Divided Loyalties: Singing in the Occupation

To what extent do popular songs and their performers shape and reflect national identity at a time of political crisis and social disarray, such as the occupation of France by the Germans from 1940 to 1944? Songs are a somewhat neglected source of cultural and historical information, particularly for the study of changing emotions, attitudes and daily behaviour. Even if one samples only the comparatively small corpus of songs that survive in recordings, one discovers a wide variety: certain songs clearly put a case in favour of various ideological positions, while others comment on the problems of daily life. A representative selection thus covers topics as diverse as *maréchalisme* (that is, the cult of Marshal Pétain), the resistance and rationing. At the same time, star performers clearly possess symbolic power over mass audiences, even if they use a different form of discourse from political leaders. Their popularity and durability, apart from the content or aesthetic interest of their songs, suggest it is perfectly reasonable to see singers as vehicles expressing forms of national identity (albeit an identity which, in the context of the occupation, is fragmented and conflicting). After examining the issues raised by the expression of overt ideological commitment in the well-known and more obscure anthems of opposing groups, we will turn to the equally problematic question of songs which are usually perceived as forms of entertainment or escapism, paying particular attention to the career of Maurice Chevalier, since he is in many ways exemplary.

The authors of the *Mémoire de la chanson française* assert that 'De tous temps, la chanson a accompagné les gestes les plus quotidiens de la vie, elle a appelé au combat, célébré la rencontre des corps, provoqué le rire, tenté d'apprivoiser la mort' ['Throughout the ages, songs have accompanied the most basic actions of life: they have called to battle, celebrated the encounter of bodies, provoked laughter, attempted to tame death'][1]. Songs, in other words, are central to the defining factors of life, rather than simply incidental entertainments. Or should one argue rather that such apparent distractions can be as significant as the grander abstractions of ideologies and politics? Montherlant wrote of the Munich agreement (whereby France and Great Britain avoided war by abandoning Czechoslovakia to the Germans in 1938) that 'La France est rendue à la belote et à Tino Rossi' ['France has gone back to

belote and Tino Rossi']: a contemptuous reference from a right-wing authoritarian admirer of the Nazis to the fact that his compatriots preferred the distractions of card-playing or the famous Corsican tenor to the harsher realities of European power politics. For such commentators, Rossi's popularity (he recorded far more songs during the Second World War than any other French performer) signalled a woeful perversion of national identity and patriotic energy. While the schoolgirl Micheline Bood (whose family were anglophile Gaullists) rhapsodises adoringly in her Occupation diary over 'ce cher Tino Rossi' and his voice 'combien suave et mélodieuse' ['so mellifluous and melodious'][3], Alfred Fabre-Luce, a proponent of Vichy's programme of moral and social regeneration known as the National Revolution, complained that 'Un eunuque fait rêver les Françaises', as opposed to 'un chant viril de travailleur devant une terre en friche' ['A eunuch is making French women dream', 'the virile song of a worker ploughing a fallow field'].[4] Mass singing of this healthier variety was incorporated into Vichy's ideological programme of national purification. The Chantiers de jeunesse [youth work camps] were created in summer 1940 as a substitute for military service with the slogan 'Chanter c'est s'unir' ['to sing is to be united'], with collective discipline overriding musical talent; the authors of a manual for trainees noted that 'Le fait n'est pas de savoir mais de vouloir chanter' ['What matters is not being able to sing but wanting to'][5].

In practice, however, songs may well seek to promote the unity of groups (from the paramilitary collaborators of the Milice to the provocative sartorial eccentricities of swing and *zazous*), but such affirmation of group identity also exposes the profound division and antagonism between the groups which claim to speak for the nation. This can be illustrated by the two most famous songs of the occupation, which are respectively hymns to Pétain and to the resistance: 'Maréchal, nous voilà!' and 'Le Chant des partisans' ['Marshal, hwere we are', 'The Song of the partisans']. The first song was written by Montagard and Courtioux in 1941, with its most celebrated interpreter being the tenor André Dassary. In her excellent account of Vichy's exploitation of music, *Vichy sous chants* (1996), Nathalie Dompnier observes that Pétain's public appearances in the unoccupied southern zone controlled by Vichy

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[1] Duverney, A.-M., & O. d'Horrer, *Mémoire de la chanson française depuis 1900* (Paris, Musique et Promotion, 1979), p.7.
[2] Quoted in Cannavo, R., *Monsieur Trenet* (Paris, Lieu Commun, 1993), p.290.
[3] Bood, M., *Les Années doubles: journal d'une lycéenne* (Paris, Laffont, 1974), p.69.
[4] Quoted in Miller, G., *Les Pousse-au-jouir du Maréchal Pétain* (Paris, Livre de poche, 1988), p.150.

were carefully orchestrated spectacles, 'l'occasion de mises en scène musicales minutieuses qui doivent participer à l'élaboration de l'image de Pétain et au bon déroulement de ses visites' ['the occasion for detailed musical productions intended to help promote Pétain's image and the smooth running of his visits'], verging on religious ceremonies.[6] The parallel with the elaborate staging of Hitler's public manifestations is also worth noting, what the historian of the Third Reich Michael Burleigh has called 'exercises in mass bathos […] in which a man assumed mythic dimensions'.[7] Such spectacles may strike us retrospectively as tawdry and meretricious, for their instigators have lost both their emotional potency and political credibility, but this is not a reason to ignore or underestimate their impact on audiences whose limited knowledge and deprived material and social circumstances made such figures far more appealing.

Democratic pluralism, peace and prosperity, as well as the rise of the mass media have attenuated the power of the dictatorial demagogue who in such public displays is presented both as statesman controlling the destiny of nations and live performer seducing the masses. As Dompnier further notes, the mass reproduction of songs through the recording industry is largely a post-war phenomenon which weakened the collective, oral function which they still retained in the early 1940s (a period when sales of sheet music to be performed at home or in public were larger than those of records to be listened to more passively). As the cult of Pétain was elaborated, the jaunty march 'Maréchal, nous voilà!' effectively became the régime's unofficial anthem.

