

“Over There” – Nora Bayes (1917)

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Essay by Sarah K. Whitfield (guest post)*



“Over There” sheet music featuring Nora Bayes



Original release label



George M. Cohan

“Over There” was written and composed by the great theatrical impresario George M. Cohan (1878-1942), and sung by the now almost forgotten Nora Bayes (b.c. 1880, Leonara Goldberg - d. 1928), a woman who was then at the height of her fame in both America and further afield.

This patriotic song was released at a moment of profound change in US daily life, and became uniquely interwoven with the experience of a country going to war some 3,600 miles away. The main lyrical hook of the song, “Over There,” even became the colloquial description for the Western Front, the unknown place where US forces were headed to. When President Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) gave a speech before sailing to France for the Conference of Versailles (which generated the eventual Treaty), he promised not to “come back ‘till it’s over over there.”

The song is a straightforward quasi-military 2:4 march, that expressly speaks to the listener to join the army and “*Make your daddy glad/That he had such a lad.*” The song has numerous invitations to “you”: “*Tell your sweetheart not to pine*” and “*Hear them calling you and me / Every son of liberty.*” But as in the “and me” line, the song also features a prominent use of *we*: “*We’ll be over, we’re coming over/And we won’t come back till it’s over, over there.*”

This period saw rapid changes in the music industry, which was in the process of shifting from a largely publication-based model to the growth and popularity of professionally recorded music, songs were published as both sheet music and as recordings. The William Jerome publishing company printed “Over There” shortly after Bayes premiered it. The edition was easily playable for amateur pianists, something born out by later reports that its various printed editions sold over one million copies. The sheet music features red, white and blue colors, and a picture of Bayes herself. Local music stores placed ads making clear that the song was available there, placing images of soldiers alongside copy that promised “the bright, refreshing art” of the “one and only” Nora Bayes! “A record for red-blooded Americans!”

Cohan’s song was written the day after the US declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917. War could surely not have been a surprise since conflict had been raging since July 1914 and discussions of whether the US should be involved had taken up much of political discussions and debates in the intervening years. Anti-war songs had been popular, with hits like “I Didn’t Raise My Boy to be a Soldier” (1914) reflecting the desire not to get involved in what was seen as Europe’s business or to risk young men’s lives. Germany’s pursuit of unrestricted submarine

warfare led to the US being drawn into a war which had already involved so many nations, and cost so many lives.

On the 7th, Cohan described being excited by the newspaper headlines of the declaration and writing the chorus and tune, before jumping on a train to New York from his home upstate. Various accounts of what happened next exist, but those closest to the event suggest that Cohan called a pianist and gave him the melody; telephoned Nora Bayes and hummed the tune over the phone to her and asked her if she would sing it that night. She performed it at the 39th Street Theatre, New York City, as part of her vaudeville act.

Over time, the events have been misremembered so that Charles King has been erroneously known as the first performer, but this is not reflected in contemporaneous documentation and seems to have been a later invention. By June 1917, "Billboard" described the song as "a new martial song" noted it "promises to be one of the biggest knockouts in the sensational song writing career of George M. Cohan."

During this period, popular music was shifting from ragtime towards the wider enjoyment of jazz. But "Over There" retains a straight (i.e. not syncopated) rhythm, retaining an anthemic military-esque appeal. The song remains over a hundred years later infuriatingly catchy. Bayes' delivery in the recording accents the on-beat rhymes, but opens up in the slightly more expansive "*the Yanks are coming*," reassuring the Allied Powers that "*the Sammy's are coming*" (this lyric is changed elsewhere). The recording was released by Victor Records as a double-faced disc (no. 45130), for 75c, with "Good Bye and Good Luck Be With You, Laddie Boy!" on the reverse.

By August 1917, "Billboard" was calling it "one of the sensational successes of the present summer" noting that Bayes was sending telegrams to the publishing company to order it for marching bands who had apparently requested it. It was then being explicitly called a recruiting song, and contemporary writers noted that the song was "a masterpiece," and "an essential part of every cultivated New Yorker's home life."

In April 1918, a special meeting was held to launch "America's Over-There Theatre League," the beginning of an entertainment committee organized by Cohan and Winthrop Ames (with the apparent approval of President Wilson). The organization successfully ran vaudeville performances at US bases in France, at what were called "Liberty Theaters." Bayes toured these makeshift theatres along with many other vaudeville stars of the day, including Elsie Janis.

Bayes' intimate connection with the song raises questions about the relationship between performers and composer/authors. If Cohan wrote the lyrics and the music, and the unnamed pianist the accompaniment, then did Bayes make any less of a contribution in the song's success? Bayes remains a key figure in the relationship between Broadway, Tin Pan Alley and popular music--she recorded over 100 songs. She was also a prolific composer in her own right, though the extent of her work has been disputed. What is absolutely clear is her unique ability to put a song over has left us with this remarkable record that places Broadway theatre at the heart of making US American identity.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.