

God Bless America: Tin Pan Alley Goes to War

By Kathleen E.R. Smith

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After Pearl Harbor, Tin Pan Alley songwriters rushed to write the Great American War Song?an "Over There" for World War II. The most popular songs, however, continued to be romantic ballads, escapist tunes, or novelty songs. To remedy the situation, the federal government created the National Wartime Music Committee, an advisory group of the Office of War Information (OWI), which outlined "proper" war songs, along with tips on how and what to write. The music business also formed its own Music War Committee to promote war songs.

Neither group succeeded. The OWI hoped that Tin Pan Alley could be converted from manufacturing love songs to manufacturing war songs just as automobile plants had retooled to assemble planes and tanks. But the OWI failed to comprehend the large extent by which the war effort would be defined by advertisers and merchandisers. Selling merchandise was the first priority of Tin Pan Alley, and the OWI never swayed them from this course.

Kathleen E.R. Smith concludes the government's fears of faltering morale did not materialize. Americans did not need such war songs as "Goodbye, Mama, I'm Off To Yokohama", "There Are No Wings On a Foxhole", or even "The Sun Will Soon Be Setting On The Land Of The Rising Sun" to convince them to support the war. The crusade for a "proper" war song was misguided from the beginning, and the music business, then and now, continues to make huge profits selling love?not war?songs.

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Editorial Review

Review
"A rich overview of popular songs during the early 1940s."?*Choice*

"Complete with a marvelous discography and rare sheet music photographs, *God Bless America* captures the temperament of a people that faithfully believed Les Brown when he tapped his baton, smiled at the audience, and promised that their dreams were betting better all the time."?*Film & History*

"Smith has written an interesting and useful book, one that raises a number of important issues and illuminates many of them."?*International History Review*

"Smith endeavors to explain why no memorable song came forth in the 1940s."?*Journal of American History*

"Smith discusses the role music played in American society following Pearl Harbor and examines the similarities between that time and the tragedies the nation has most recently faced."?*McCormick (SC) Messenger*

"Explores the structure and influence of Tin Pan Alley on American popular music as well as the intersection of government and culture."?*Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*

"A well written book with absolutely none of the glossy enthusiasms that nearly always burden books about jazz, Swing, musicians, and the followers of popular music. . . . This is an interestingly written book, pulling no punches in order to soft peddle the rather gritty history of the war years."?*Frank F. Mathias*

"Of the utmost significance because it develops a conflict of opposing interests between official Washington and the American people. The author knows her subject matter, its authorities, and the significance of all. It is a must for libraries, as a reference tool, and for aficionados. . . . [W]ell written, clear, clever, informative and interesting."?*Ray Browne*

"This fascinating history looks at how radio and the music business geared up for total war, and how the government unnecessarily invented a committee to solve a problem that didn't exist."?*WTBF Radio*

About the Author
Kathleen E.R. Smith, assistant professor of history at Northwestern State University of Louisiana, is the author of *Lieutenant Colonel Emily U. Miller: A Biography*.

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