Liberation Songs: Music and the Cultural Memory of the Dutch Summer of 1945

Frank Mehring

Photographs of victory and liberation of 1945 have entered the collective memory of contemporary viewers. In the United States, the iconic snapshot of the homecoming sailor kissing a nurse at Times Square in New York at V-J Day comes to mind, or: the liberation of Paris with crowds of French patriots lining the Champs Élysées to view Allied tanks and half-tracks passing through the Arc de Triomphe on 25 August 1944, the flag raising by Soviets over the Berlin Reichstag during the Battle of Berlin on 2 May, the liberation of concentrations camps in Auschwitz, Dachau or Buchenwald (by the US Third Army in April 1945), as well as photos of civilians greeting home-coming soldiers and the liberators of the Allied Forces. In the Netherlands, the picture of a Canadian Seaforth Highlander on a motorbike with two laughing girls on the backseat on the Amstellaan in Amsterdam (after the war the name of this street was changed to Vrijheidslaan/Freedom Lane) became one of the most popular images of the liberation. These scenes have entered the Dutch collective memory of the liberation and have been remediated in newspapers, magazines, documentaries, feature films, on social media platforms and innumerable Internet sites. I recently came across a remarkable image from the city of Nijmegen, which was liberated during Operation Market Garden in September 1944 (see fig. 1). We see people gather in front of a large brick building, singing and dancing. The photo was taken the following year on that memorable 5 May when the liberation of the Netherlands became official.

The feeling of being free again becomes visible in seemingly spontaneous, improvised performances. A piano has been pulled from a nearby house to the space in front of the Nutsschool at Hertogplein. The piano player sings and flirts with a woman standing next to him. Children sit in a church alcove slightly above the piano observing with many other bystanders the lively scene at the public

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Place at the intersection of Gerard Noodstraat and Van der Bruggenstraat in downtown Nijmegen: young men and women dance with each other celebrating the end of the war. What is expressed here are gratitude for the new-won freedom from occupation, a vital approach to deal with loss and the destruction surrounding the scene. However, the image remains silent. The question inherent in the photo is: what kind of soundtrack accompanies the scene? Could it be a Duke Ellington number? One of the latest swing, jive, foxtrot, or jitterbug dancing hits? Or perhaps something completely different, unexpected?

Historians have been surprisingly quiet about the sounds and soundtrack of history. In retrospect, the sounding signature for the Dutch liberation has become American jazz, in particular swing music and the close harmonies associated with the Andrews Sisters, as today’s annual performances on 5 May (Liberation Day) in major cities such as Amsterdam, Arnhem, Den Haag, Nijmegen, Rotterdam, or Utrecht testify. Much of the original documentary

2 In the case of this image, ruins are carefully kept outside of the photographic frame. The building we see is intact while the area behind where the photographer stands has been destroyed in an allegedly mistaken bombing by US forces in February 1944.