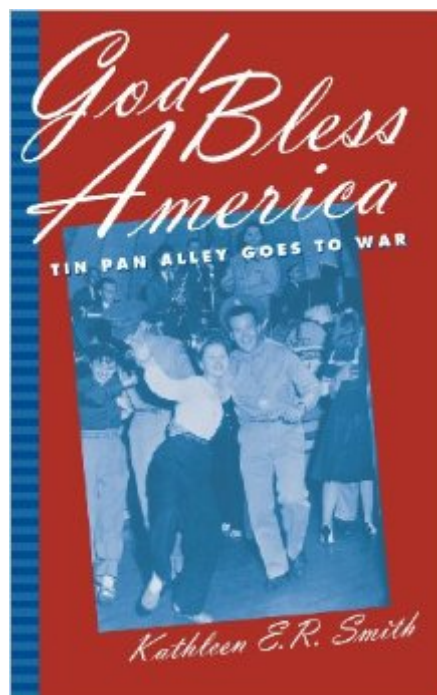


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# God Bless America: Tin Pan Alley Goes To War



## Synopsis

After Pearl Harbor, Tin Pan Alley songwriters rushed to write the Great American War Song—a "Over There" for World War II. The most popular songs, however, continued to be romantic ballads, escapist tunes, or novelty songs. To remedy the situation, the federal government created the National Wartime Music Committee, an advisory group of the Office of War Information (OWI), which outlined "proper" war songs, along with tips on how and what to write. The music business also formed its own Music War Committee to promote war songs. Neither group succeeded. The OWI hoped that Tin Pan Alley could be converted from manufacturing love songs to manufacturing war songs just as automobile plants had retooled to assemble planes and tanks. But the OWI failed to comprehend the large extent by which the war effort would be defined by advertisers and merchandisers. Selling merchandise was the first priority of Tin Pan Alley, and the OWI never swayed them from this course. Kathleen E.R. Smith concludes the government's fears of faltering morale did not materialize. Americans did not need such war songs as "Goodbye, Mama, I'm Off To Yokohama", "There Are No Wings On a Foxhole", or even "The Sun Will Soon Be Setting On The Land Of The Rising Sun" to convince them to support the war. The crusade for a "proper" war song was misguided from the beginning, and the music business, then and now, continues to make huge profits selling love—not war—songs.

## Book Information

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Despite the efforts of several government agencies, and the willingness of many topflight

songwriters, including Frank Loesser and Irving Berlin, no single song emerged from Tin Pan Alley during World War II that took the war as its subject directly. Berlin's own "God Bless America," which became one of the great hits of the wartime era, was actually written at a time slightly preceding the entrance of the US into World War II. Kathleen Smith, the author of this study, whose name oddly enough suggests that of Kate Smith, the moon-faced and wildly popular radio star who made "God Bless America" a monster sensation, suggests that the reason for this is that, enraptured by swing music, the teenagers who controlled the chart did not want to buy martial tunes. They wanted love songs and they wanted music they could dance to. In this way the era seems oddly close to our own. The book's accompanying promotion materials suggest that a similar situation has transpired today, after 9/11 American musicians wanted to create a hit that would show the Al-Qaeda that we were unbowed, but despite the best efforts of everyone from Paul McCartney to Bruce Springsteen and back around again, from all shadings of the right and left, the song that is most mentioned as a result of the terrorist destruction of the World Trade Center was that country number by Toby Keith about the red, white and blue, with the pugnacious lyric, "You'll be sorry that you messed with the U.S. of A./ 'Cause we'll put a boot in your ass/ It's the American way." Some of the WWII would be hit songs expressed similar sentiments against the "Nips" and "Krauts" of Axis fame. Smith is an okay writer but her book is somewhat padded, and Kentucky should hire a proofreader, it is trying indeed that Melvyn Douglas and Ralph Bunche both have their names misspelled.

One of the best general discussions about popular music during World War II currently available. Her presentation of the tensions between those who wanted a "war song" and those who supported a more evenhanded approach to records and sheet music is thought-provoking and unusual. Highly recommended.

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