Une flamme sacrée
Monte du sol natal
Et la France enivrée
Te salue Maréchal
Tous les enfants qui t'aiment
Et vénèrent tes ans
Et ton appel suprême
Ont répondu: «présent».

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[5] Quoted in Miller, p.145.
[6] Dompnier, N., *Vichy à travers chants* (Paris, Nathan, 1996), p.114.
[7] Burleigh, M., *The Third Reich* […], p. 266.

Maréchal, nous voilà!
Devant toi, le sauveur de la France
Nous jurons, nous tes gars
De servir et de suivre tes pas.
Maréchal, nous voilà!
Tu nous as redonné l'espérance
La Patrie renaîtra
Maréchal, Maréchal, nous voilà![8]

It also spawned many imitations whose trite idolising of Pétain seems ludicrously blasphemous and grotesquely at odds with historical and biographical reality to anyone who studies their texts sixty years on. Hence Hervé Le Boterf's observation that André Dassary exploited his popularity to interpret 'une kyrielle de marches dans le style soldat-laboureur propres à discréditer, par leur niaiserie, la politique du retour à la terre' ['a string of marches in the soldier-ploughman style liable to discredit through their idiocy the policy of the return to the soil'][9]. This ironic effect was, obviously, not intended. Thus Pétain in 'Maréchal, nous voilà!' appears as sacred flame, patriarchal guardian, military saviour and unifier of the nation, offering work and hope in place of the ravages of war, although retrospectively we know that most of such promises were broken (Pétain was a childless roué who sank into senility as his régime became a police state which abandoned much of its territory, economy and citizens to the Germans). Nevertheless, to counteract such propaganda, with its infantilisation of the nation and equation of Pétain with France, required a powerful counterblast. The resistance attempted to appropriate some of the musical charm of 'Maréchal, nous voilà!' by producing parodic versions, either reversing its idolatrous terms to make Pétain an enemy (thus 'Malgré toi, nous sauverons la France,/Nous jurons qu'un beau jour/L'ennemi partira pour toujours' ['In spite of you, we will save France. We swear that one fine day the enemy will go away'][10]) or transferring his virtues to de Gaulle as 'Général, nous voilà!'.

[8] A literal translation has the unfortunate effect of accentuating the crashing banality of this ditty: 'A sacred flame rises from the native soil and France, intoxicated, salutes you, Marshal. All your children who love you and venerate your age have answered "present" to your supreme call. Marshal, here we are before you, the saviour of France. We your lads swear to serve and follow your footsteps. Marshal, here we are, you have given hope back to us. The motherland will be reborn. Marshal, here we are, here we are.'
[9] Le Boterf, H., *La Vie parisienne sous l'Occupation* (Paris, Éditions France-Empire, 1997), p.263.
[10] Quoted by Dompnier, p.46.

In this respect, it is worth recalling that although the Germans banned performances of 'La Marseillaise' in the occupied northern zone, Vichy was determined to retain the national anthem, despite its unpopularity with past authoritarian regimes owing to its revolutionary and anti-German origins as the 'Chant de guerre pour l'armée du Rhin' ['war song for the Rhine army'] (composed by Joseph Rouget de Lisle in 1792:[11] for details, see Vovelle, 1998). Versions published by Vichy suppressed references to 'cohortes étrangères' and 'vils despotes', but its bellicose, bloodthirsty stanzas still remain closer to the spirit of resistance than to collaboration (the final stanza 'Amour sacré de la Patrie…', which usually remained uncensored, still celebrates the triumph of Liberty over 'tes ennemis expirants'). This paradox is partly explained by the celebrity of 'La Marseillaise', an essential patriotic commodity, and partly by a long-standing tradition. Dompnier argues that

> l'hymne est une représentation sociale que la population d'un pays s'approprie, qui fonde son identité et la définit non seulement par rapport à elle-même mais aussi aux yeux de l'extérieur. ['the national anthem is a social representation adopted by the population of a country, which founds its identity and defines it not only in relation to itself but also in the eyes of outsiders.'][12]

Louis-Jean Calvet has shown that recycling famous songs like 'La Marseillaise' for diverse ideological purposes was common practice throughout the nineteenth century (one might note in passing the existence of numerous variants of the British national anthem, which likewise attempt to universalise the aspirations of conflicting political groupings). One early nineteenth-century reference source in fact enumerates 2,350 'timbres', that is 'des airs destinés à la parodie' ('parodie' here meaning the use of existing music with new words, without necessarily implying satirical distortion).

Whereas 'Maréchal, nous voilà!' in its original form as a jaunty rallying call avoids the divisions and betrayals of Pétain's régime, the song which encapsulates resistance, on the other hand, 'Le Chant des partisans', co-authored by the Gaullists Joseph Kessel and Maurice Druon in 1943, with music composed by Anna Marly, is a

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[11] For details, see Vovelle, M., 'La Marseillaise: War or Peace', in P. Nora ed., *Realms of Memory*, vol. 3, *Symbols*, English editrion ed. L.R. Kritzmann & trans. A. Goldhammer (New York, Columbia UP, 1998).

[12] Dompnier, p.??

much more sombre and solemn evocation of 'L'Armée des ombres' (The army in the shadows: the title of the novel on resistance which Kessel published in the same year).

Ami, entends-tu le vol noir des corbeaux sur nos plaines?
Ami, entends-tu les cris sourds du pays qu'on enchaîne?
Ohé! Partisans, ouvriers et paysans, c'est l'alarme!
Ce soir l'ennemi connaîtra le prix du sang et des larmes.

Montez de la mine, descendez des collines, camarades.
Sortez de la paille, les fusils, la mitraille, les grenades.
Ohé! Les tueurs, à la balle ou au couteau, tuez vite!
Ohé! saboteur, attention à ton fardeau, dynamite!

