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LET'S ALL BE AMERICANS NOW: PATRIOTISM, ASSIMILATION AND UPLIFT IN AMERICAN POPULAR SONG OF WORLD WAR I

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'America does not consist of groups. A man who thinks of himself as belonging to a particular national group has not yet become an American'

President Woodrow Wilson

'Address to Newly Naturalized Americans', 1915

In the years leading up to and including the United States' involvement in World War I, patriotic language and evocation of collective Americanness pervaded literature, music, advertising and political addresses. Yet, on the eve of America's declaration of war, the nation found itself grappling with the boundaries of its own identity. Given the continued influx of immigrants into major United States cities, defining exactly who or what was American became a critical issue for immigrants and reformers alike. One way in which the problematic ambiguity of Americanness was mediated was through the concept of social uplift. During the first decades of the twentieth century, politicians, reformers and intellectuals believed that culturally, morally and intellectually improving of the masses would benefit the nation as a whole through an elevation in national character. The project of uplift partially necessitated a narrative of the successful assimilation of working-class immigrant populations in order to project a fully-unified representation of American identity. Cultural products provided both a path and a model for many new Americans to engage with and perform permissible Americanness. Uplift is also audible in the popular song of this era, specifically in an emerging sub-style of patriotic battle-cry songs, the texts and music of which were particularly aimed at these immigrants. Through the conflation of patriotism, military action and legitimate Americanness within multiple popular and mass-disseminated media, these songs issued both an underlying call to assimilation and a potential avenue to achieve it.

At the same time, Tin Pan Alley was also changing. Once driven completely by sheet music sales, this first American popular music industry found itself in the midst of a rapid technological transformation. Initially used only as a marketing device, recordings of Tin Pan Alley songs on cylinders and phonograph discs had, by 1917, become commodities themselves. Major recording companies released different versions of



the most successful songs, flooding the newly created market. Musicians and producers employed a number of techniques to extend and differentiate each recorded version. These often included extended instrumental interludes, barbershop quartets, Sousa-esque band arrangements, and musical allusion to or direct quotation of popular patriotic songs. It is in these moments of variation and difference that these recordings directly and significantly engage with a larger discourse of difference, assimilation, and American identity during World War I.

This article explores the relationship between popular song, the phonograph, and American identity in the late 1910s. Understanding the fluid and overlapping nature of multiple recorded versions of popular songs allows for the greater understanding of the many ways audiences came into contact with songs. Despite the benefits of such a discussion to both disciplines, neither musical nor historical scholarship has yet to interrogate the musical content of acoustic-era recordings and their relationship to one another. Listening to these recordings in relation to one another brings to life a more active performance and consumption history silenced by reliance on sheet music accounts of these songs alone. As such, the voices and sounds of these particular songs join larger conversations of assimilation, uplift, patriotism, and the war effort. This article listens to the 1917 song *Let's All Be Americans Now* by Irving Berlin, Edgar Leslie and George Meyer. Ultimately, the variation between multiple recorded versions of *Let's All Be Americans Now* functions as a lens by which we may view greater negotiations of the individual within the larger national identity, specifically within the context of patriotism, assimilation, and uplift.

‘War is Talked of Everywhere’: Tin Pan Alley, Sousa and the Phonograph

By January 1917, Tin Pan Alley had already begun to anticipate United States involvement in World War I. Songwriters, reacting to growing countrywide debate over United States involvement, had begun to incorporate themes from the foreign war as elements of novelty as early as 1914. Songs were published on both sides of the debate, including the emphatic and emotional *I Didn't Raise My Boy to be a Soldier* by Alfred Bryan and Al Piantadosi in 1915 and *Wake Up, America* by Jack Glogau and George Graff in 1916. The formal Declaration of War in April 1917, however, heralded a dramatic shift in the quantity and tone of war-related songs. These songs capitalised on a number of musical tropes: patriotic themes, both narrative and musical, pervaded all areas of the style with martial rhythms, with soldier protagonists, and with quotations and allusions to popular patriotic songs such as *Yankee Doodle* and *Dixie*. No aspect of this musical life was left untouched by the war.

Many of these musical tropes were rooted in the wildly popular band music of the late nineteenth century by John Philip Sousa. Sousa's band, based on the military band tradition and comprised of entirely of reed and brass instruments with percussion, toured the United States extensively during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, firmly establishing both the style and repertoire. Sousa wrote and performed over 130 marches during his career, most of which were composed around patriotic or military themes and frequently invoked images of the American flag ([Crawford 2001: 485](#)). This widely circulated exposure to band arrangement and Sousa's sonic conflation of patriotism and the military established a strong and still-present association between martial rhythms, the American flag, and band music as a signifier of a unique, collective American musical identity.

