



The Songs That Fought the War: Popular Music and the Home Front, 1939-1945

John Bush Jones

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Poet Rod McKuen once observed that "1939-1945 was a terrible time for the world, but it was a glorious time for songs and fighter pilots." Anyone who was alive during World War II remembers with fondness the music of the period. Songs such as "I'll Be Seeing You," "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy," "It's Been A Long, Long Time," and "Praise The Lord And Pass The Ammunition" became standards that are still around today. But what's most amazing about the popular songs of the war years is just how many there were. World War II was one of the most fertile periods of American popular songwriting; it was also the heyday of such "big bands" as those of Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman, and Harry James, and of vocalists such as Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Dinah Shore, Kitty Kallen, and, of course, the Andrews Sisters. This outpouring of music included romantic ballads, rhythm numbers, dance tunes, and novelty songs, and the war itself occasioned the writing, publishing, recording, and performance of thousands of war-inspired songs. Professionals wrote virtually all of the wartime songs we still sing today, but thousands of other numbers were written by inspired (or not-so-inspired) amateurs: men, women, and even children eager to express their patriotism through lyric and melody. Although a central part of home front popular culture during World War II, these war-related and war-inspired songs had never been systematically analyzed or interpreted. In "The Songs That Fought The War", John Bush Jones examines hundreds of these tunes in the context of the times. He begins with a look at the contemporary music industry and the astonishing array of songwriters (including amateurs) prior to Pearl Harbor and during the war. Then, he turns to songs written and popularized before Pearl Harbor, including tunes that touted isolationism and patriotism in the late 1930s, songs written by Americans about the European allies, and songs from England that became popular in the United States. Post - Pearl Harbor tunes included songs about the draft, enlistment, army life, national pride, and a few about wartime personalities such as FDR and MacArthur. Humorous songs about shortages, rationing, and Victory Gardens and sentimental ballads about boys abroad missing girls back home (and vice versa) expressed home front anxieties and efforts, not least of which was the German hit among both the Allies and the Axis, "Lili Marlene."

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