C'est nous qui brisons les barreaux des prisons pour nos frères.
La haine à nos trousses et la faim qui nous pousse, la misère.
Il y a des pays où les gens au creux du lit font des rêves.
Ici, nous, vois-tu, nous on marche et nous on tue, nous on crève…[13]

Compared with the facile, jaunty optimism of 'Maréchal, nous voilà!', what is most striking about this song (reinforced by its sombre, dirge-like music) is the brutal directness with which it evokes the business of resistance, the action of killing or being killed (by bullet, knife, or dynamite). The partisans being called to action are ordinary men (workers, peasants, miners), for whom survival remains uncertain. Whether the appeal was actually answered or even heard is another matter: Richard Raskin has shown that 'Le Chant des partisans' was little known even by maquisards in France before the liberation in 1944; its initial function was to promote a positive image of the resistance for doubters abroad.[14] The song was adopted as the theme tune for the Free French programme 'Honneur et Patrie' broadcast from London by the BBC from May 1943 to May 1944 and has acquired a quasi-sacred status as the anthem of Resistance, in spite or because of the stereotyped images it conveys and its

[13] 'Friend, can you hear the black flight of the crows over our plains? Friend, can you hear the muffled cries of the land in chains? Ahoy, partisans, workers and peasants, sound the alarm. Tonight the enemy will learn the price of blood and tears. Come up from the mines and come down from the hills, comrades. Bring out the guns, bullets and grenades. Killers, kill quickly with bullet or knife. Saboteur, watch out for your burden, dynamite. We will break the prison bars for our brothers, pursued by hatred and driven by hunger and misery. There are countries where people dream asleep in their beds. But we are on the march, killing and dying.'

[14] Raskin, R., 'Le Chant des partisans', *Folklore*, 102 (1991), 62-76.

elision of the complexities of resistance. Thus the ceremony marking the consecration of Jean Moulin as the supreme martyr of the resistance with the transfer of his supposed ashes to the Pantheon in 1964 concluded with a choir singing 'Le Chant des partisans' (though Moulin's activities as an administrator and co-ordinator, the political rivalries which he encountered, and his probable betrayal to the Gestapo by a senior member of the rival resistance movement Combat, naturally all fall outside the compass of this song). In a somewhat pious anthology entitled *Les Chansons de notre histoire*, André Gauthier concludes unsurprisingly of this 'Musique obsédante et profonde' that 'on pouvait entendre en elle l'invincible accent de la liberté en marche […] par le jeu de ses dernières notes en suspens, l'impression de menace signifiait la lutte à poursuivre et l'ultime effort vers la victoire!' ['Haunting, profound music, in which one hears the invincible sound of liberty on the march…. Its final, unresolved notes convey the menacing impression of the ongoing struggle and the final effort to achieve victory'][15].

Such an interpretation also suggests how inevitably songs tend to be fitted retrospectively into an ideological agenda as much dependent on subsequent historical and political developments as their actual music and text. In fact the two songs 'Maréchal, nous voilà!' and 'Le Chant des partisans', with their explicit commitment either to *pétainisme* or violent resistance, are only the best-known survivors of many ideologically committed songs, most of which have been consigned to oblivion. This applies particularly to the anthems of disgraced collaborationist organisms like the Milice, the Legion of Volunteers against Bolshevism (the LVF) or the French Division Charlemagne of the Waffen SS. While the song of the LVF is a bland appeal for Franco-German reconciliation ('Nous apportons avec nous l'espérance/Que nos deux pays enfin réconciliés/Écarteront à jamais la souffrance/Qu'ils ont connue dans les annés passées' ['We bring with us hope that our two countries, reconciled at last, will shake off for ever the suffering which they have endured in past years']), SS songs celebrate death and destruction ('Là où nous passons/Que tout tremble/Et le diable rit avec nous'['When we pass by, let everything trmeble, and the devil laughs with us'])[16]. An anthology published in 1945 entitled *La France nouvelle: chansons de la Résistance* celebrates, in the words of its anonymous editor, 'des voix qui

[15] Gauthier, A., *Les Chansons de notre histoire* (Paris, Pierre Waleffe, 1967), p.204.
[16] Quoted by Giolitto, P., *Volontaire français sous l'uniforme allemand* (Paris, Perrin, 1999), pp.76, 398.

chantent pour rythmer l'effort, chasser les craintes et consoler les souffrances, pour clamer l'espoir, l'enthousiasme, la joie de la libération, la foi en l'avenir de la patrie et de l'humanité!' ['voices singing to give rhythm to their efforts, to dispel their fears, to offer consolation for suffering, to proclaim hope, enthusiasm and joy in liberation, faith in the future of the motherland and humanity!'][17]. The hundred or so texts in this collection (the music had to be purchased separately) embrace many aspects of allied and French victory, from celebrations of the maquis, such as 'Ceux du maquis' (another song made famous by the BBC) and 'Le Chant des FFI', to endless patriotic marches and ditties, and the national anthems and most popular hits of the victorious nations, done into French (such as 'Dieu sauve le roi!' and 'Oui nous n'avons pas de bananes'). While songs which welcome the departure of the Germans and their Vichy acolytes and the return of prisoners predominate (so that Vichy is present only as a purely negative interlude) certain songs which found favour during the Occupation survive, despite their rather equivocal messages (e.g. Maurice Chevalier's numbers 'Ça fait d'excellents Français' and 'Notre espoir', which will be discussed below, and Charles Trenet's 'Douce France'), just as other songs which evoke occupation fashions (wooden soles and painted legs) are retained. Offering a liberation variant on a well-known song is a further possibility: thus Trenet's 'La Romance de Paris' is given with a 'Version 44' and as 'La Romance du maquis'.