In addition to these themes and musical gestures, an entirely new sub-style emerged. Songs concerning new and hyphenated Americans appeared as an extension of patriotic songs. Prior to the war, concerns regarding increased immigration, ranging anywhere from general nostalgia for an imaginary, idealised homogeneous past, to xenophobia. These concerns generally manifested themselves in music as parodic ethnic novelty songs that sought to musically and culturally define immigrants as not pure Americans through amplification of perceived stereotypes¹. However, with the beginning of the war, this nervousness, expressed via novelty, recast itself as an anxiety over misplaced allegiance of new American citizens ([King 2005: 65](#)): it became critical to properly and musically define one's commitment to the United States in order to identify the potentially dangerous internal 'others' as enemies ([Hamm 1993: 13](#)). This anxiety over internal others became more profound and potentially dangerous as it merged with the power of the State when the United States entered the war in April 1917. While previously committed to isolationism and avoidance of the war, the Wilson administration had to quickly turn public opinion in favour of a new American war effort. In order to do so, it established the Committee on Public Information to create and



distribute exaggerated sensationalist propaganda campaign material, frequently drawing on a rhetorical dichotomy of fearmongering against internal others, and an impressive, and at times oppressive, ‘avalanche of patriotism’ ([Kennedy 1980: 62](#)). Shifting from a tone that exploited the musical novelty of ethnic groups to forceful inclusion, the anxiety over assimilation dressed itself up in patriotic clothing. Using many of the same musical gestures of other patriotic songs at the time, songs like *What Kind of an American Are You?*, *Don’t Bite the Hand That’s Feeding You*, and *Let’s All Be Americans Now* capitalised on martial rhythms, fanfare figures, and textual evocation of the American Revolutionary and Civil Wars.

Beyond initial mention of the text, musical gestures and patriotic content of the sheet music scores within this sub-style, the multiple recordings of each song on phonograph cylinders and discs also prove enlightening. While fine scholarship exists from a variety of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives concerning both early recording technology and Tin Pan Alley, there is a visible absence of any scholarly engagement with the actual musical content of these recordings. Musicological inquiry has historically interrogated the notated and marketed sheet music ([Hamm 1979](#); [Garrett 2008](#); [Goldmark 2005](#); [Magee 2002](#); [Sanjek 1983](#); [Sanjek 1985](#); [Smith 2003](#)) while scholarship from the historical perspective has prioritised either the commercial aspects of the sheet music and phonograph industries or the technical specifics of the technology itself ([Eisenberg 2005](#); [Goodfriend 1980: 19–24](#); [Hamm 1980: 61–4](#); [Millard 1995](#); [Read and Welch 1976a](#); [Read and Welch 1976b](#)). Most Edison biographers and recording technology scholars provide a passing nod to the musical content of recordings used in early coin-operated phonograph machines (a precursor to the jukebox) as the unexpected realisation of the potential of the phonograph. Yet, the dominant focus of these discussions tends to either be highly technical, focusing on the actual mechanics of such a machine ([Read and Welch 1976a: 108–15](#)) or the consumer capitalistic implications ([Collins and Gitelman 2002: 129](#)). The content of the jukebox is regarded as important in that it was pleasing and sought out by consumers, but the actual music is not discussed, evaluated or even described.

In his 1995 book, *America on Record: A History of Recorded Sound*, historian Andre Millard theorises the interaction between the content and social history of these recordings. Millard asserts that, while the technology was still emerging and developing at this time, the recordings themselves act as an archive of a shared mass popular culture: each recording preserves and presents a specific moment in the musical history of the song and how it was presented to audiences at that moment ([Millard 1995: 10](#)). Yet, in his entire chapter devoted to the music of early recordings, Millard does not engage the content of the recordings at all. Instead, he opts for descriptions of these preserved archived moments by timbre, title and style: the relationship between the musical content of the recording and creative processes employed in the composition, performance, and recording of each recording is absent.

In the introduction of his 1999 book, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory 1890–1945*, William Howland Kenney asserts that scholarship has also failed to address the significance of the interaction between the actual musical content of these recordings and the social history surrounding their creation and consumption ([Kenney 1999](#)). Kenney focuses primarily on the communities created out of common phonograph consumption patterns, asserting that consumers and listeners were able to articulate important dimensions of their personal lives through the complex reciprocal relationship with the recording industry their consumption helped to shape. From this perspective, Kenney takes issue with Millard and other scholar’s fetishisation of the technological aspects of the phonograph over the content. In order to remedy the disconnect created by scholarship that overstate the relevance of art music over popular music or focus too heavily on technology, Kenney evaluates three interrelated processes by which recorded music engenders meaning in society. The first is an examination of the political economy of culture, which evaluates the process by which the commercial goals of the phonograph industry shaped the type of music recorded and distributed. This process had previously been interrogated by most scholars and can be applied to Mark Katz’s evaluation of the phonograph as distributor of highbrow culture ([Katz 1998](#)). The second process utilises the reading of patterns of audience reception: Kenney argues that the phonograph industry did not wholly impose its tastes on the public, but rather reflected the values and preferences of the public. In this approach, meaning arises out of the relationship between specific records or a collection of records in a style or genre, ‘the musical and cultural gestures to which they refer, and the reactions of the listeners’ ([Kenney 1999: xvi](#)). In his framing of the third process, the musical inscriptions produced by the recording companies, Kenney recognises the importance of the musical and cultural meanings activated in the music. He goes on, however, to argue against the analysis of specific recordings: analysis of individual recordings, he argues, contains the potential pitfall of isolation. Instead, he chooses to read gestures across several recordings linked by common producers or performers. While I do not generally



disagree with Kenney's desire to emphasise the role of the specific producers and artists, Kenney nests this notion of the dangerous pitfalls of musical analysis of specific recordings in a discussion of authenticity versus inauthenticity, a debate itself riddled with potential pitfalls. Rather than shy away from detailed analysis or attempt to characterise musical behaviour of a still largely anonymous body of producers and musicians², a comparative analysis of recordings recognised to be both the same (containing a shared identity: title, words, melody and, usually, harmony) and different (as intentionally and often dramatically varied) provides a comparative basis by which these musical and cultural gestures may be read and situated into a larger social history.

