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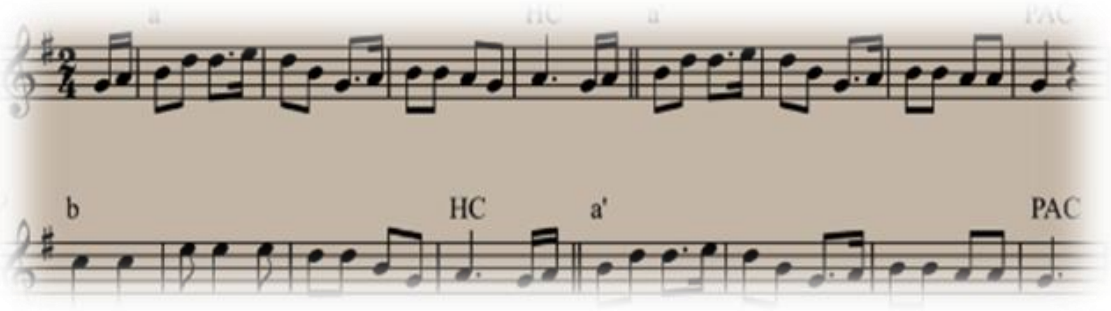
American "Pop:"
Notes on American Popular Music, Part Two



"Oh, Susannah"

What was America's first song?

What was America's first *popular* song?

Perhaps a false distinction, but according to the Library of Congress, America's first secular song (that is not a hymn or music written for church) is generally

believed to be Francis Hopkinson's 1759 composition "My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free." Hopkinson is "the only American born composer for whom there is evidence of having written songs prior to 1800." [1] An interesting character, lawyer, and amateur composer, Hopkinson signed the Declaration of Independence and allegedly designed the first American flag. He was also a close friend of George Washington, to whom he dedicated a collection of "Eight Songs" in 1788. [2]

An art song not written to be popular in the modern sense, with lyrics by Thomas Parnell and scored for harpsichord, "My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free" begins:

from My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free

My days have been so wondrous free,
The little birds did fly
With careless ease from tree to tree,
Were but as bless'd as I.

Ask gliding waters, if a tear
Of mine increas'd their stream?
Or ask the flying gales, if e'er
I lent one sigh to them?

But now my former days retire,
And I'm by beauty caught;
The tender chains of sweet desire
Are fix'd upon my thought. [3]

Hopkinson's song might not have been popular in the modern sense; however, his theme certainly carries into the present as he laments his loss of freedom due to his love for Nancy, who he wants to "teach a young, unpractic'd heart" to be his own. A recording of "My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free" sung by Margaret Truman, daughter of President Harry S. Truman, can be found here.

According to Pete Seeger, in an interview with John Gilliland, popular music is "professional music which draws upon both folk music and fine arts music." [4] The first songs to meet that criteria are those of Stephen Foster, whose "Old Folks at Home" became a runaway national hit in 1851.

But it was predated by 1848's "Oh, Susanna," which launched Foster's career. As noted in "Song of America,"

working in Cincinnati and "inspired by blackface minstrel groups…Foster wrote 'Oh, Susanna' in the minstrel tradition." Written to a polka tempo, it was first published locally. When a New York publisher pirated it, it rapidly gained popularity and swept the nation along with the new polka fad. The New York publisher was E. P. Christy whose Christy's Minstrels made it the first song to become a middle-class hit. [5]

Two things of importance from that paragraph. First, in terms of ***The American Tapestry Project's*** thread "Freedom's Faultlines," the earliest popular American music came out of the minstrel show tradition. So, at the beginning of American popular music, we find ourselves enmeshed in the tensions of all the times Americans did not live up to their glittering ideals of "liberty, equality, and opportunity." Minstrel shows in the early and mid-19th century were music hall revues performed by white singers in blackface singing either authentic Black American music, other folk songs, or original compositions, like "Oh, Susanna." This music melded those folk traditions with either art songs or other popular music styles (in this case, the polka) to create something new. This new music was a blended, authentic new American music rising out of America's diverse ethnic and racial history.