These ready adaptations indicate how untypical explicit ideological commitment is in popular songs, which generally aim to be all-embracing rather than limited to narrow sectional interests. Indeed, most songs produced during the occupation fall into a fairly neutral category, of entertainment or what might be called oblique commentary on issues of daily life. Nonetheless, certain songs, despite their apparent neutrality or blandness, can evoke attitudes and feelings which produce a surprisingly hostile response in commentators for whom they represent symbolic but negative values. Thus while most listeners today probably find the comic songs of the phoney war period at best anodyne exercises in nostalgia, or at worst vainglorious expressions of optimism in an allied victory over the Germans, which the defeat of 1940 was to render nugatory, the anthologist André Gauthier is enraged by the French version of 'On ira pendre notre linge sur la ligne Siegfried' (1939: adapted by Paul Misraki from Jimmy Kennedy and performed by Ray Ventura and his band, who were

[17] *La France nouvelle: chansons de la Résistance* (Paris, Éditions Salabart, 1945), p.1.

celebrated for their comic numbers, until their bandleader's Jewish origins drove them into exile in South America for the course of the Occupation): 'ce refrain qui eut son heure de célébrité nous semble aujourd'hui l'un des meilleurs exemples de bourrage de crânes et de crétinisation de la masse!' ['this refrain had its moment of fame but seems to us today a perfect example of brainwashing and cretinisation of the masses!].[18]

Criticism of the Germans or collaboration was impossible in songs performed or recorded in occupied France, given the rigorous censorship imposed on publications and the entertainment industry. Occasionally, satirical references escaped notice, by accident or design. For example, Radio Montpellier was suspended for a week in May 1941 for playing Chevalier's 'Prenez le temps d'aimer', which contains a spoken, veiled criticism of Hitler — typically, the career-minded Chevalier complained about the broadcast rather than the ban.[19] In her unpublished study of 406 songs produced from 1941 to 1943, Sophie Dransart has found only one critical reference to Pétain (in Georges Milton's 'Nous les Français', 1942).[20] That being said, however, more indirect criticism of the living conditions produced by Occupation (such as shortages, the black market, bureaucracy) is in fact a common feature in many songs, the best of which are often memorably inventive in a humorous or *fantaisiste* fashion, 'sur le mode grotesque, de l'exagération, des jeux de mots ou du ridicule' ['using the grotesque, exaggeration, wordplay or ridicule'.[21] Andrex's 'Monsieur Jo' (1943) recounts the exploits of a notorious profiteer until his final downfall (the parallel with the infamous scrap metal dealer Joanovici seems inescapable, although the latter escaped retribution till well after the Liberation). Georgius, dubbed by one admirer the 'Daumier de la chanson'),[22] in 'Elle a un stock' (1941), recounts the hoarding and bartering exploits of a *femme de ménage* in an increasingly surreal inventory. Such insistence on essentially domestic woes is seen by many commentators as a form of avoidance of wider and harsher political and military realities. As Dransart says, 'La chanson, de par sa nature, est un moyen

[18] Gauthier, op. cit., p.200.
[19] See Eck, H., ed., *La Guerre des ondes* (Paris, Armand Colin/Lausanne Payot, 1985), p.32.
[20] Dransart, S., 'La Chanson de variété en France sous l'Occupation', mémoire de maîtrise (Université de Paris I, 1994).
[21] Dransart, op. cit., p.91.
[22] Chollet, J.-J., *Georgius, l'amuseur public n^{o} 1* (Paris, Christian Pirot, 1997), p.7. See Lloyd, C., 'Comic Songs in the Occupation', *Journal of European Studies*, XXXI (2001), 379-93, for a fuller discussion.

d'évasion' ['song by its nature is a means of escape'],[23] a point reinforced by the significant rise in attendance at cinemas and other public shows during the occupation. But the pejorative notion of escapism overlooks the rather obvious fact that songs and their performers are hardly able to provide practical solutions to social and economic problems; what they offer instead through music and verse, in other words through an aestheticised commentary on shared experience, is a sense of solace and solidarity. Here again, words and music are less important than performance, particularly in front of a live audience: 'Par la seule force de communication, la chanson [est] devenue un moment d'émotion collective, un instant artistique' ['By the sheer force of communication, song has become a moment embodying collective emotion, an artistic instant'].[24] Hence Peter Hawkins's more persuasive argument that popular 'songs fulfil a very basic need for the stylisation of our everyday experience' (2000: 57).[25]

In many respects, the career of a singer like Maurice Chevalier is typical of entertainers during the occupation and therefore merits attention.[26] Self-serving opportunism and a reluctance to quit the spotlight of public attention, even when temporary invisibility might be a better survival tactic, could be seen as his main characteristics. This is to ignore the fact, however, that at least for French audiences, immensely popular singers like Chevalier do have a genuine consolatory function; they encapsulate and express feelings and attitudes which are widely shared by their public. Can we recapture and explain some of this lost glory, over half a century after the event? Does the popular artist fulfil a civic mission, especially in moments of crisis? And did Chevalier betray this mission by collaborating with the Vichy government and the Germans between 1940 and 1944? Such questions are central to understanding popular songs during the occupation.

In May 1944, Josephine Baker (one of the very few artistes to engage in resistance activities) condemned Chevalier as a 'collaborationniste nazi' who merited severe punishment; and within a few months, after being detained by maquisards in

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[23] Dransart, op. cit., p.137.
[24] Dillaz, S., *La Chanson sous la Troisième République* (Paris, Tallandier, 1991), p.114.
[25] Hawkins, P., *Chanson: the French Singer-Songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the Present Day* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000), p.57.
[26] For a fuller discussion, see Lloyd, C., 'Maurice Chevalier et l'Occupation', in *La Culture populaire en France*, ed. P. Whyte & C. Lloyd (Durham Modern Languages Series, 1997), 79-92, and Charman, T., '*Chantons sous l'occupation*: Maurice Chevalier and Collaboration in Occupied France', *Imperial War Museum Review*, 6 (1991), 96-108.

the Dordogne, he learned that a court in Algiers had sentenced him to death. What had he done during the occupation to call down such an exemplary judgement? In November 1941, he had accepted an invitation to perform in Germany, without payment, for French prisoners of war at Alten Grabow (the camp where he had himself been a prisoner in the First War). In addition, he had appeared on stage on frequent occasions between 1941 and early 1943, mainly in the unoccupied south zone, but also for several months at the Casino de Paris and in Belgium; he had also made a series of eleven broadcasts for Radio-Paris, the station controlled by the German Propagandastaffel. On the other hand, he spent the last eighteen months of the occupation in virtual retreat, first in Cannes and then in the Dordogne, passing the time by writing his autobiography. Unfortunately, he took up this literary pursuit too late to escape the hostile attention of critics who began accusing him of collaboration from 1942; envy and spite may have motivated his detractors as much as authentic patriotism.