Following and extending the scholarship of Alban Zak III, I analyse these recordings as separate, yet related, compositions. While focused on popular recordings from the 1960s onward, Zak argues in his 2001 book, *The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records*, for the importance of evaluating Rock recordings for their compositional value. Zak places Rock recordings into the compositional realm by specifically engaging in the process of record making, as distinguished from the acoustic presentation of a previously written text (Zak 2001: 39–42). Major technological advancements play an essential role in Zak's argument: the ability to divide, manipulate, and mix instrumental tracks allows producers to begin composing with tracks before and after musicians enter the studio in ways that cannot or need not be replicated live. However, while the ability to separate and manipulate tracks in the 1960s was certainly important to the development of popular music composition, surely some of the decision-making of the producers in the earlier era played an important role in the recorded outcome. Could not aspects of this argument be drawn further backward to encompass all recording?

In addition to the many techniques to differentiate recorded versions of songs discussed in the introduction to this chapter, acoustic era recording processes necessitated a delicate balance of techniques and practices to ensure the capture of optimal clarity and, to some extent, fidelity. In addition to highly trained recording technicians, phonograph companies continually sought to improve the sound quality of their machines over that of their competitors with a race to the best materials and technologies. While more durable, chemically engineered materials replaced the original foil and resin versions and battery-operated motors were installed, the overall process of recording the master copy remained registrally and timbrally restricted: music too high in pitch or bright in tone created too narrow and compact grooves for the needle to interpret and reproduce and the grooves for bass notes tended to exceed the physical boundary of the cylinder or disc shape. Despite the similar processes and limitations, a lack of standardisation between the disc technology and materials meant that discs created by Victor could not be played on Columbia phonographs and vice versa. When a consumer purchased a phonograph, they were effectively buying into the brand and their catalogue alone (Millard 1995: 55–60). As a result, each of the big three recording companies, North American, Victor, and Columbia, would often record different versions of their competitors' profitable songs. This practice was intended in part to profit from the popularity of the song but also to demonstrate the perceived superiority of one company's phonograph technology and potentially to convert consumers over to its product. As a result, technicians individualised recordings through a number of compositional decisions in order to make recordings stand out among the often overlapping output of other labels. These techniques included (i) additional instrumental sections that highlighted the skill of studio musicians (ii) the inclusion of barbershop quartets, generally led by the most famous tenor on their label (iii) Sousa-esque band arrangements which made the most of the timbral restraints of the acoustic recording process and (iv) most notably, formal interruptions of predictable song forms with musical allusion to, or direct quotation of, popular patriotic songs.

These moments of interruption and substitution present in many recordings during the 1910s create moments of rupture or separation from published sheet music versions of the same songs, which mostly adhered to strict Tin Pan Alley formal conventions. Overall, traditional Tin Pan Alley song form generally adhered to a standard ABB'ABB' structure (where A represents a twenty-four measure verse and B represents a thirty-two measure chorus), with an 8-measure introduction based on the thematic and harmonic material from the chorus followed by a repeatable 4-measure vamp that acts as a transition between that material and the verse. While it is not possible to determine exactly when the practice of formal interruption began, it was especially commonplace in war-themed songs between 1914 and 1919. The practice was also often invoked in recordings that used barbershop quartets, which were used to evoke either group consensus regarding the war or singing soldiers. Producers of recordings during the first two decades of the twentieth century strove to differentiate their versions from others on the market. The added musical novelties and alterations made to upend listener expectations gave opportunities to create unique versions³.



Given the distinct and deliberate decisions made in the recording processes, these varied recordings each constitute a new, though related, compositional text despite their reliance on an acoustic process. Foucault's analysis and dismissal of the notion of the work is also useful in critiquing previous conceptions of sheet music as text and recordings as performance of that text. Outlining the notion of the work and the analysis of its internal structural elements, Foucault interrogates the notion that its internal relationships alone might uncover meaning. He further argues that the notion of the work implies a false unity, one that is derived from the name of the author and his or her other work (Foucault 2016). Similarly, Foucault argues that both history and musical works are smoothed into unified wholes by discursive formations that privilege continuity (Foucault 1972: 4). By focusing on moments of discontinuity, including the interruptions heard in these recordings, we can reject these totalising notions of internal and external (or contextual) musical unity. Doing so allows us to hear new information, new possibilities, silenced by focus on written texts.

This argument and the questions it raises are particularly evident in a song like *Let's All Be Americans Now*. Where should one locate the work? Is it the score? Is it the home performance from that score? Is it the recording? Which recording? As we can see, this idea of a unity becomes highly problematic. While each of these things may have a shared identity, they are by no means one. Treating each recording as one possible text, a thorough evaluation of multiple versions of one song highlights the ways in which compositional choices made in each recording process, and the variations these choices produce, may also occur in dialogue with the larger historical context of the song in this time period.

The following section evaluates how these techniques were employed to differentiate both notated and recorded versions of Irving Berlin, Edgar Leslie and George Meyer's *Let's All Be Americans Now*, all of which were published or released just before official declaration of war by the United States.

