

G. I. Jane Joins the Band: WAC and the Andrews Sisters

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During World War II, female musicians enjoyed new professional opportunities. For both national acts like the Andrews Sisters and local talent enlisted in WAC (Women's Army Corps), WWII provided unprecedented popularity and chances to perform. However, these musical opportunities for women dwindled by the end of the war. To understand why female musicians were briefly catapulted to fame during the combat years but deprived of opportunities in the war's aftermath we must examine both the "total war" mentality of the United States and American gender roles. This dual analysis reveals an uneasy balance between the need for women to fulfill wartime goals and the social expectation that women would remain in the home. Though women were given new chances to perform music publicly, such opportunities were conditioned on the assumption that female musicians would only perform patriotic songs (that would improve wartime morale) and would resume their domestic roles once the war was won. Because women were viewed as temporary tools of the war effort instead of qualified professionals, their musical careers cratered once victory was achieved and society expected them to return to the home.

Before World War II, male instrumental bands (led by Glenn Miller, Artie Shaw, Duke Ellington, etc.) and male crooners (Bing Crosby, Nat King Cole) dominated the pop charts. While female musicians achieved success on the vaudeville circuit or in the race music industry (such as Bessie and Mamie Smith), there was little room for female artists in the mainstream. It wasn't until the 1940s, that the public embraced female singing groups. Plunged into war, Americans suddenly wanted to hear motherly, soothing voices associated with the security of home. While record labels were initially reluctant to sign female acts, companies soon recognized the appeal of the Andrews Sisters and similar groups. At the same time, the armed forces recruited WAC (Women's Army Corps) members to entertain the troops, promote war bonds, and staff veterans' hospitals. To motivate WAC and national acts to make inspiring music, the government stressed patriotism and new opportunities arising from wartime service. However, the government qualified its appeal to women by invoking idealized motherhood to exclude certain singers from WAC, censure female artists, and to disband female bands after the war. The rise and fall of WAC bands and the Andrews Sisters in the 1940s suggests that Americans tolerated women singers when they promoted patriotic values, but not when they violated gender boundaries.

Before examining the role of female musicians in the 1940s, it is important to establish the cultural context which allowed women to leave the household and perform publicly. The OWI (Office of Wartime Information) and ASF's (Army Services Forces') promotion of the Andrews Sisters and their WAC counterparts attests to a broader move to utilize all resources and citizens (including the untapped female workforce) to achieve victory. Due to this "total war" mindset, there were massive propaganda campaigns (featuring "Rosie the Riveter") to encourage housewives to leave the home in order to serve in industry, community service, and civil defense. At the same time, the military encouraged female professionals such as nurses and musicians to rehabilitate troops and boost domestic morale. Whereas stigma¹ had previously restricted the number of women working outside the home, new propaganda glorified the female worker."² To explain this new propaganda, author Maureen Honey suggests that "During World War II, economic, social, and political forces combined to produce a need for new images of women, those that showed wage work as a normal, vital part of female lives and that conveyed the message that women could and should occupy all types of jobs."³ The propaganda campaign to normalize the female worker was so successful that some 19 million women joined

the workforce by July 1944—an increase of 47% from 1940 levels of female employment.⁴ While some women joined the workforce in response to patriotic propaganda, women also adopted traditionally male positions out of economic necessity (since the male breadwinner was off at war) or desires for higher wages, independence, and social interaction.⁵

Like women in other occupations, female musicians received more opportunities and an elevated status during World War II. While the government privileged all female workers in wartime, the government gave special consideration to enlisted women and entertainers who could improve American morale. Spurred by the U.S. Surgeon General's recommendation that "consideration be given to music as an integral part of the recondition program [of injured soldiers]" due to "the importance of music in the lives of soldiers," the Army Services Forces (ASF) afforded female entertainers new opportunities to serve their country.⁶ For local musicians and teachers, such opportunities included enlistment in the WAC band. Whereas previous wars prohibited female military bands and the enlistment of women, the scarcity of civilian men in WWII (caused by the unprecedented size of the draft) necessitated the placement of women in traditionally male-dominated professions.⁷ While some women joined WAC bands out of nationalism, the majority sought adventure and professional opportunities. According to WAC member Novella Cromer, she joined WAC because "I just wanted to get away, because I just wanted to start a new life."⁸ On a similar note, WAC conductor Leonora Hull claimed, "I didn't do it out of love of country. I did it because I was tired of teaching."⁹ Citing similar motivations, some 350,000 women enlisted in WAC and other women's outfits during the war.¹⁰