Second, sheet music sales determined popularity rather than performance since recorded music did not appear until almost 75 years later. Without radio, much less computers streaming an endless variety of music, in the 19th century, people needed to play musical instruments and entertain themselves. For a song to be a "hit" meant it resonated so deeply with audiences that in order to hear it, they learned to play it. As a result, "pop" music provides ample clues to what people thought, felt, and valued in the era.

Speaking of shifting values, a product of its times, the original 1848 racist lyrics to "Oh, Suanna" will offend most 21st-century ears. Demonstrating the cultural elasticity of pop music, a highly sanitized version of it sung by the late Connie Francis on the *Ed Sullivan Show* in 1962 can be found here.

Connie Francis aside, the fact that the first great commercially successful American "pop" song 170 years later would offend a majority of American listeners prompts a series of questions. What values in the 1840s did the majority of Americans possess that their descendants in the 21st century reject? And, more to the point, what happened in the intervening years to change those values? We'll discuss "Oh, Susanna's" cultural significance in a future ***Book Note***, but for those seeking historical authenticity a version of it with the original lyrics sung by Tom Roush can be found here.

from Oh, Susanna

“I come from Alabama
With my banjo on my knee
I'm going to Louisiana
My true love for to see
It rained all night
The day I left
The weather it was dry
The sun so hot
I froze to death
Susanna, don't you cry
Oh, Susanna
Oh don't you cry for me
For I come from Alabama
With my banjo on my knee….” [6]

Changing opinions about “Oh, Susanna” illustrate that understanding public reaction to popular art works tells us more about the audience than perhaps the creator. One assumes the composer, in this case Stephen Foster, was comfortable with the racist culture of early minstrel shows; in fact, it is possible the idea never occurred to him because in his world, that just was the way things were. Pop music, as a living artifact, serves as a portal into that world. The question, however, becomes why did artists like Connie Francis, Pete Seeger, and James Taylor, a century and a half later change the lyrics to suit their audience?

How had the audience changed and why?

Setting the context for our exploration of American “pop” music as a window into ***The American Tapestry Project*****,** here is a highly condensed history of American popular music:

American Popular Music: Origins of a Fusion Story

Illustrating the essence of ***The American Tapestry Project’s*** “Fusion Thread,” beginning in colonial times and then shaped by centuries of immigration, slavery, industrialization, and technological innovation, American popular music’s roots stretch deep into the tapestry of America’s many stories. American music emerged from a vibrant synthesis of musical traditions, including the ballads, hymns, and dance music of the earliest settlers, the spirituals of enslaved Africans, the Appalachian folk tunes of British and Scots-Irish immigrants, and the musical genius of wave after wave of immigrants in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Colonial Beginnings and Musical Fusion

The earliest foundation of American music was laid in the 17th and 18th centuries, when European settlers brought with them a range of musical forms—ballads, hymns, and dance tunes—from England, Ireland, Scotland, and Germany, as well as the music brought by enslaved people. Early American music was essentially British, either folk songs or more current music hall numbers. In a future ***Book Note***, we'll explore the evolution of "Yankee Doodle" from a British marching song satirizing American rebels to those very rebels proud anthem.

How did that happen?

We'll answer that in a future ***Book Note***, but for now, these early American songs grew out of oral traditions meant to be shared communally and adapted over time.

As we discovered, when studying American pop music's origins, we are immediately enmeshed in ***The American Tapestry Project's*** "Freedom's Faultlines" thread. At the same time that white colonists were evolving their own musical styles, enslaved Africans brought their own rich musical traditions marked by polyrhythm, call-and-response, improvisation, and a deeply spiritual ethos.

Unlike the music of British and other European colonists, African American music emphasized rhythm over harmony and often merged music with bodily movement (as in work songs, field hollers, and ring shouts). Slave masters, understanding that drums could share encoded messages, forbid enslaved people to use them. So, the enslaved pivoted and used their bodies (clapping, stomping) and tools (hoes, axes) to retain rhythmic complexity.

Preserving cultural memory, early African American music subtly resisted slavery's dehumanizing impact.