'Then We'll Rally 'Round The Flag, Boys. We'll Rally Once Again': Victor's American Quartet

The Victor release of *Let's All Be Americans Now*, featuring the American Quartet, is very likely the first recording of the song. Recorded on 28 February 1917, this version features many standard elements of Tin Pan Alley popular song in the late 1910s. The main melody of the song is featured in the chorus which contains two distinct motives: a slow half- and quarter-note motive that ascends up a fourth and a syncopated eighth-note gesture that includes that suspension over the barline into an offbeat articulation of text which shifts the accent to the second and fourth quarter notes of b46. The mostly diatonic melody showcases frequent repetition and tonal sequencing which assures memorisation and allows for the clear articulation of the text. Additionally, the song remains in a single key, B \flat major, throughout the piece.

The lyrics of the song are positioned as a dialogue between a collective, plural first person speaking to an unnamed, yet very specific external person or group. [Table 1](#) provides a full transcription of the original text. In its assertion that no one truly wants to go to an apparently imminent war, the first verse establishes the context for the song, directly reflecting the political climate of the United States in the last months before the formal declaration of war. The second verse also serves a scene-painting function: in its evocation of former American presidents known for either their military service or wartime presidency, it seeks to establish both sympathy and legitimatising precedence for action through conflation of this war with the American Revolutionary and Civil Wars. Alternately, the text of the chorus turns away from the narrative function to directly engage the listener, entreating a call to action while creating an oppositional binary by which inaction is conflated with being un-American. The alternation of the scene-painting verses with the call to action in the chorus functions within the Tin Pan Alley standards discussed earlier.

There are two primary aspects to this version that make it stand out from other recordings: the use of extended instrumental and vocal arrangement and formal interruptions of traditional song form with direct quotations of songs from the American Civil War. This recording features a brass arrangement with additional support from piccolo, flute and clarinet. With the timbral restraints of the acoustic recording process, the timbre or full range of the piano did not translate well to these early recordings. It was common practice to use brass arrangements in recordings of all kinds at the time. According to Millard, the 'clear strident sound' of the trumpet, tuba and trombone most suited recording, in large part because they could be placed further away from the recording horn but still remain unambiguous and maintain their sonic character (Millard 1995: 82). Apart from its practical recording purposes, this arrangement also reflects patriotic

Example 1. Opening to Chorus, *Let's All Be Americans Now*, mm. 37–52

The image shows a musical score for the opening of the chorus of the song 'Let's All Be Americans Now'. It consists of two staves of music in 2/4 time, with a key signature of one flat (Bb). The first staff starts at measure 37 and contains the lyrics: 'It's up to you ____ What will you do? ____ Eng-land or France'. The second staff starts at measure 46 and contains the lyrics: '____ May have your sym-a- thy ____ ov-er the sea ____ but you'll a- gree ____ that'. The music features a mix of eighth and quarter notes, with some rests and ties.

song as modelled by Sousa. In his arrangements of opera overtures and tone poems and his own compositions, Sousa frequently divided his band into two parts: the trumpet, trombone, euphonium and clarinet would alternate carrying the melody while the rest of the band (the saxophone, French horn, tuba and percussion) would fill in the texture ([Crawford 2001: 462](#)). Due to the muddy quality of this version, it is often difficult to differentiate the number of specific brass instruments. However, one can make out a tuba playing the bass line, maintaining the even emphasis on beats one and two while the remainder of the brass section homophonically fills in the harmonic content. Additionally, the flute and clarinet often mirror the melodic content of the vocal parts and support them.

In this recording, the trumpet holds an elevated position in the arrangement. The trumpet, sometimes used to mirror the melodic content of the voice, often punctuates the end of vocal lines. This fanfare itself is a sonic representation of the military and war. Fanfare (short, rhythmic brass motives based on the harmonic series) has long functioned as a military signal. In a practical sense, the military used fanfares during wartime in either an official capacity, to announce the entrance of an important figure or, in a practical capacity, as communication on the battlefield. In both cases, the tone colour of the trumpet cuts through dense sonic textures, both musical and battle, to attract the attention of the majority. By the end of the nineteenth century, the use of fanfare during battle had become obsolete ([Tarr n.d.](#)). Fanfares, however, continue to signify the military for listeners in the United States, continuing to occur in symphonic repertoire, popular band music and film music. Within the context of this version, however, the fanfare replaces the signalling function of the off-beat accentuation in the sheet music version, a gesture that this recording's arrangement de-emphasises. Similarly, this recording features a piccolo mimicking a fife-call, scalar sixteenth-note scalar passages featuring dotted rhythms. The fife, a small cylindrical flute in Bb, was widely used as a signaling device in British and American military practices in the late eighteenth century, particularly during the American Revolutionary War. By the mid-nineteenth century, the fife and the signals had become outdated in military practice ([Brown n.d.](#)). However, the emergence of band music at the end of the nineteenth century, and specifically Sousa's compositions and arrangements, recast fife-like signals into fast ornamental figures for the piccolo. Thus, the use of the piccolo at key moments in this recording serves as another significant assignment of military meaning, as well as reference to America's musical past, to its content.

