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Book Notes

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Six Patriotic Songs for a Joyous July Fourth



From left are Francis Scott Key, John Philip Sousa, Katherine Lee Bates, James Weldon Johnson, Irving Berlin, and Woody Guthrie. [1]

With the *Fourth of July* fast approaching, that metaphorical marker of summer's midpoint celebrating America's founding and freedom's triumph, I thought it an apt time to explore patriotic American songs that sing about common objects of our love that St. Augustine says bind a people into a nation.

We'll look at six songs over the next two *Book Notes*, but the catalog of songs is so large we could spend the entire summer listening to what Bob Marley, in another context, called "the sounds of freedom." Speaking of listening, since a *Book Notes* is by definition silent, if you want to hear these and a few more of

songs, tune into my *The American Tapestry Project* on Sunday July 11 at 4 p.m. on WQLN NPR 91.3FM public radio. If you can't make that date, that program and June 13's featuring America's freedom music are (or will be) posted to WQLN's website and can be found here: <https://www.wqln.org/Listen/Podcasts/The-American-Tapestry-Project>

Everyone knows these songs, or at least most of them, but everyone reacts to them in different ways – a gush of patriotic pride or maybe taking a knee bowing to the gap between the ideals of which they sing and the reality which some still endure. Common to all of them, however, is the love of home and the shared experience of being American exhorting all of us to be true to “the better angels of our nature.”

Who wrote “The Star-Spangled Banner”?

Who wrote “The Washington Post March”?

Who wrote “America the Beautiful”?

Who was James Weldon Johnson?

Who wrote “God Bless America”?

Who was Woody Guthrie?

Which of these six love songs to America describes it honestly and completely?

None?

All?

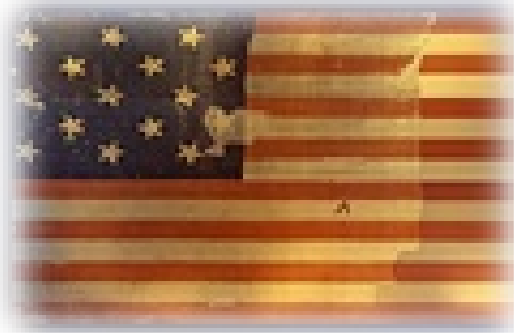
Or all of them but maybe none of them completely.

One or two?

Which?

I'll argue all of them, but none of them completely. But, taken together, they sing of America, “Of thee I sing!”

The Star-Spangled Banner



“The Star-Spangled Banner” is actually a flag modeled after the U.S. flag but with 15 stars and stripes. [2] Also known as the “Great Garrison Flag,” it flew over Fort McHenry in Baltimore Harbor as the Battle of Baltimore raged during the War of 1812. The story is well known. How the battle raged through the night of September 13, 1814. All was thought lost, but at the dawn's early glow on September 14, the flag still flew. The sight of the fluttering flag inspired lawyer and amateur poet Francis Scott Key, who witnessed the bombardment, to write the poem, “Defence of Fort M'Henry.” [3]

Key witnessed the bombardment of Ft. McHenry from the vantage point of a British warship upon which he was held prisoner. He had approached the British on a mission approved by President James Madison seeking an exchange of prisoners, but because he overheard British battle plans, he was detained until after the battle. Throughout the night he could not tell how the battle was

progressing until he saw the flag still flying in the morning light. [4]

The song was put to music by Key's brother-in-law, Joseph Nicholson. He recognized that the lyrics fit, ironically enough, a popular song by the English composer John Stafford Smith. The tune was "*The Anacreontic Song*," the official song of the Anacreontic Society, a London-based club of amateur musicians. [5] First publicly performed in October 1814, Thomas Carr, proprietor of a Baltimore music store, tweaked the arrangement; Washington Irving published it in his *Analectic Magazine*; and the song became increasingly popular. [6] It was played at patriotic events, at military installations and other popular venues, including baseball games. Although some argued it was difficult to sing, it became the national anthem on March 4, 1931, when President Herbert Hoover signed it into law.