While joining WAC band benefited women, the government remained uncertain of the unit's potential. Initially, the army was reluctant to let WAC bands interact with soldiers because of possible moral impropriety. However, the military soon conceded that the soothing, maternal presence of the WAC band boosted the morale of injured soldiers. As Mattie Treadwell (1966) explained: "Hospital authorities at first had felt that only male combat returnees should

help rehabilitate the wounded...When the first women began to be assigned to hospital work, authorities discovered, instead that 'the psychological reaction to feminine association had been most beneficial.'"¹¹ Once the military recognized the importance of female bands, it expanded the duties of the WAC bands. By the middle of the war, WAC bands were stationed on both coasts to perform for returning troops, traveled to hospital ships, and performed in military hospitals.¹² At each of these destinations, WAC bands performed songs in a variety of genres including brass band ("There'll be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight") and Tin Pan Alley Pop ("Sentimental Journey").¹³

When performing in WAC, many women experienced unique opportunities and more appreciation for their work than they have previously enjoyed. Whereas many female musicians on the home front practiced music as a hobby or occasionally taught music in public schools, WAC musicians were treated as celebrities by soldiers. Signing autographs and playing encores, WAC musicians experienced a new appreciation for their talents. As WAC Edisel Ford recalled, "I was amazed at how much it meant to those people (soldiers) for us to be able to do that (perform in hospitals)."¹⁴ SPAR (Women's Coast Guard) band member Joyce Williams added, "When we arrived in our bus, the young men patients descended on us and in spite of their handicaps, carried our instruments in to the auditorium. As we came onto the stage to play the concert, the audience went into a frenzy."¹⁵ For many WAC musicians, such positive reception, made WWII the highlight of their careers.

Like the WAC bands, radio acts like the Andrews Sisters benefited from the sudden appreciation for female musicians. Though the Andrews Sisters had performed before the war, it wasn't until they sang numbers like "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" on USO tours and engaged in patriotic radio broadcasting that the group achieved massive recognition. While pre-war and post-war civilians had little appreciation for the Andrews Sisters, they retained an appreciative audience during the combat years. According to the Andrews Sisters, it would be hard "going to work for ordinary civilians again" because "The expressions on a GI face are wonderful;

here it's 'try and please me.'"¹⁶ The Andrews Sisters' wartime popularity was partially due to the broad recognition that women could play an important role in victory. In addition, the Andrews Sisters benefited from the government's changing perception of music. Just as the WACs received an extra boost from the U.S. Surgeon General's recommendation that "consideration be given to music as an integral part of the recondition program [of injured soldiers],"¹⁷ the Andrews Sisters benefited from the recognition that music could serve as a morale booster and promote patriotism.

Following the same "total war" mentality which led it to incorporate women into the workforce, the government tried to rally the entertainment industry around patriotic goals. While the government had the greatest control over its military bands, the government also exerted its power over mainstream acts like the Andrews Sisters. Through the Office of Wartime Information (OWI), the government issued guidelines for proper war songs and tried to make the music industry a propagandist arm of the government.¹⁸ Perceiving music as a "psychological fighting force," the OWI and the Composers' War Council of Tin Pan Alley and Hollywood Songwriters made it to their official mission "to harness the talents and resources of America's songwriters to further the war effort."¹⁹ According to author Kathleen Smith, the OWI's interference with the music industry "reflects the detailed manner in which the government spelled out World War II as a "total war" for the American people. The government needed Americans to recognize the all-encompassing nature of the conflict and the potential threat it posed to every facet of American life."²⁰ With this goal in mind, the OWI tried to replace record companies' escapist tunes with war songs to rally soldiers and the public.