Another significant component of this version is the use of a barbershop quartet as opposed to a more-common solo voice. Barbershop quartets were extremely popular and frequently recorded in the earliest days of phonograph technology. Records by barbershop quartets accounted for approximately 20 per cent of all hit records between 1900 and 1920. This was partially for practical reasons: due to the registral restrictions of acoustic recording process, mid-range vocals and close harmonies sung directly into the horn of the phonograph recorder translated particularly well to the early wax and resin media ([Averill 2003: 61–4](#)). The American Quartet was one of the most prolific and popular barbershop quartets of the early twentieth century. Centered around Billy Murray, the group formed in 1909 and remained exclusive to the Edison and Victor label until 1918, when Murray's contract with Victor ended ([Gracyk 2000: 27–32](#)). In his 2003 book about the social history of barbershop in North America, Gage Averill implicates barbershop in 'the production of an American national imaginary formed in the crucible of conflicts over class, race, gender and ethnicity'. The close harmonies and collective participation were seen in context of a nostalgic gaze backward towards small-town rural life in America, in contrast to the realities of the rapid industrialisation and urbanisation of the early twentieth century ([Averill 2003: 8–9](#)). In this recording, as with many recordings of this period, the quartet maintains close harmonies throughout but does not conform to strict barbershop arrangement models. True barbershop is a cappella, but here barbershop expresses collectivity and harkens back to an innocent past through its combination with the band arrangement.



Table 1. Lyrics of *Let's All Be Americans Now*

Verse 1 (A)	Peace has always been our pray'r Now there's trouble in the air War is talked of ev'rywhere Still in God we trust We're not looking for any kind of war But if fight we must
Chorus (B)	It's up to you! What will you do? England or France may have your sympathy Or Germany But you'll agree that Now is the time To fall in line You swore that you would so be true to your vow Let's all be Americans now!
Verse 2 (A')	Lincoln, Grant and Washington They were peaceful men each one Still they took the sword and gun When real trouble came And I feel somehow, they are wond'ring now If we'll do the same
Chorus (B)	It's up to you! What will you do? England or France may have your sympathy Or Germany But you'll agree that Now is the time To fall in line You swore that you would so be true to your vow Let's all be Americans now!

At the formal level, this recording varies from traditional song form. Recorded songs would, as was common in the first two decades of the twentieth century, often omit repetition of the conventional chorus after the first verse and, occasionally, after the second verse as well. This was initially due to the length limitations of the records and remained as recordings increased in length. Beyond this common change in form, this American Quartet recording includes two additional sections added to the overall form of the song, providing a notable interruption of the original sheet music text as well as an aural reference to both America's military past and present. [Table 2](#) provides a diagram of the formal sections and lyrics for this version. The first interruption occurs just after the first full pronouncement of the chorus, but before the restatement of the vamp material into the second verse. At this moment, the majority of the band cuts off: only the piccolo continues aided by the entrance of a snare drum for the first time. This choice of arrangement is another specific reference to military gestures, functioning as a replacement for the traditional fife and drum music mentioned above.

More significant than this symbolic pronouncement of war is the actual musical content of the interruption. In a break from both melodic and harmonic material of *Let's All Be Americans Now*, the piccolo directly quotes the opening melody of Daniel Emmert's *Dixie (I Wish I Was in Dixie)*. *Dixie*, dating back to the first years of the American Civil War, is one of the most widely known examples of minstrelsy in American song. The lyrics invoke a sense of nostalgia for a fictionalised Old South, a constructed and artificial time and space before the beginning of the war in which slavery was both acceptable and satisfying. This quotation initially seems out of place: the Civil War



was long since over and the then-impending battle in Europe had little resemblance to the issues and language of that war. In its fife and drum arrangement, *Dixie* would have been recognisable as being directly associated with a very specific moment in military history of a differently divided American nation. Moreover, the minstrelsy tradition continued to play a predominant role in Tin Pan Alley song of the day. In this context, the melody to *Dixie*, with its scalar sixteenth-note patterns and dotted leaps, lends particularly well to fife conventions. Together, these sonic representations present another construction of Americanness in the context of both military action and American racial history.

The second formal interruption also stems from the American Civil War. Just before the arrival of the title lyric at the end of the second chorus, the four-part barbershop vocal harmony slows to a fermata, using the final chord on 'vow' as a pivot into an eight-measure solo unison section. The dramatic change in texture from band arrangement with four voices to solo unison also functions as another point of emphasis: this moment is a dramatic change, bringing the attention of the listener to the lyrical content. The content of this unison passage is another direct quote from a prominent song from the American Civil War, *The Battle Cry of Freedom*. Today, this tune is lesser known than its counterpart *Battle Hymn of the Republic*. However, the chorus quoted here in *Let's All Be Americans Now* was still widely recognisable and popular during the early twentieth century. Significantly, the quoted portion is the literal battle cry, rallying the troops around the flag for the purpose of military service. The location and unison articulation of this quotation serves as another recognisable musical indicator of specific military history, fused together with a signalling call to action, conflating past military service with the then-current battle.

Star Spangled Tuba: Adolph J. Hahl and Edison Blue Amberol

Edison's record company also released, as was common practice at the time, another contemporary recording of *Let's All Be Americans Now* in 1917. While Edison's version also utilises a traditional band arrangement, this recording varies from the Victor version in several ways. First, it closely conforms to the formal outline of traditional Tin Pan Alley song: there are no formal interruptions of the standard ABB'ABB' form with additional material. Second, the arrangement is far more conservative in its support of the vocal line. Instead of weaving additional melodic support in the trumpet, flute and clarinet, the arrangement serves a traditional function of filling in the harmonic material around the vocal line. The only exception to this is the flute part, which adds embellishments in the style of contemporary piccolo interpretation of fife signals. Third, the tempo is much slower and more varied because of the greater rhythmic freedom of the vocal line. In each repetition of the chorus, the tempo slows dramatically just before the delivery of the title text. So, rather than emphasising the offbeat syncopated figure of the chorus melody, as the bottom-heavy timbre of the arrangement buries the figure, the line slows down to provide the same level of emphasis on the title text. Another significant, remarkable aspect of this recording is the vocalist and the properties of his voice. Rather than utilising a barbershop quartet, this version is sung by classically trained vocalist, Adolph J. Hahl, who retains traces of his classical technique in the vocal delivery. These timbral and textual differences change the position of the singer and narrator from that of a collective with nostalgic links to a rural agrarian past to that of the European high-art tradition.

