, their bassist Jo Bench, who joined in 1987.
31. Laura Wiebe Taylor, 'Images of Human-Wrought Despair and Destruction: Social Critique in British Apocalyptic and Dystopian Metal', in Gerd Bayer (ed.), *Heavy Metal Music in Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), p. 95.
32. The artwork of *Those Once Loyal* depicts Gilbert Ledward's highly realistic frieze of an 18-pounder gun in action, which is part of the Guards Memorial in St James's Park, London.
33. Karl Willetts, interview with the author, 29 June 2014.
34. Ibid.
35. Taylor, 'Images of Human-Wrought Despair and Destruction', p. 91.
36. Suggesting another Wilfred Owen comparison, this time to 'Strange Meeting'. See Owen, *Poems*, p. 125.
37. Sabaton, lyrics for 'The Price of a Mile'.
38. Phillipov, *Death Metal and the Critics*, p. xix.
39. Willetts interview.
40. 'Local Rock Star PJ Harvey Talks to the News', *Bridport and Lyme Regis News*, 26 January 2011, <http://www.bridportnews.co.uk/news/8813041.Bridport__Local_rock_star_PJ_Harvey_talks_to_the_News> (last accessed 15 November 2016).
41. It was named 'album of the year' by sixteen publications and won the *Uncut* Music Award for 2011; see <http://www.metacritic.com/feature/music-critic-top-ten-lists-best-albums-of-2011?tag=supplementary-nav;article;2> (last accessed 15 November 2016). The album was not quite as successful commercially, peaking at number eight in the UK and number thirty-two in the US album charts.
42. Interview with Dorian Lynskey, *The Observer*, 24 April 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2011/apr/24/pj-harvey-england-shake-interview> (last accessed 15 November 2016).
43. 'Local Rock Star PJ Harvey Talks to the News'. Some of the references are more obvious than others, for example Goya's 'The Disasters of War', the Doors' track 'The End' and the Pogues' version of 'The Band Played Waltzing Matilda'.
44. The 'old' image is well captured in her performance at the V Festival in 2003; see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A29BMj3v86w> (last accessed 15 November 2016). For the 'new' see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fOV9e5eufMU> (last accessed 15 November 2016).
45. Interview with John Sellers, *GQ*, Music Issue 2011, <http://www.gq.com/entertainment/music/201111/pj-harvey-gq-music-issue> (last accessed 15 November 2016).
46. Neil McCormick, 'P.J. Harvey: Masterpiece of the First Rock-and-Roll War Artist', *Daily Telegraph*, 20 July 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/rockandpopfeatures/8650329/P.J-Harvey-Masterpiece-of-the-first-rock-and-roll-war-artist.html> (last accessed 15 November 2016).
47. Interview on *The Andrew Marr Show*, BBC1, 18 April 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49BPRI0UbDo> (last accessed 15 November 2016).

48. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0M5MFryU3c> (last accessed 15 November 2016).
49. Rob Woodard, 'Lyrics Poetry?', *The Guardian*, 19 December 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2007/dec/19/lyricspoetry> (last accessed 15 November 2016).
50. Frith, *Performing Rites*, p. 182.
51. Willetts interview.
52. Owen, *Poems*, p. 152.
53. Devon Powers, review of *Her Majesty the Decemberists*, *Pop Matters*, 14 September 2003, <http://www.popmatters.com/review/decemberists-hermajesty/> (last accessed 15 November 2016).
54. Owen, *Poems*, p. 56.
55. Glenn Watkins, *Proof through the Night: Music and the Great War* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2003), p. 429.
56. Interview with Miranda Sawyer on *The Culture Show*, BBC2, 10 February 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Gqd-2Tz6cc> (last accessed 15 November 2016).
57. Hawkins, *Chanson*, p. 4.
58. Richard Floeckher, 'Fuck Euphemisms: How Heavy Metal Lyrics Speak the Truth about War', in Niall W. R. Scott and Imke von Helden (eds), *The Metal Void: First Gatherings* (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2010), pp. 233–44.
59. Ibid., p. 236.

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