But, as the tapestry's "Fusion Thread" illustrates, these musical traditions—Anglo-European and African—did not remain separate. In rural areas, especially in the American South, they began to influence each other, forming an integrated musical language. The banjo, for instance, evolved from African instruments like the akonting. An akonting is "a string instrument with a skin-headed gourd body, two long melody strings, and one short drone string, akin to the short fifth 'thumb string' on the five-string banjo." [7] White settlers in the mountain south, particularly the Scots-Irish, adopted the new banjo instrument into white folk traditions combining it with fiddles (violins – they're the same instrument) [8] in plantation and backwoods dances.

A video of the great Rihanna Giddens on “African American Contributions to Music” including the akonting, the banjo, and the origins of square dancing can be found here.

Minstrelsy and the Rise of Mass Entertainment

As we said in the brief discussion of “Oh, Susanna,” the minstrel show emerged in the 1830s as the first form of American popular music to gain widespread national appeal. Minstrel shows featured white performers in blackface makeup performing skits, songs, and dances that caricatured African Americans. Later, Black performers created their own minstrel shows, seeking to earn a living, protect their cultural heritage, and counteract the demeaning influence of white minstrelsy. Despite its overt racism, white and Black minstrelsy served as a vehicle for blending African-derived rhythms with European harmonies, contributing to the musical fusion that defines American pop.

As we have seen, Stephen Foster, often called the “father of American music,” wrote songs like “Oh! Susanna” and “Camptown Races” in the minstrel idiom. Foster's compositions were widely disseminated through sheet music and became early American standards. In fact, Foster’s songs gave us the word “standards” to denote songs that transcended their time and place to become permanent entries in the American popular music tradition. Minstrelsy shows thus marked the transition from folk-based music to music as a commercial product.

Spirituals, Gospel, and the Black Church Tradition

After the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln’s “Emancipation Proclamation” and the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery, African American religious music flourished. Spirituals—songs like “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and “Wade in the Water”—evolved into gospel music in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Black church became a source of musical innovation, fusing traditional spirituals with blues, jazz, and later, soul. Gospel greats like Thomas A. Dorsey ("the father of Black gospel music") and Mahalia Jackson transformed sacred music into a powerful popular art for social change and recognition.

The Blues and the Birth of An Authentic American Sound

The origins of the blues are rooted in the experience of enslaved African Americans who fused their "rhythms and melodies with European musical elements" to create the music that became "known as the blues." [9] By the late 19th century, the blues emerged from the Deep South as a distinct African American musical form rooted in work songs and spirituals. Characterized by its themes of sorrow, love, and resilience, the blues was both expressive and adaptable. Early blues artists like W.C. Handy ("St. Louis Blues") codified and popularized the genre, while rural musicians like Charley Patton, Robert Johnson, and Bessie Smith gave voice to the travails of Black life in Jim Crow America.

Hardly an original observation on my part, but the blues' influence on later American music cannot be overstated—it directly shaped jazz, rhythm and blues (R&B), rock 'n' roll, and hip-hop. Showing its immense cultural importance, the blues' improvisational spirit and emotional depth laid the groundwork for the development of modern American music. While the influence of European folk and art music should not be understated, it's the fusion of that tradition with the dynamism of African American music that makes American music so powerful.

Ragtime, Jazz, and Urbanization

As African Americans moved northward during the Great Migration, their music transformed in urban contexts. Ragtime, with its syncopated piano rhythms, became a national craze in the 1890s. Scott Joplin's compositions such as "Maple Leaf Rag" gained wide popularity. Ragtime music was the first major wave of African American music embraced by white audiences.
From ragtime, jazz developed in New Orleans in the early 20th century. Drawing on blues, brass band music, and ragtime, jazz became the quintessential American art form. Musicians like Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Jelly Roll Morton innovated with improvisation, swing rhythms, and complex harmonies. Jazz clubs in New York's Harlem and Chicago's South Side became the hubs of American musical innovativeness.

Country, Folk, and the White Working Class

While African American genres developed in the South and urban centers, white rural Americans preserved and adapted Anglo-Celtic folk traditions. By the 1920s, these styles were marketed as "hillbilly" music—a precursor to modern country music. Artists like The Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers became early stars, singing about heartbreak, faith, and hard times in simple, melodic forms.