The last and perhaps most remarkable variation in this recording also involves a direct quotation from widely-known song. In the final repetition of the chorus after the second verse, the low brass break, eight-measures in, from their previous accompaniment gesture. Instead, the accompaniment dramatically shifts to a direct, unison quotation of *The Star Spangled Banner*. In a striking juxtaposition, Hahl and the reeds continue the chorus melody and accompaniment above this quotation. The result is a literal conflation of the call to Americanness through assimilation (as articulated by the lyrics, 'England or France may have your sympathy, or Germany, but you'll agree that now is the time to fall in line') and the music of an established patriotic song³.



Table 2. American Quartet recording of *Let's All Be Americans Now*

Time marker	Formal structure	Lyrical content
00:01 – 00:06	Introduction	(Instrumental)
00:07 – 00:14	Vamp	(Instrumental)
00:15 – 00:36	Verse 1	Peace has always been our pray'r Now there's trouble in the air War is talked of ev'rywhere Still in God we trust We're not looking for any kind of war But if fight we must
00:37 – 01:06	Chorus 1	It's up to you! What will you do? England or France may have your sympathy Or Germany But you'll agree that Now is the time To fall in line You swore that you would so be true to your vow Let's all be Americans now!
01:07 – 01:13	Interruption: 'Dixie'	(instrumental)
01:13 – 01:21	Vamp	(instrumental)
01:22 – 01:43	Verse 2	Lincoln, Grant and Washington They were peaceful men each one Still they took the sword and gun When real trouble came And I feel somehow, they are wond'ring now If we'll do the same
01:44 – 02:10	First 28 bars of Chorus 2	It's up to you! What will you do? England or France may have your sympathy Or Germany But you'll agree that Now is the time To fall in line You swore that you would so be true to your vow
02:10 – 02:15	Interruption: 'Battle Cry'	Then we'll rally 'round the flag, boys we'll rally once again, Shouting the battle cry –
02:16 – 02:19	Completion of Chorus 2	Let's all be Americans now!
02:20 – 02:34	Chorus 3a	(instrumental)
02:35 – 02:49	Chorus 3b	You swore that you would so be true to your vow Let's all be Americans now!
02:50– 02:59	Introduction (as outro)	(instrumental)



‘It’s up to you! What will you do?’ Uplift and the Consumption of American Identity

During the first decades of the twentieth century, politicians, reformers and intellectuals struggled to contextualise and solve the perceived rampant issues of poverty, immigration, and education through a wide-sweeping series of reforms. The constant negotiations of military action, Americanness and assimilation presented in the two versions of *Let’s All Be Americans Now* highlight the many ways in which these issues permeated public consciousness in 1917. Concerns about patriotism, Americanism and assimilation were a pervasive underlying current throughout the reformation process, often cast as social uplift. Believing that the overall national character of America could be elevated through reformation of the lower classes, reformers and politicians, such as John Dewey, Jane Addams, and Woodrow Wilson, directed their programs towards culturally, morally and intellectually improving the uneducated and poor masses. This improved definition of national character was shaped by the deeply coded rhetoric which articulated both the ideals and methods behind acceptable demonstration of American identity and behaviour. Language that privileged both individuality and collectivity shaped articulations of uplift to the masses from above, reinforced by participation of the masses communicating support for these values⁴. Three of the methods in which this rhetoric was articulated, consumed and supported include (i) concepts of self-determination and self-realisation, which focus on the individual’s ability and obligation to improve themselves and their status (ii) a one people nationalism that created and depicted a desirable, homogeneous manifestation of American identity, and (iii) consumer capitalism, which gave individuals the ability to publically demonstrate their engagement and support of these ideals through their purchasing power.

The concepts of self-determination and self-realisation were two sides of the same individualist coin ([King 2005: 18](#)). Emphasis was placed on the individuals right and obligation to live up to his or her own maximal potential, which included an idealised American identity. In a historic address delivered at the Columbian Exposition of the Chicago Worlds Fair in 1893, historian Frederick Jackson Turner famously defined common traits of Americans at the close of the nineteenth century as:

coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind,... that masterful grasp of material things,... that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance (Jackson as quoted in [Trachtenberg 2005: 34](#))

In his evaluation of Turner’s comments and the larger implications for new immigrants, Native Americans and descendants of earlier European settlers, historian Alan Trachtenberg highlights the ways in which these traits were not perceived to be naturally ingrained. Rather, for Turner and other reformers of the period, American identity rested in the acquisition of these traits. In one way, this belief system helped the descendents of earlier European settlers rationalise their oppression over indigenous populations ([Trachtenberg 2005: 34](#)). In another, it established the perception that American identity could also be acquired for new immigrants. Self-realisation and self-determination were viewed as both possible and potentially obligatory routes to achieve this identity.