Chevalier describes these tumultuous events in the third volume of his autobiography, *Tempes grises*, published in 1948. Between 1946 and 1969 he would tirelessly produce ten volumes altogether. In fact he was rapidly cleared of all charges (thanks in part to support from the Communist party) and was able to add a new career as a writer to his activities as a singer and actor. To understand Chevalier's enormous popularity and his subsequent behaviour during the occupation (which seems both representative and reprehensible), it is useful to recall his origins in the poorest classes of Parisian society in the late nineteenth century. In the words of the historian Serge Dillaz:

> Le personnage de Maurice Chevalier fait de distinction et de gouaille synthétise à lui seul le formidable brassage social occasionné par la Grande Guerre. A ce titre, il est plus qu'un simple interprète. Il est miroir. Il se reconnaît dans le public et ce dernier se reconnaît en lui. [The character created by Maurice Chevalier, mixing refinement and lowbrow humour, encapsulates the tremendous social intermingling caused by the Great War. In this respect, he is more than just a simple performer. He recognises himself in the public, and the public recognises itself in him.][27]

[27] Dillaz, op. cit., p.114, 177.

In September 1939, he heard the news of the invasion of Poland while on a Riviera golf course, in the company of the Duke of Windsor (no doubt Chevalier thought that this disgraced monarch, who was on friendly terms with Nazi leaders, was a good connection). In fact, he was fond of admitting his ignorance of political issues with a rather complacent disingenuousness which overlooks the influence exerted by popular entertainers:

> Qu'on nous laisse tranquillement […] faire nos métiers de distrayeurs. Que ceux qui font œuvre politique, que ceux dont c'est la raison de vivre, l'idée ou l'intérêt prennent leurs responsabilités et que ceux qui ne peuvent être que de simples artistes soient laissés à leur industrie de sourire et de grâce. […] Deux denrées bien nécessaires à la Santé française. [Just leave us alone to do our job as entertainers. Let those who are in politics, for whom politics is their main reason for living, idea or interest, accept their responsibilities, while those who can only be simple artists are left to pursue their industry of smiles and graces. Two products which are certainly necessary for French health.][28]

However, as this last reference to the nation's well-being suggests, Chevalier considers singing to be more than a frivolous or superfluous distraction:

> C'est à travers les chansons que chantent et qu'ont chanté les peuples, que se retrouvent les sentiments et les émotions du pays, aussi bien dans le malheur qu'aux époques ensoleillées. [It is through songs that peoples sing and have sung, that the sentiments and emotions of nations are given form, both in times of unhappiness and in sunny periods.][29]

He clearly sees that popular art can have a therapeutic function and the star performer can act as a vehicle which expresses and comments on the feelings of his audience.

Maurice Chevalier certainly had no hesitation in continuing his national mission through the first three years of the occupation. Unfortunately, in so doing he displayed a somewhat blinkered conformism and opportunism; after the event, his attempts to exculpate himself by references to unavoidable pressures and obligations which forced him to carry on performing also sound unconvincing. The issue is not so much one of overt commitment to either resistance or collaboration, as one of the moral responsibility of the celebrity who can choose to exert influence in a positive or negative sense, to appear courageous or craven. Like the great majority of French

[28] Chevalier, M., *Tempes grises* (Paris, Julliard, 1948), p.51.

people, he tells us, 'je croyais à Pétain au début de son règne' (1948: 108)['I believed in Pétain at the beginning of his reign'].[30] Just before his performance at the Casino de Paris, in September 1941 the widely-read newspaper *Le Petit Parisien* printed an interview headed 'Maurice Chevalier, le populaire artiste, prône la collaboration entre les peuples français et allemand'['Maurice Chevalier, the popular artist, is promoting collaboration between the French and German peoples']. In his memoirs, Chevalier claims that this interview is an 'abominable fausseté' ['abominable falsehood'][31], although his enthusiastic remarks about Marshal Pétain were repeated a fortnight later in *Comœdia* and probably during his subsequent broadcasts on Radio Paris.[32] As for the notorious visit to Alten Grabow, Chevalier claims that he had merely acceded to the entreaties of French POWs who 'réclament leur chanteur national'['demanded their national singer']; again the French and international press distorted this event by alleging that 'Maurice Chevalier vient de faire une tournée dans les villes d'Allemagne' ['Maurice Chevalier has just gone on tour in German cities'].[33]

Eight months later, the American magazine *Life* published in its issue dated 24 August 1942 a black list of 'some of the Frenchmen condemned by the Underground for collaborating with the Germans: some to be assassinated, others to be tried when France is free'.[34] Next to politicians like Déat, Pétain, Laval, Darlan and Doriot, one finds the names of Mistinguett, Marcel Pagnol, Sacha Guitry and Maurice Chevalier. The actress Françoise Rosay had denounced Chevalier and Guitry to the British press before settling in Hollywood (though she herself had appeared in a film made in Berlin in 1938); possibly she gave the names of her more successful colleagues to *Life* as well. However, despite such warnings, Chevalier returned to the occupied zone to perform again for six weeks at the Casino de Paris from September 1942. Seeing himself 'entouré de trappes et d'embûches' ['surrounded by traps and pitfalls'](Chevalier, 1948: 80),[35] he finally abandoned performing. Nevertheless, he was denounced over the airwaves of Radio Londres by the satirical singer Pierre Dac in February 1944. At the Liberation, his execution by agents of the resistance was

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[29] Chevalier, op. cit., p.10.
[30] Chevalier, op. cit., p.108.
[31] Chevalier, op. cit., p.63.
[32] See Behr, E., *Thank Heaven for Little Girls: the True Story of Maurice Chevalier's Life and Times* (London, Hutchinson, 1993), p.229.
[33] Chevalier, op. cit., pp.66-67.
[34] Reproduced in Guitry, S., *Quatre ans d'occupations* (Paris, Éditions de l'Élan, 1947), p.409.
[35] Chevalier, op. cit., p.80.

announced by the international press. *The New York Times* reported on 27 August 1944, for instance: 'French report Chevalier slain for collaborating with Germans' (in the event, the victim proved to be a namesake, the pro-Vichy mayor of a provincial town).

