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Music of the Great War Explored in New Special Exhibition

Harmonies of the Homefront debuts February 9, 2013

For Americans at home during the Great War, singing was a means of actively expressing patriotism in private and public settings. The National World War I Museum at Liberty Memorial will explore music of the World War I era in a new exhibition called “Harmonies of the Homefront.”

Located in Memory Hall, the exhibition will be open from February 9 – October 27, 2013, and is included with admission to the Museum and free for members.

The pages of sheet music, which are part of the Museum’s extensive collections, are brought to life in this multimedia exhibit. Visitors will view artistic sheet music covers and humorous lyrics, hear historical recordings and even have the chance to try out a few of the big “hits” of the era on a period piano.

Guest exhibition curator Dr. Kristin Griffeath is an Assistant Professor of Music at Southwestern Oklahoma State University. Her recent research involves sheet music from World War I, and her thesis, “War Sirens: How the Sheet Music Industry Sold World War I,” earned the 2012-2013 Distinguished Master’s Thesis Award from UMKC. Griffeath explains what she hopes guests will take away from the exhibition:

My hope is that people coming to this exhibit will gain a sense of who these Americans were. The songs echo across the almost one hundred years that separate these Americans from our generation, telling us why they fought, demonstrating how they maintained a sense of humor and

patriotism in a time of great sacrifice and challenge, and voicing their concerns about how the war had changed the men and women who would return home. I can think of no better way to connect the iPod generation to this American history than to literally let them plug into and listen to the songs of the war.

“We are excited to partner with Dr. Griffeath and share this unique view of life during the First World War with our guests,” says Museum Board Chair Dr. Mary Cohen. “‘Harmonies of the Homefront’ will add a colorful dimension to the stories often only told through text, silent film and photographs.”

The History of World War I Music

Joining voices around a piano at home or singing along to a recording of world-famous opera singer Enrico Caruso’s rendition of “Over There” bolstered morale and helped people feel connected to the soldiers who had left them behind. Sing-alongs were also used to energize Liberty Bond rallies and other public gatherings. Classical concerts were peppered with nationalistic tunes, and it became nearly impossible to attend a musical event without encountering war music of one kind or another. Music bound the nation together in support of the war, critical to building and maintaining energy for the continued sacrifices the war would entail.

More than 35,000 copyrighted musical works document the conflict, lending credence to American composer Irving Berlin’s claim that “the history of America could be traced through its music.” The history of World War I is told in the thousands of songs that accompanied the fighting. The titles, lyrics and sheet music cover images highlight the American experience of the war from both civilian and combatant perspectives.

Some featured lyrics from the exhibition are:

K-K-K-Katy, beautiful Katy

*You’re the only g-g-g-girl that I adore
When the m-m-m-moon shines
Over the cowshed
I’ll be waiting at the k-k-k-kitchen door*

“Oh, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning.”

*Oh! How I hate to get up in the morning,
Oh! How I’d love to remain in bed;
For the hardest blow of all, is to hear the bugler call;
You’ve got to get up, you’ve got to get up,
You’ve got to get up this morning!
Someday I’m going to murder the bugler,
Someday they’re going to find him dead;
I’ll amputate his reveille, and step upon it heavily,*

And spend the rest of my life in bed.

Keep the home fires burning,

*While your hearts are yearning,
Though your lads are far away they dream of Home;
There's a silver lining
Through the dark cloud shining,
Turn the dark cloud inside out
Till the boys come home.*

We'll keep things going till the boys come home, Won't we girls?

*Bet your life, every sweetheart and wife,
Will do her bit for Yankee Doodle,
We'll take care of all the Boodle, Won't we girls?
You bet your life, Mother's taking Father's job, he was a steeple Jack,
She wears a pair of overalls, that button up the back,
And she'll have a "Ripping" time some day when she climbs up a stack!
But we'll keep things going till the boys come home.*

For more information on the National World War I Museum at Liberty Memorial,
visit www.theworldwar.org.

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