Additionally, reformers believed that the refocus from group identity to that of the self, inherent in these notions of self-realisation and self-determination, would ultimately unite all Americans under the same shared devotion to the United States by de-emphasising group allegiances along lines of race, class and ethnicity. In a speech given to newly naturalised American citizens in 1915, President Woodrow Wilson contextualised the loyalty pledged by his audience within a greater narrative of ‘e pluribus unum’⁵ and the resulting erasure of group ties ([Wilson 1919: 172–4](#)). Wilson framed steady immigration as unique to America, a positive source of constant renewal of American ideals and, significantly, humanity. Central to these American ideals is the language and importance of self-realisation and an unequivocal unity: ‘for America was created to unite mankind by those passions which lift and not by the passions which separate and debase’ ([Wilson 1919](#)). Wilson explicates the negotiation between this individualised self-realisation and a collective unity born out of American ideals as an essential component of an unambiguous American identity:

You cannot dedicate yourself to America unless you become in every respect and with every purpose of your will thorough Americans. You cannot be Americans if you think of yourself in groups. America does not consist of groups. A man who thinks of himself as belonging to a particular national group has not yet become American, and the man who goes among you to trade upon your nationality is no worthy son to live under the Stars and Stripes ([Wilson 1919](#)).



In his evaluation of patriotism, uplift and assimilation, political scientist Desmond King articulates how this rhetoric, as well as the larger education and cultural reforms occurring at the time, contributed to an overall notion of 'one people' nationalism, one in which boundaries of ethnicity, race and class were erased for the purpose of assimilation ([King 2005: 64](#)). Through evocation of selective images that reinforced messages of collectivity, one people nationalism rhetorically reinforced specific associations beneficial to the project of uplift. The Wilson quote above highlights one of these significant correlations: the connection of American identity with the imagery of the American flag.

Complicating the issue of a singular American identity born from the erasure of group ties, however, was the constant negotiation of membership: exactly who was allowed to be assimilated into the collective constantly changed and shifted. In the process, the new, hyphenated Americans that the process engendered were undoubtedly marked by their perceived inauthenticity: their identity within the perceived group allegiance to their home country bred skepticism about loyalty to American ideals. As a result, the process of forced assimilation essentially marked both the undesired and excluded groups and the assimilated group ([King 2005: 64–7](#)).

If the rhetoric and ideology were clear, how were new Americans expected to achieve this self-realised American ideal? Consumer capitalism offered a powerful avenue. The rhetoric of individuality, allegiance and collectivity was closely linked to the goals and ideals of uplift: engagement with consumer capitalism was one effective and profound way of visibly demonstrating those goals and ideals. Cultural products offered visible ways in which individuals within newly assimilated groups were able to consume, represent and project their allegiance. As an extension of the rhetoric of self-realisation, individuals were encouraged to make purchases to publicly display and articulate their individual selves ([Finnegan 1999: 30–5](#)). This type of participation in consumer capitalism was the extension of changing conceptions of the notion of desire as a democratic principle. The ability to desire the same goods and luxuries as others, regardless of age, race or gender, was viewed as personal and attainable, unlike wealth or power ([Leach 1993: 4](#)). Engagement with consumer capitalism through the purchase of cultural goods reflected this strong new concept of the democratisation of desire. This engagement was also understood as a patriotic gesture that reflected the democratic ideals on which the country was founded. Paradoxically, participation and production of these goods in consumer capitalism is inherently undemocratic: the production of goods is controlled by an elite and small group of corporations for the consumption by the masses ([Adorno 2002a: 377–8](#))⁶. When viewed in context of the concepts of self-determination and self-realisation, this powerful conflation of capitalism with democracy created the illusion that American identity is attainable through the patriotic process of purchase. The rhetoric of uplift and assimilation visible through the purchase and display of goods as a display of American identity is also audible in the popular musical culture of Tin Pan Alley and early recording technology.

Rehearing *Let's All Be Americans Now*

In the two discussed recordings of *Let's All Be Americans Now*, we can hear a dialogue between this Tin Pan Alley song and the social history of the United States just before its entry into World War I, a conversation that includes patriotism, military action, assimilation, and the rhetoric of uplift. Specifically, the texts and musical gestures of the emerging sub-style of patriotic battle cry songs were aimed at both assimilated and unassimilated groups of immigrants by appealing equally to individual self-determination and vows, by way of purchases, of allegiance to their adopted country. *Let's All Be Americans Now* highlights the many ways in which the concepts of uplift and assimilation are clearly audible in the Tin Pan Alley song of this era, through allegorical representation of the flag, military past and individualism. In the American Quartet recording, added musical quotations perform a cultural memory of the American Civil War, allowing new Americans to similarly perform both the knowledge and the memory of a defining American moment preceding their arrival. In hearing and decoding the obscured content of these two Civil War songs, new Americans demonstrated their new understanding of the intellectual and cultural cues important to an emerging collective American identity. The collectivity heard in the barbershop voices similarly elicit a one people nationalism: presented as a collective of singers, the arrangement of these voices masks the individuality of those singers, erasing their individual identities for the benefit of the message of unity. Similarly, the evocation of the American flag in lyrics and imagery, as well as a literal 'rally[ing] around the flag' at a crucial moment in the overall form, provide a rallying point for new Americans to the assimilationist message.