One way that the government promoted patriotic song production was by intervening in the 1941 ASCAP (American Society of Composer, Authors, and Publishers) strike. Whereas escapist Tin Pan Alley artists were constrained by an ASCAP recording ban during the strike, the government forced the lifting of sanctions for V-Disks (recordings for servicemen). As such, ASCAP artists who wanted to make records during the strike could only make patriotic V-

Disk songs. If artists took this option, they could be assured that their music would be air-dropped to millions of troops—which would increase the fame and recognition of the participants' music. Responding either to a sense of duty or opportunities not otherwise available to the industry, many artists like the Andrews Sisters took advantage of the exception to ASCAP rules. During the war, songs by the Andrews Sisters and other artists were pressed into some 8 million V-disks for overseas troops.²¹

The fact that the Andrews Sisters and WAC bands were "rewarded" with new recording opportunities for their patriotism points to several trends in WWII music. First, female artists were seen for the first time as professional musicians who had much to contribute to America's fighting spirit. Both as women and entertainers, the Andrews Sisters and WAC, became the focus of government efforts to mobilize all parts of the population in a "total war" against the Axis. Despite the new appreciation and opportunities for women during WWII, it must be noted that women's increasingly public and professional role was conditioned on their acceptance of certain gendered and patriotic values. Though not expressly stated by the government or the listening public, feminist scholars contend that new professional opportunities for women stemmed not from "a women's right to be treated fairly and judged as individual workers but on their heroic service to the nation, a duty that required self-sacrifice and putting the welfare of soldiers above one's own desires."²² Though "propaganda appeals sometimes mentioned the career advantages women might find in war jobs...the assumption was that women's role was to help out in an emergency, which led naturally to the conclusion that they would leave once it was over."²³

Besides assuming that it was the woman's place to abandon her public role once men returned from overseas, popular opinion expected the women would bring certain "feminine" traits to their employment and that female workers would not adopt threatening male characteristics—such as the expectation of steady employment and wages. Clarifying this phenomenon, William Chafe suggests that "Americans were willing to accept women in the work force as

long as the changes could not be interpreted as a threat to traditional sex role divisions. Because women's work was justified as a patriotic necessity during the war... it coincided with other values important to Americans, and thus antifeminist opposition was muted."²⁴ Yet, when women appeared to stray too far from traditional roles, the public questioned women's participation in the workforce. Like other professionals, female musicians were subjected to a cultural critique by their contemporaries. Although the American public appreciated the positive effect of female musicians on morale, Americans worried that wartime service would distort traditional gender roles. Of greatest concern was the possibility that female musicians would abandon their roles as mothers in favor of work. According to authorities, too much independence would masculinize women, place them in competition with men, or would result in juvenile delinquency because women would privilege work over childcare.²⁵ Addressing these issues, government authorities and ladies' magazines (often owned by men) scrambled to delineate the proper role of the wartime woman.

To keep female musicians in traditional roles, the government segregated military outfits by sex and emphasized that WACs were not coequal with male soldiers. Consequently, Law 554 (legislation governing enlisted females) clarified that WAAC (a forerunner of WAC) was "not a part of the Army but it shall be the only women's organization authorized to serve with the Army."²⁶ Legally separated from the male soldiers, WAC musicians were also socially reminded of their subordinate position within the military. Lest they imitate their male peers, popular opinion (expressed through women's magazines) reminded women to emphasize their feminine traits. For example, *Good Housekeeping* reminded WACs that "a mannish effect is the last thing you want" and that the respectable enlisted woman should only wear her uniform on the job (but never in public), should "use any make-up you require to get the fresh, pretty, mind-on-the-job appearance you should have," and must never "swagger or stride along in a masculine fashion."²⁷ From Maureen Honey's perspective, such attempts to feminize women in the armed forces suggest a cultural ambivalence about

women in the workplace. While the public recognized women's benefits to morale and industry, they also worried about the breakdown of the female gender role. According to Honey, "The fact that a woman could step into a man's shoes and wear them rather comfortably posed an implicit challenge to traditional notions about femininity and female limitations."²⁸

To ensure that WAC musicians were not forgetting their motherly roles, the government coupled its segregationist and uniform policies with age restrictions. To ensure that childbearing women were not working outside the home, the government only employed women under 45 who had children no younger than 16. Until 1943, when the supply of single women was exhausted, the government also excluded married women from the workforce.²⁹ This exclusion of potential mothers from wartime industry and WAC enlistment reveals the idealization of motherhood and cultural fears about the loss of womanhood. While many Americans acknowledged that the war could not be won with women's support, Americans also believed that working mothers would produce delinquent, maladjusted children; if women were too busy working to instill proper values in their offspring, the next generation might become riddled with immorality. Taking an alarmist stance, the *Woman's Home Companion* railed against "American mothers swap[ping] their aprons for overalls and trad[ing] their homes for autotrailers." Far from patriotic, these "absentee mothers" would make military victory a "hollow mockery" if they continued to "produce a generation of demoralized and delinquent Americans while winning this 'war to preserve our way of life.'" Furthermore, the *Companion* claimed "We have thousands of underfed neglected children tied with clotheslines, locked in cellars or left to run wild, while Mother yields a blow torch. We have courtesans, schoolgirl age, diseased in mind as well as body. We have more illegitimate babies."³⁰ Echoing such sentiments, reputable organizations like the FBI and churches cautioned that women should only work outside the home when absolutely necessary.³¹

