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ARCH SUPPORTS

THE TRUTH ABOUT SILLY WAR SONGS

TEN minutes was all the time it took for one of America's biggest industries to start converting its production lines to war work—Tin Pan Alley, when it heard of Pearl Harbour, was very soon churning out war songs with a sentiment that Americans call "phoney," and Arthur Bliss, Director of Music to the BBC calls "insincere." This condensation of an article in "Collier's Magazine," by Joe Bookman (with illustrations by Sydney Hoff), tells how this rapid conversion took place, and what came of the change. On the theory that they didn't care who made a Nation's Lend-Lease laws as long as they could write its songs, the Broadway song-writers sprang to their pianos (writes Bookman), and retooled their muses, converting "June," "moon," "croon," and "spoon" into "scrap," "slap," "Jap," and "off the map."

TIN PAN ALLEY beat the automobile industry to all-out war conversion by several months. Within 10 minutes of the first news from Pearl Harbour, Benny Davis, who had participated in writing "Margie" shortly after World War I, was singing of arms and the man. That Sunday afternoon, Davis was sitting in a Broadway restaurant, which is the Mermaid Tavern of the modern American minstrel, and when he heard the news, he cried, "They asked for it—and they're gonna get it!"

He then dashed off a tune bearing this title, and on Monday it was published. Before the week was out, the 90-odd publishers of popular music were racing to produce the first "Over There" of 1942. From the presses poured ditties like "Good-bye, Mama, I'm Off to Yokohama," "Slap the Jap," "Remember Pearl Harbour," "We'll Sing Hallelujah When We're Marching Through Berlin," "Let's Put an Ax to the Axis," "You're a Sap, Mr. Jap," "He's My Uncle, Uncle Sam," "Thank Your Lucky Stars and Stripes," "Buckle Down, Buck Private, Buckle Down."

The trouble with these songs was that they were so synthetically forced and phoney that nobody would sing them. Although war songs were plugged into American ears by radio and "juke box," sensible persons simply refused to repeat such childish drivel, as is contained in a number entitled "I'm Uncle Sammie's Soldier Now," and in which the singer tells his sweetheart not to fear, because he will bring her home a Japanese as a little souvenir.

The war songs of early 1942 were written in the spirit of two small boys hurling threats at each other—We did It Before and We Can Do It Again. This became slightly silly when the enemy began winning most of the early battles in the Pacific.

Arms Around the Army

The next trend was the Venus-for-Victory school of song writing, in which the stereotyped sex ballad was disguised by military camouflage. There was one called "On the Shoulder of a Soldier Let Me Rest My Head To-night." Another one, called "The Old Army Game," announced that if anyone wished to be kissed, or wanted the living they had missed, they were advised to put their arms around the Army, because love was the Army's middle name, was the ancient Army game.

The issue was stated even more bluntly by a song entitled "I Wanna be an Army Hostess." The lady explained that when a soldier held her hand, she

was the happiest girl in the land. Probably this Army hostess found one of the hearts which, according to Irving Berlin's song, are constantly being lost at the Stage Door Canteen. "A soldier boy without a heart," Mr. Berlin informs us, "has two strikes on him from the start."

Many war songs are so infantile that they'd be harmless, if it wasn't that, by debasing profound issues, they help to create a moronic ideology; a bad song, like bad money, may drive the good out of circulation. In the class of tunes apparently dedicated to the feeble-minded, my favourite is a masterpiece entitled "Stamp, Stamp Out the Jap With a Defence Stamp," which invites us to send up in smokio the city of Tokyo and show the Nipponese that Uncle Sam does not jokio!

Nothing Sublime, Nothing Heroic

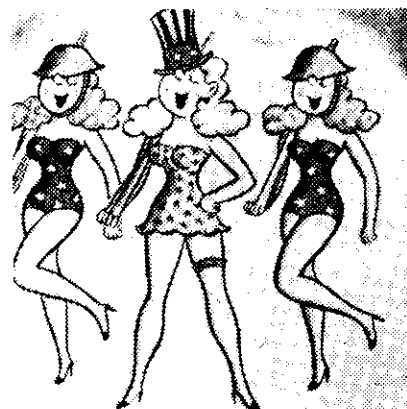
Where the song writers have failed us is in the complete absence of the sublime and the heroic. The issues are life and death, freedom against slavery, but there has not been anything to stir the mind and the heart, to crystallise the issues emotionally, as in Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic".

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored . . .

The war, and the need for genuine folk music that knits us together, only highlights a problem that has existed for many years—our lack of honest, popular music, and Tin Pan Alley's tendency to choke off any possible folk expression, and give us in exchange a counterfeit article. Is any improvement possible? To answer this question, it's necessary to look briefly at the way in which popular songs are written, selected and exploited.

Before 1920, there were important music publishing houses in Bos-

★ Have you been waiting for a truly rousing popular war song that everyone will sing—and like? Well, you won't get it, and here's why



Broadway and the movies give wide circulation to Silly War Songs, rhyming "Tokyo" with "Smokio" and "Jokio"



Many cocksure war songs became silly when the enemy began winning the early battles in the Pacific



"... By debasing profound issues, they help to create a moronic ideology"