In mapping the musical representation of the early American flag in *The Star Spangled Banner* directly onto a pointed call to this war, the Hahl version furthered association of a collective military past with a contemporary American identity during World War I. The jarring effect



of the overlapped messages of flag and allegiance provide a startling moment of discontinuity, one that mimics the conflicting discourse of the possibility of assimilation for immigrants and the impossibility of ever fully shedding their hyphenated status.

In evaluating the specific moments that differentiate multiple related texts sharing a common overall identity, it is possible to see how these sounds contribute to the song as it was interpreted, altered and reflected to a mass audience through the cultural consumer products in sheet music, cylinder and disc form. The moments of discontinuity present in each recording interrupt our perception of sheet music as text, or of a unity of any particular song. Hearing these moments of interstice in both composition and performance of song at the beginning of World War I provide a way into larger conversations of identity. Each quotation simultaneously interrupts and interpolates, creating a conversation between all related versions, in a world where all coexist on equal footing. Listening to this conversation provides a far richer picture of the world in which these sounds were possible, probable, and relevant.

Less certain, however, is the agency of the immigrant populations themselves in these musical and commercial negotiations. Kenney reads meaning in the process of audience reception by which consumers shape the content of future recordings through their reaction to the musical and cultural gestures in the recordings they purchase. In contrast, Theodor Adorno's earlier writings on music and mass culture have theorised the irreparable impact of commodity culture on the music itself. The dual nature of Tin Pan Alley and recording technology, as both commercial industries and artistic products reflective of that industry, facilitated and necessitated compositional choices that varied each text. At the same time, both depended upon a recognisably shared identity as a point of comparison for the sake of a competitive and commercially successful product. While commodification clearly shaped the text, it is not the only influential force on music: the larger negotiations of uplift and assimilation actively affecting society at the time also shaped the content of the recordings. While the role of the consumer of these products and the immigrants to which the text speak is not clear, the musical gestures themselves reflect larger debates and values present in the social history of this time period.

Overall, these different sounds, familiarly coded with historical and military imagery demonstrate the multiple ways in which a belief in one specific, authentic American identity, was conflated with demonstrated support for the war. Defining Americanness as agreement with the United States military involvement in World War I, as this evaluation of *Let's All Be Americans Now* demonstrates, shows a greater negotiation of political and social tension mediated through music, tension that potentially othered immigrants, demanding that they assimilate into a society that would nonetheless continue to musically mark them as different. Through the conflation of patriotism, military action and legitimate Americanness within multiple popular and mass-disseminated media, these songs issued both an underlying call to assimilation and a perceived recourse to achieve it.

ENDNOTES

1. For more on exoticism and ethnicity in Tin Pan Alley, see Garrett (2008) and Millard (1995: 84–9).
2. Attribution of instrumentalists, arrangers and producers involved with early phonograph recordings was, in the main, not standardised. Packaging of discs and cylinders rarely contained this information. Further archival research must be done in order to bring more of this information to light.
3. While recordings with formal interruptions in the first few decades of the twentieth century created distinctions between the sheet music text and the recordings themselves, it is not clear the extent to which these interruptions also occurred in live stage performance. Very few manuscript arrangements of songs used in vaudeville performances survive and it is likely that any novelties, additions, or interruptions were worked out between the singer and the accompanist in advance and not notated. Further archival research seeking manuscripts from vaudeville is needed.
4. While *The Star Spangled Banner* was not formally adopted as the United States national anthem until 1933, it was part of a small established collection of national songs frequently circulated and acknowledged as patriotic in nature and function.
5. For more information on uplift, assimilation, self-realisation and American identity during the Progressive Era, refer to: Finnegan (1999); Leach (1993); Jacobson (2001); and King (2005).
6. 'Out of many, one': this quote was the unofficial motto of the United States until 1956 and is printed on most United States currency.



7. Adorno famously read this brand of consumer capitalism as fascist: the controlled production of cultural goods by a small, elite few inherently manipulates and controls society by neutralising the artistic and cultural value of the product. This commodification, in turn, flattens the meaning in it through its disconnection with the humanity of the subject and, in turn, the individual who consumes it:

While the public apparently became their master who has the choice among the infinite variety of cultural goods, the public actually was the victim of this whole process since the works became mute to the listener and lost any deeper hold on his experience, his development and his philosophy ([Adorno 2002a: 377–8](#)).

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the ways in which multiple recordings of Irving Berlin, Edgar Leslie and George Meyer's 'Let's All Be Americans Now' highlight different messages of patriotism, assimilation, and uplift in the United States at the beginning of World War I. During the years before the United States' entry into the conflict, discussions about the nature of American identity and the proper performance or display of that identity became a central political and social issue. These discussions were particularly directed towards new American immigrants whose loyalties were frequently questioned.

At the same time, recordings of Tin Pan Alley songs had become popular commodities separate from their sheet music counterparts. In order to differentiate different recordings made by different labels, musicians and producers employed a number of techniques including: additional instrumental sections, the inclusion of barbershop quartets and Sousa-esque band orchestration and, most notably, formal interruptions of the notated song structure with musical allusion to or direct quotation of popular patriotic songs.

This article examines 'Let's All Be Americans Now' by deploying contextualized comparative analyses of multiple versions as a way to engage with the discourse of Americanness and immigrant identity. Ultimately, the variation between multiple recorded versions of the song function as a lens by which we may view greater negotiations of the individual within the larger national identity, specifically within the context of patriotism, assimilation, and uplift.

Keywords. Phonograph, Uplift, Assimilation, American Identity, Tin Pan Alley

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