There is little doubt that Maurice Chevalier behaved with ostentatious indiscretion during the Occupation. The chronicler Galtier-Boissière noted in his journal the caustic rejoinder given by the 'perroquet pro-hitlérien de Radio-Paris', ['pro-Hitler parrot on Radio Paris'] Jean Hérold-Paquis, at his trial for treason in September 1945: 'Je gagnais 30 000 francs par mois, donc en deux mois, ce que Maurice Chevalier touchait, au même micro, pour une seule émission' ['I used to earn 30,000 francs a month, that is in two months what Maurice Chevalier earned for a single broadcast on the same station'].[36] Whereas Hérold-Paquis was condemned to death and shot on 11 October 1945, Chevalier was rapidly cleared of all blame (like the majority of entertainers briefly detained at the Liberation). But whatever the huge sums earned by stars and their rather unappealing mercenary zeal (Édith Piaf, who also toured French prison camps in Germany, could command the equivalent of a clerk's annual salary for a single performance), their performances of songs or works of art can hardly be equated with the political pronouncements of Nazi propagandists, unless one can find an explicitly pro-collaborationist message or ideological bias in these songs. Hérold-Paquis's lawyer claimed at his trial that his client too, when all was said and done, was no more than an entertainer; the court saw a clear distinction (cf. *Les Procès de la radio*, 1947).[37]

As for Chevalier, he went on to claim, in the English version of his autobiography published in 1960, that he had helped the resistance in 1943 by acting as a clandestine *boîte aux lettres*; he also made much of the help which he gave to the Jewish parents of his female companion Nita Raya. Like many Frenchmen, in other words, Chevalier was happy to contribute retrospectively to the glorious myth of resistance, or *résistancialisme*, by eliding the less honourable aspects of his wartime record and stressing unverifiable deeds of patriotism. However, this hardly merits severe condemnation, still less the accusation of collaboration, given his apparent lack of ideological commitment (his position of opportunistic *attentisme* or time-serving is characteristic of most entertainers). How should one interpret the commentary on

[36] Galtier-Boissière, J., *Journal1940-1950* (Paris, Quai Voltaire, 1992), p.508.

defeat, occupation and liberation which one finds in several of Chevalier's best-known songs from the period? He observed correctly that 'Il n'a jamais été question pour moi de messages obscurs ou de rébellion contre quoi que ce soit' ['There was never any question of my preaching obscure messages or rebellion against anything'][38]. Nonetheless, while the message may be clear enough (and part of his songs' charm stems from their luminous simplicity), the interpretation which it invites can vary according to the exact circumstances in which it is heard.

Three well-known songs provide effective illustration: 'Ça fait d'excellents Français' (Boyer & Van Parys, 1939), 'Notre espoir' (Chevalier & Betti, 1941) and 'La Chanson du maçon' (Vandair/Chevalier & Betti, 1941). The first song offers an amusing and perceptive satirical account of the failings of the French army during the first months of the war, the so-called phoney war or *drôle de guerre*. Although the documentary value of such a comic piece should not be exaggerated, the picture it paints goes a long way towards explaining the débâcle of May 1940, in the obvious defeatism of its final lines, for example (see Lloyd, 2001, for more detailed discussion).[39]'Ça fait d'excellents Français' merits a parenthetical detour, or rather a return to the issue of songs being used for overt propaganda purposes. This is because its popularity made it a prime target in 'La Guerre des ondes'['the war of the airwaves'], that is the use of music for propaganda purposes in radio broadcasts. About half of the daily output of Radio Paris (the German-controlled station which broadcast over the whole of occupied France) was devoted to music, including a programme called 'Au rythme des temps' which adopted famous songs for propaganda. Their adversaries, the team who produced the celebrated 'Les Français parlent aux Français' for the French section of the BBC in London also 'font assaut d'esprit «chansonnier» pour ridiculiser l'adversaire' ['launched an assault using satirical songs to ridicule their adversary'], their main innovation being 'd'organiser une émission politique comme un spectacle' ['to organise a poltical broadcast like a variety show'].[40] The humorists Pierre Dac and Maurice Van Moppès produced a stream of parodic songs deriding collaborators and the Nazis, including Dac's version of 'Ça fait d'excellents Français', which targets the greed for fame and lucre of stars like Maurice Chevalier, who were happy to accept large sums to perform on Radio

[37] For more details, see *Les Procès de la radio* (Paris, Albin Michel, 1947).
[38] Chevalier, M., *Les Pensées de Momo* (Paris, Presses de la cité, 1970), p.96.
[39] See Lloyd, 'Comic Songs…', op. cit., for further details.

Paris and to ignore the propaganda benefits which they thereby offered to the Germans.

Dac's willingness to commit himself to resistance shows that the entertainer can if he wishes join in the propaganda battle: in fact in the closing weeks of the Occupation, he engaged in a virulent war of words with Vichy's minister of propaganda, Philippe Henriot, cut short by the latter's assassination. Hence his closing words that 'Henriot est mort pour Hitler, fusillé par les Français' ['Henriot died for Hitler, shot by the French'].[41] After the Liberation, he claimed that he helped save Chevalier from further persecution, seeing him as a 'victime de sa célébrité',[42] though Chevalier counted Dac as one of his main persecutors. But despite the undoubted personal courage of a satirist like Dac, which distinguishes him radically from so many other entertainers, and despite the propaganda value of his texts, the problem with such parodic songs is their ephemeral and parasitic nature. Not only do they require their audience to have a good knowledge of the original version which they distort, but also they seem rather crude in comparison. Thus Dac's simple contrast between bad and excellent Frenchmen is much less subtle than the ironic awareness of social and ideological divisions revealed in Chevalier's original version. Similarly Van Moppès's reworking of standard numbers like 'Prosper' or 'Tout va très bien, madame la marquise' show none of the wit and inventiveness of the original versions, limited as they are simply to poking fun at Hitler. The 'Couplet 1944' added by an unknown author to 'Ça fait d'excellents Français' in the anthology of resistance songs discussed earlier again does no more than offer sycophantic praise of the FFIs, completing losing the tone of affectionate derision that makes the original so telling. At best, all that distinguishes such songs is their overt commitment to the cause of resistance.