For the WACs, such cultural fears about femininity and motherhood produced significant barriers to their musical careers. Segregated in the armed forces because of their inferior status as women, wearing uniforms suggesting traditional gender identities, and legally prohibited from services during their childrearing years, WAC

musicians (and other working women) found their employment constrained by contemporary cultural values. While average working women and WAC musicians faced more restrictions than national female celebrities, even singing groups like the Andrews Sisters found their musical careers subject to cultural criticism. For example, when the Andrews Sisters sang “risqué” “unwomanly” songs, they faced severe reprimands and censure from the government and recording industry. Though the Andrews Sisters were applauded for dressing as WACs and singing “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy,” they were censured from radio when they sang “Rum and Coca-Cola.”³² Adopted from a calypso ballad, “Rum and Coca-Cola” featured shocking, suggestive lyrics such as the following:

Since the yankee come to Trinidad, they
got the young girls all goin’ mad /
Young girls say they treat ‘em nice, make
Trinidad like paradise /
Drinkin’ Rum and Coca Cola, go down
Point Cumana //
Both mother and daughter, workin’ for
the yankee dollar... / ³³

The OWI found “Rum and Coca-Cola” inappropriate for female singers because the lyrics featured alcohol and prostitution instead of patriotic or escapist motifs. In addition, the song was demoralizing because it questioned the fidelity of American soldiers fighting abroad. Based on these objections, the OWI banned the Andrews Sisters’ version of “Rum and Coca-Cola” from airwaves and film. Although “Rum and Coca-Cola” became the third-best selling record of the decade (behind only Bing Crosby’s “White Christmas” and Patti Page’s “Tennessee Waltz”), the song owed its success to record sales among GIs instead of popular airplay.³⁴ As far as the government and general public were concerned, both the Andrews Sisters and WACs had no business performing songs or engaging in behavior which degraded the ideal female image. When female performers jeopardized their roles as women and mothers, they lost their place in military bands and government airwaves.

[The censorship of the Andrews Sisters and the segregationist, uniform, and age policies of the WACs reveal cultural perceptions of female WWII musicians. While average enlisted women and female celebrities (e.g. Doris Day, the Andrews Sisters, and Dinah Shore) had unprecedented musical opportunities during World War II, cultural values nevertheless constrained women’s potential. Believing

that women should privilege motherhood and femininity, public opinion censured untraditional behaviors and held that women should only work when absolutely necessary. The corollary to this second argument was that women’s contributions were neither patriotic nor necessary during peacetime, and women should therefore abandon their jobs at the close of the war. Accordingly, WAC bands were disbanded in 1945 and female singing groups declined in popularity.³⁵ Joining some 2 million women displaced by retuning male veterans, female musicians found themselves unemployed.³⁶ While some WACs went on to become music therapists and the Andrews Sisters had sporadic success, post-war opportunities for female musicians paled in comparison to the early 1940s.³⁷ This fall of female bands in the post-war era, as well as their interwar regulation, reveals the limitations of American culture. Although Americans acknowledged the power of women’s music, the public still viewed female musicians as temporary tools of the war effort instead of qualified professionals. Consequently, the public revoked female musicians’ privileged status as independent wage-earners when they lost their patriotic purpose and began competing economically with male soldiers in the post-war.

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Endnotes

1 A 1936 Gallup poll indicated that 82% of American opposed the paid employment of married women. In addition, more than half of American states prohibited employment among married women because they believed that a woman's place was in the home. However, when WWII propaganda recast female workers as patriotic citizens, attitudes began to change. Propaganda was so effective at portraying female workers as necessary to the war effort that opposition to female workers shrunk to 13% in the early 1940s. Nancy A. Walker. *Women's Magazines, 1940-1960: Gender Roles and the Popular Press*. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998). 12.

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19 Ibid., 114.

20 Ibid., 6.

21 Ibid., 41.

22 Honey, 51.

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28 Honey, 1.

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