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Obituary: Vera Lynn, 1917-2020

Peter Grant

Throughout the history of popular music there are examples of artists who have become symbolic of their country and others who are emblematic of a particular point in history. Dame Vera Lynn, who died on June 18, could lay claim to represent both trends. As Christina Baade, who has written extensively about Lynn and her work has noted, for more than seventy years Vera Lynn was “a living symbol of the British effort in World War II” (“Forgotten”). Even during lockdown her funeral was marked by a fly-past by vintage Spitfires and attended by representatives of the Queen and all four armed services. Yet Vera Lynn and her career were more nuanced and, sometimes, more controversial than her public and media depictions usually allow.

Part of her mythical status was simply the result of her longevity. She was born on March 20, 1917, the same year as Ella Fitzgerald and more than five years before Judy Garland. The daughter of a plumber from London’s East End, Vera Margaret Welch first performed publicly at the age of seven, adopting her maternal grandmother Margaret’s maiden name “Lynn” when she was eleven. Her first radio broadcasts in the mid-thirties were with leading British dance bands of the day, initially with Joe Loss and then Charlie Kunz and Bert Ambrose.

Though her hit recordings began in 1937 it was the coming of war that propelled Lynn to the forefront of popular appeal. In 1939 she recorded Ross Parker and Hughie Charles’s “We’ll Meet Again,” which became not only her signature song but also, with its nostalgic lyrics, perhaps the most emblematic of Britain’s wartime tunes. In April 1940 she came top in a survey conducted by the BBC to identify the British Expeditionary Force’s favorite singer (Guthrie 251). This led to her becoming known as “the Forces’ Sweetheart” and, in July 1940, launching her solo career.

Her popularity was rewarded in 1941 with her own BBC radio show, *Sincerely Yours*, which proved incredibly successful. The first broadcast garnered an audience of over 23%, by far the largest ever recorded at this time on Sunday night in the Forces Programme. *Sincerely Yours* aired over two series until March 1942 when circumstances intervened. Lynn's intimate performances were crafted for radio and, despite her robust singing style, her often sentimental songs led to her being linked with the "crooner" style. The war had taken a turn for the worse with the fall of Singapore in February 1942, and elements within the BBC hierarchy combined with some politicians to decree that sentimentality could prove detrimental to the morale of the troops. Similar misguided ideas often seem to affect conservative thinking during wartime and Lynn's program was taken off the air for 18 months.

Ironically what was seen, by some in authority, as too close an identification with American singing styles was regarded by others as not close enough. My own mother, whose teenage years coincided exactly with World War Two, said that her generation regarded Lynn as too "old fashioned," especially in comparison with the "exciting" American swing bands they flocked to see in wartime London.

But despite official disapproval regarding Lynn's impact and some youngsters' misgivings, there was not the slightest impact on Vera Lynn's popularity. 1942 saw the release of her second most iconic song, "The White Cliffs of Dover," words by Nat Burton and music by Walter Kent, and the launch of her film career. Though never becoming a big star, Lynn filmed her three wartime movies that utilized her "next door girl" image, reprising her own story. In the first, inevitably entitled *We'll Meet Again*, Lynn plays a young music hall dancer called Peggy Brown, who unexpectedly rises to fame after her chance discovery by the BBC.

Back on the air from 1943 onwards Lynn also visited British troops overseas in Egypt, the Middle East, and, in March 1944, she went to Bengal to entertain the troops before the Battle of Kohima.

After the war there were many who thought her style and repertoire would mean she had simply become a relic of the past. In 1949 she was told by the BBC's head of light entertainment that her kind of music was finished and that she should change her style. However, Lynn retained and even extended her fan base. In 1952 with "Auf Wiederseh'n, Sweetheart" Lynn became the first British performer to top the charts in the United States. Through the 1950s, '60s, and '70s she hosted several television series and toured extensively in Australia, Scandinavia, and the Netherlands. And Vera Lynn was not disregarded by the new generations of pop and rock performers. Roger Waters's obsession with World War Two led to the inclusion of the song "Vera," referencing Lynn and "We'll Meet Again," on the Pink Floyd album *The Wall* and, in 1985, Vera Lynn appeared on stage at Crystal Palace Bowl, with Hawkwind, Doctor and the Medics, and others, for the finale of a benefit concert for Pete Townshend's Double-O anti-heroin charity.

In September 2009, at the age of 92, Lynn became the oldest living artist to reach #1 in the UK album chart with her compilation *We'll Meet Again: The Very Best of Vera Lynn* and, in 2017, *Her Greatest from Abbey Road* made her the best-selling female artist of the year in the UK.

In 1975 she was appointed Dame Commander of the British Empire, and, in 2016, a Companion of Honour, a recognition that only Paul McCartney and Elton John of popular musicians have achieved. Christina Baade summed up Vera Lynn's status in British historical memory: "Dame Vera Lynn is iconic in the cultural memory of World War II as a good 'People's War' for Britain, in which people united across class lines, women moved

unproblematically into supportive roles for men in the services, wartime separations heightened romance, and morale never wavered” (“Sincerely Yours” 36).

However, many modern historians have undermined the nostalgic view that Britain was united by an unbreakable “Blitz Spirit” pointing out that there was significant dissent, looting, and pessimism, especially in the period 1941 to ’43. Should we also reassess Vera Lynn’s status as the embodiment of that spirit? Ultimately, I would say not. No one would suggest that she possessed one of the greatest singing voices of the era but, as Baade has noted,

Vera Lynn's power lay in the way that she mobilized sentiment, femininity, and even the glimmerings of utopia in the confusion, fear, and loneliness of war. With her sincere persona and hybrid working class voice rising above the chorus — enacted or imagined —Lynn evoked community and the unity of the nation for the British in the Second World War. (“Sincerely Yours” 45).

I would perhaps be more specific and suggest that Lynn was an embodiment of a positive version of “Englishness” (as opposed to that of the other countries of the Union) that few other performers have achieved. It was notable that, in 2009, she was outraged and tried to take legal action against the far-right British National Party when they included “The White Cliffs of Dover” on a CD. Even though English ethnicity may be a construct it is still possible to “reclaim” Englishness in a positive way. Ron Moy, in relation to Kate Bush, has suggested that “mythical constructions of Englishness do have resonance, and can become self-fulfilling in a positive as well as a negative fashion” (58, 57). Artists such as Ray Davies and PJ Harvey have done so in more recent years, but no one other than perhaps Gracie Fields achieved this in the 1930s and ’40s and Fields was somewhat hampered in this regard by her marriage to Italian-born film director Monty Banks in 1940.

It is certainly true that the public perception of Britain during World War Two is exaggerated nostalgia. But every country needs its positive myths and, whilst they survive, their musical embodiment will forever include the songs of Vera Lynn.

As if to prove this point, just before Lynn's death, the Queen made an unscheduled address to the nation at the beginning of the coronavirus lockdown. In her effort to calm the country and reassure families that had been separated by the unprecedented restrictions, the monarch insisted that Britons "will meet again."

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