If we return to Chevalier's two other songs, it is no surprise to discover that the singer was much more cautious in offering any but the blandest of opinions. In the case of 'Notre espoir' (where he wrote the words himself), ironically the German censor was suspicious of the phrase 'Zim ba boum ba la', 'craignant quelque sens caché'['fearing there was some hidden meaning'], according to the composer Henri

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[40] See Eck, op. cit., p.9, 67
[41] Dac, P., *Un Français libre à Londres en guerre* (Paris, Éditions France-Empire, 1972), p.232.
[42] Dac, op. cit., p.282.

Betti (quoted by Kirgener, 1988: 139-40),[43] though the absence of meaning was meant to be the point. Indeed, we are to understand that the best policy is not to express controversial views but to feign joyful feelings, 'sans grande joie pourtant'['with little real joy, however']:

L'important c'était de recommencer
Qu'importe l'expression
L'essentiel était de pouvoir dispenser du rêve en chanson[44]

This urge for quiet renewal is expressed again in 'La Chanson du maçon', which is often interpreted as a pro-Vichy song. There is a further appeal for unity and reconstruction:

Si tout le monde chantait comme les maçons
Si chacun apportait son moellon
Nous rebâtirions notre maison…[45]

As Henri Betti remarked, had it appeared three years later, this song would have been understood not as a 'hymne pétainiste' but as a celebration of *la France combattante* (the lyricist Maurice Vandair was in fact a member of the French Communist Party).[46] The fact remains that propaganda in favour of Vichy's National Revolution did exploit images close to those evoked by this song; such as the well-known drawing of a ruined house, representing the Third Republic sapped by Jewry and the leftist reforms of the pre-war Front populaire, set against a splendid new house representing the virile values of Vichy's État français. On the other hand, as Laurent Gervereau notes, in the nationalist domain, Vichy and Resistance propaganda often overlaps, since both claim to speak for the nation and its eternal values; and the observation extends to cultural representations, so that a famous song like Charles Trenet's 'Douce France' 'reprend une terminologie pétainiste alors que certains y voient une allusion à la Résistance' ['adopts Péainist terminology, though others see in it an allusion to Resistance'].[47] In any event, three years later, Chevalier exchanged

[43] Quoted by Kirgener, C., *Maurice Chevalier* (Paris, Vernal/Lebaud, 1988), pp.139-40.
[44] 'The main thing was to start again, whatever the expression. The essential thing was to be able to give out dreams in song.'
[45] 'If everone sang like builders, if everyone brought along his breeze block, we'd soon rebuild our house.']
[46] See Kirgener, op. cit., pp.144-45.
[47] Gervereau, L., & D. Peeschanski, *La Propagande sous Vichy* (Paris, BDIC, 1990), p.143.

the ‘églogue vichyssoise’ of ‘Ça sent si bon la France’ (Larue & Louiguy, 1941) for the ‘patriotisme viril et résistant’ of ‘Fleur de Paris’ (Bourtayre & Vandair, 1944).[48]

Such ambiguities show that Chevalier cannot be accused of actively promoting the Vichy regime in his songs, unless their content is wilfully distorted. In this context, it is interesting to recall that the film director Marcel Ophuls exploited Chevalier’s music and personality in his demystifying documentary film *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (1971), not only in order to suggest the cultural climate of the occupation but also rather more tendentiously to suggest troubling affinities between culture and politics. For example, towards the middle of the first part of the film, entitled ‘L’effondrement’[‘the collapse’], we are shown a newsreel extract about ‘La Visite du Maréchal’. The director replaces the original commentary by Chevalier’s song ‘Ça sent si bon la France’, which has the effect of creating a series of derisive equivalents. As we see Marshal Pétain meeting his subjects, we hear the national singer Maurice Chevalier extolling the virtues of *la France profonde*. The satirical intention seems fairly obvious: by promoting a pro-Vichy message, Chevalier is exposed as a collaborator who is assisting the senile dictator and his regime as they dupe the French nation. Culturally, in other words, Chevalier is supposed to be the equivalent of Pétain in the field of politics, although this rather crude interpretation may not actually be the one Ophuls wants to provoke.

In any case, it seems unlikely Ophuls intended to slander Maurice Chevalier, whose music has a simple, plebeian appeal that is remote from Vichy’s reactionary, exclusive elitism. A more persuasive interpretation is that Chevalier is meant to be emblematic of the average Frenchman, overtaken and humiliated by events and wanting above all to be left in peace. Chevalier’s music is heard four times in *Le Chagrin et la pitié*. ‘Ça fait d’excellents Français’ and ‘Notre espoir’ accompany the credits at the beginning and end of the first part. The penultimate sequence of the second part (entitled ‘Le choix’[‘the choice’]) shows the interview in English which Chevalier gave to Paramount in 1944 when he was seeking to exculpate himself. By recalling the rumours of his death (or liquidation), the singer presents himself as a victim and survivor of the chaos of liberation. Since this impression of dishonesty and discomfort is characteristic of many other interviews in *Le Chagrin et la pitié*, Maurice Chevalier’s exercise in self-justification makes him a typical sample of the

[48] See Perrault, G., *Paris sous l’Occupation* (Paris, 1987), p. 190.

discreditable behaviour which the film exposes with cruel satisfaction. Finally, this last song is used, now in an orchestrated version, to accompany the last sequence which shows General de Gaulle's triumphal visit to Clermont-Ferrand. This invites the conclusion that Maurice Chevalier and the Gallic spirit which he embodies have in effect survived the transition between two interchangeable political regimes, that songs and popular culture actually have a more durable legitimacy than political leaders. If a derisory equivalence was established between Chevalier and Pétain at the beginning of the film, at the end the director establishes a correspondence between Pétain and de Gaulle, as the latter takes on the provincial tour of inspection of his disgraced predecessor. Monarchs come and go, but Maurice Chevalier lasts for ever, it would seem.