This music resonated with working-class whites during the Depression and beyond. Like the blues, country music was often deeply autobiographical. Woody

Guthrie, in the folk revival tradition, wrote protest songs like "This Land is Your Land," which is the anthem of ***The American Tapestry Project***. A video of Guthrie singing "This Land Is Your Land" can be found here.

The Recording Industry and Radio

Technology played a pivotal role – no, a transformational role – in the expansion of American popular music. The invention of the phonograph in the late 19th century and the rise of commercial radio in the 1920s made music more accessible than ever. Record labels such as Victor, Columbia, and Paramount recorded blues, jazz, gospel, and country artists for national distribution.

Radio broadcasts brought artists into American homes, uniting rural and urban listeners. Shows like the Grand Ole Opry promoted country music nationwide. Simultaneously, race records marketed African American artists to Black audiences, though many also crossed over into white markets.

Rhythm and Blues to Rock and Roll

By the 1940s, African American music evolved into R&B—an electrified, up-tempo fusion of blues and swing jazz. Artists like Louis Jordan, Ruth Brown, and Big Joe Turner helped lay the groundwork for rock and roll. The combination of driving rhythms, catchy melodies, and youth-centered themes proved irresistible. The role of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and its Black citizens in all of this was the subject of ***Book Note*** #201 reviewing Mark Whitaker's "*Smoketown*."

In the 1950s, rock and roll exploded with artists like Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Elvis Presley, who borrowed heavily from R&B and gospel. Presley, in particular, served as a cultural bridge, bringing Black-derived music to a mass white teenage audience. Though white artists often received more visibility and commercial success, the foundation of rock 'n' roll was indisputably African American. You might recall in the 1989 film "Great Balls of Fire" Dennis Quaid as Jerry Lee Lewis recalling his experience as a young boy sneaking up to the window of a Black church to hear the incredible music pouring out. He called it his inspiration. [10]

Folk Revival, Protest, and Soul

The 1960s witnessed the resurgence of folk music through artists like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, whose songs were vehicles for civil rights and anti-war protest. This period also saw the emergence of soul music, which blended gospel fervor with R&B rhythms. Artists like Sam Cooke, Aretha Franklin, and Otis Redding used their voices to articulate both personal and collective Black experiences. We

have explored the Dylan phenomenon in a number of ***Book Notes*** about not only him but others in the folk revival of the era and its attendant protest music.

Berry Gordy's Detroit-based Motown Records engineered crossover success with acts like The Supremes, Stevie Wonder, and Marvin Gaye. Motown's sophisticated sound, known as the "Sound of Young America," demonstrated that Black music could dominate the pop charts while retaining its cultural roots. [11]

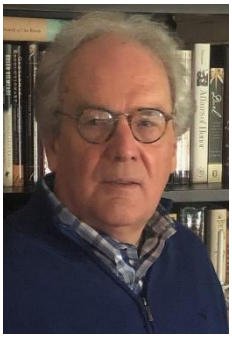
Conclusion: A Fusion Continually Evolving

Granted that was a short and admittedly derivative history of "American pop," but just as America is a tapestry of many stories, the concluding one of which I call "The Fusion Thread," American popular music originated not from a single tradition but from the dynamic synergy of numerous cultures, histories, and technologies.

Beginning with the British, its roots lie in immigrant ballads, then the transatlantic slave trade, religious expression, and working-class life. While there are those who want to freeze-frame it in some mythical and fanciful past, American music like America itself continues to develop—from minstrelsy to jazz, from blues to rock, from gospel to soul to whatever comes next — it remains the living voice of the tapestry of America's many stories: divided, creative, evolving, fusing.

What distinguishes American popular music is its capacity for innovation through fusion. Genres collide, transform, and give rise to new forms: hip-hop from funk and soul; country rock from Nashville and blues; pop from gospel and R&B. Each generation reshapes music to reflect its own identity and struggles. In this sense, the origins of American popular music, like America itself, are not fixed in the past but are continually evolving.

Speaking of the rhythms of the present, in Part Three of "Popular Music: A Window Into American Culture and History" we will examine the Top 10 Songs of the 20th Century to see what they tell us about the tapestry of America's many stories.



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End Notes

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