

endeavors

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On the cover: Aaron Copland, American composer, 1946. His *Lincoln Portrait* was commissioned as part of the war effort. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

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THE UNIVERSITY
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In the thick of World War II, one low, sad, and sweet sound rose out of Belgrade and wove itself around and through the drone of bombers, the bark of infantry fire, and the thudding of shells. Eventually it grew strong enough to be heard all over Europe and North Africa, and to bring together soldiers on both sides of the conflict, at least in spirit: the sound was a pop song called “Lili Marlene.”

Written in 1918 by a schoolteacher who’d been conscripted into the Imperial German Army, the song tells the story of a German soldier’s love for a young woman whom he meets every night at a lamppost outside his barracks. A German cabaret singer named Lale Andersen recorded the song in 1939. It sold about seven hundred copies and was promptly forgotten.

When the Germans occupied Belgrade in 1941, they set up a radio station to broadcast to their troops throughout Europe and the Mediterranean. A lieutenant who worked at the station picked up a stack of records at a secondhand shop in Vienna. In the stack was “Lili Marlene.” Because Radio Belgrade had only a few records, it played the song often, and “Lili Marlene” became wildly popular among Axis troops and in German homes and cafés. Radio Belgrade signed off with the song, playing it every night at five minutes till ten. Hitler liked it. But Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels could not abide it. “A dance of death lingers between its bars,” he wrote. In their book *Lili Marlene*, Liel Leibovitz and Matthew Miller write that Goebbels, “so accustomed to stage-managing every Nazi invasion with a soundtrack full of appropriate pomp . . . was apoplectic at this sentimental love song that was lulling Germany’s vaunted Aryan warriors to sleep each night on the battlefields.” It didn’t help that Lale Andersen had Jewish friends. Goebbels banned the song from German radio and tried to get Radio Belgrade to stop playing it, too. But Axis soldiers flooded the station with letters supporting the song, and Goebbels eventually relented.

The song quickly caught the ears of Allied soldiers, who could also pick up Radio Belgrade. Fitzroy MacLean, fighting for the British, wrote: “Husky, sensuous, nostalgic, sugar-sweet, her voice seemed to reach out to you, as she lingered over the catchy tune, the sickly sentimental words. Belgrade . . . the continent of Europe seemed a long way away. I wondered when I would see it again.” Allied fighter pilots painted “Lili Marlene” on the noses of their planes. Eventually, it became one of the world’s most recorded songs. Today, web pages catalog hundreds of versions of “Lili Marlene,” and iTunes carries Andersen’s original—which, after a few listens, is foxholed in my brain. But in the 1940s, write Leibovitz and Miller, “in a war remembered mostly for its stark divides and brutal, dehumanizing crimes, this song emerged from the ashes as a tiny reminder of unity, hope, and brotherhood.” The sounds of war weren’t just explosive, percussive, and traumatic. Some of them, whether classical or pop, could help heal a world split apart.

—Jason Smith



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