Given that 'La chance de Maurice Chevalier est de s'être trouvé en harmonie parfaite avec l'air du temps' ['Maurice Chevalier had the luck to be in perfect harmony with the spirit of his time'][49] the fact that he supported Pétain in 1941-42 is hardly astonishing. Is this a reason to condemn him or accuse him and other singers of betraying their mission as representatives of French culture? The authors of a history of French song observe rightly that

> Chevalier s'est toujours inscrit dans le cadre des idées, des normes dominantes. […] Socialement, il était lui-même une réussite du système et, par son personnage […] et par l'idéologie de ses chansons, il servait de caution populaire à l'ordre établi (Brunschwig et al., 1981: 94-95). ['Chevalier always followed the stream of dominant ideas and norms. Socially, he was himself a successful product of the system and through his character and the ideology of his songs provided a popular guarantee for the establishment.'][50]

In other words, a Chevalier prepared to protest against or resist the system would not have been Chevalier. Nonetheless, does this explain or justify the accusations of collaboration or moral weakness levelled against the singer and other entertainers who continued their careers during the Occupation? The egotism and weakness displayed by celebrities like Chevalier or Guitry (who ultimately did little harm to anyone or anything beyond their own reputation with posterity) should not be confused with deliberate acts of criminal treason, which can be defined in a literal, juridical sense, of surrendering the country, its people and resources to the enemy. Such a definition is

[49] Brunschwig, C., L.-J. Calvet & J.C. Klein, *Cent ans de chanson française* (Paris, Seuil, 1981), p. 94.

illustrated unequivocally by acts of political, industrial, bureaucratic, paramilitary or intellectual collaboration committed respectively by such individuals as Laval, Renault, Bousquet, Darnand and Brasillach.

But would not silence have been preferable, to avoid any suspicion of complicity? This is essentially the thesis put forward by André Halimi in his book *Chantons sous l'Occupation*, one of the few studies devoted to popular culture during the period (the documentary film with the same title also directed by Halimi is incidentally much more informative and less biased than his book). As his copious documentation shows, 'A ne lire que les pages-spectacles des journaux, on pourrait ignorer totalement que la France est occupée'['If you only read the variety pages of the newspapers, you might never realise that France was an occupied country']. Hence his observation that

> Pendant quatre années, sous l'Occupation, des millions d'hommes en France ont ri, joué la comédie, bu et mangé. Il faut le dire avec force: des millions de Français ont chanté sous l'Occupation. […] Le dossier est accablant. ['For four years during the Occupation, millions of Frenchmen laughed, played, drank and ate. It needs to be stated firmly that millions of French people sang during the Occupation. The case is damning.'][51]

Since eating, drinking and laughter are basic human needs, Halimi's sententious, moralising tone and his facile juxtapositions are difficult to understand. Pointing out that the Gestapo was committing atrocities when theatres were packed out does not really demonstrate the guilt and decadence of the French nation, but rather the paradoxical coexistence of areas of oppression and liberty during the occupation. The fact that three times as many French people went to music hall shows in 1943 than in 1938 mainly reveals an urge to 'Quitter l'horreur du monde réel pour les rivages de l'imaginaire'['Leave the horror of the real world for the shores of the imaginary'], however ephemeral this escape may be, to quote Serge Added (in Rioux, ed., 1990: 342).[52] And the reader who has any sense of historical objectivity should heed Todorov's warning in *Les Abus de la mémoire*, that pious denunciations of the

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[50] Ibid., pp.94-95.
[51] Haslimi, A., *Chantons sous l'Occupation* (Paris, Olivier Orban, 1976), p.136, p.9.
[52] See Rioux, J.-P., ed., *La Vie culturelle sous Vichy* (Paris, Éditions Complexe, 1990), p.342.

iniquities tolerated by French citizens under Vichy merely expose the accusers to charges of complacent hypocrisy for ignoring the iniquities of their own age.[53]

Our present-day cult of stars and celebrities makes us forget that it is foolish to expect entertainers, whose success depends on inventing and selling a largely fictional, fantasised personality to a paying audience, to behave like real heroes, leaders or guardians of moral values. The last word is best given to a performer celebrated for his provocations. In two post-war songs, the Georges Brassens attempted to confront the betrayals and failings caused by occupation (he himself was a conscript worker in Germany, even if his musical fame belongs to a later generation). 'Les Deux Oncles' (1964) equates resistance and collaboration as interchangeable postures, both outmoded and forgotten: 'De vos épurations, vos collaborations,/Vos abominations et vos désolations,/De vos plats de choucroute et vos tasses de thé,/Tout le monde s'en fiche à l'unanimité'. But this dismissal and lines like 'Maintenant que vos controverses se sont tues'[54] ignore the obsession with the occupation which post-war generations have inherited from those who lived through it (witness the belated trials of collaborators like Touvier and Papon or damaging accusations against members of the resistance throughout the 1990s, not to mention the controversy created from the 1950s to the 1970s by successive films which sought to anatomise the painful truths of collaboration or deportation). The battle for truth and legitimacy continues to be fought. In another song, 'Honte à qui peut chanter'['shame on you for singing'], Brassens appears to excoriate those who sing while Rome burns: 'A l'heure de Pétain, à l'heure de Laval, Que faisiez-vous mon cher en plein dans la rafale?/Je chantais, et les autres ne s'en privaient pas…' Yet, as he concludes: 'Si Dieu veut l'incendie, il veut les ritournelles./A qui fera-t-on croire que le bon populo,/Quand il chante quand même, est un parfait salaud?'[55] The distractions of song are more than egocentric frivolity; by creating a parallel universe (which comments indirectly on the real one and contains its horrors), the singer

[53] Todorov, T., *Les Abus de la mémoire* (Paris, Arléa, 1995), p.54.
[54] 'As for your purges, your collaborations, your abominations and your devastations, your plates of sauerkraut and cups of tea, nobody cares a toss about them'. 'Now your controversies have fallen silent.'
[55] 'In the time of Pétain, in the time of Laval, what were you doing, my dear fellow, when the storm was raging? I was singing, and others didn't hold back either.' 'If God wants fire and brimstone, he also wants ditties. No one really thinks that when people sing despite their troubles that makes them callous bastards.'

undertakes a form of cultural resistance in which his or her audience participates and achieves a brief moment of liberty.

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