Ninety years later, it still generates controversy, the least of which is that it is hard to sing. The most serious concern involves its third stanza, which in 2017 caused the California Chapter of the NAACP to ask Congress to remove it as the National Anthem. [7]

Everyone knows – or kind of knows – the first stanza. I suspect almost everyone assumes it is the only stanza. Actually, the poem is four stanzas long, although the last three are almost never recited or sung. I can't recall ever hearing the entire song sung. Here is the justly famous first stanza:

O say can you see, by the dawn's early light,
What so proudly we hail'd at the twilight's last gleaming,
Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight
O'er the ramparts we watch'd were so gallantly streaming?
And the rocket's red glare, the bomb bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there,
O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave? [8]

It's the third stanza that causes the controversy:

And where is that band who so vauntingly swore
That the havoc of war and the battle's confusion,
A home and a country, should leave us no more?
Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps' pollution.
No refuge could save the hireling and slave
From the terror of flight, or the gloom of the grave:
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave,
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave. [9]

Like many in American history, Key was a complicated man. Allegedly, he opposed slavery, but was a slave owner. As a district attorney, he prosecuted abolitionists. He also supported the American Colonization Society, which advocated sending freed slaves to Africa. [10] Even setting that aside, there is still the third stanza's "...Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps' pollution/No refuge could save the hireling and slave." Key is alluding to the support some slaves, some freed blacks and some laboring white men on the Baltimore docks offered the British. "Hireling" refers to those who work for wages, which many early 19th century elitists saw as wage slavery. However you parse the line, it brings into America's anthem topics many want to forget – slavery and racism. Unfortunately, for those who would refute Ty Seidule's "racism is the virus in the

American dirt,” the evidence is everywhere. [11]

That huge topic is for another day.

Still, it’s a puzzle, what to do with the anthem. There are more important issues, but it illustrates, as we saw in previous *Book Notes*, you can’t suppress the past – “it will out!” That third stanza presents a challenge, but common practice has eliminated it. For almost everyone, the anthem is the first stanza. It has become part of the wallpaper of American life, but people do change their wallpaper to accommodate changing times and taste. As for Francis Scott Key, as we discussed in yet another *Book Notes*, flawed and damaged people, even jerks, can create enduring art.

The first stanza is inspiring, if difficult to sing. Difficult it might be, but I find cringeworthy the current practice of every ephemeral singer, famous for his or her Andy Warhol 15 minutes, giving the song their own quirky rendition. Granted, there are more melodic songs, but, if national anthem we want, among many beautiful versions of it, a beautiful and straightforward rendition of *The Star-Spangled Banner* by the U.S. Army Field Band can be found here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EIODUFpatkQ>

The Washington Post March

While never sung, one of those more melodic songs that can rouse spirits at a *Fourth of July* concert is John Philip Sousa’s *The Washington Post March*. Sousa, son of immigrants – his father was Portuguese and his mother Bavarian – is known as “The American March King.” In addition to *The Washington Post March*, Sousa’s 136 military marches include *The Stars and Stripes Forever*, *Semper Fidelis*, *The Liberty Bell*, and *The Thunderer*. [12] *The Stars and Stripes Forever* is the official march of the United States. Hurriedly returning home from a foreign trip after receiving the startling news his band manager had died, Sousa was inspired to write it because “the song was about the feeling of coming home to America and how ‘in a foreign country the sight of the Stars and Stripes seems the most glorious in the world.’” [13]

Sousa, who in 1868 enlisted in the Marine Corps as an apprentice in the Marine Band, [14] wrote *Semper Fidelis* in the late 1880s at the behest of President Chester Arthur, who wanted something more emotionally resonant than *Hail to the Chief*. *Semper Fidelis*, part of a trio of compositions Sousa created for Arthur, eventually became recognized as the official march of the U.S. Marine Corp. As most know, “semper fidelis” means “always faithful.” [15]

Sousa composed *The Washington Post March* in 1889. And, before you ask, yes, it has a direct connection to *The Washington Post* newspaper. In 1889, ownership of the paper changed hands and the new owners sponsored a number of promotional contests to increase readership. One was a contest celebrating “awards presented by the *Washington Post* Amateur Authors Association ... a club created by *The Post* to encourage District schoolchildren to write. ...” [16] The owners asked Sousa, by then already renowned as “America’s March King,” to write something inspirational to be played at the awards ceremony. Sousa wrote *The Washington Post March*, and it was first performed on June 15, 1889, on the grounds of the Smithsonian before an audience of 25,000 people. [17]

So, *The Washington Post March* began its long career as a sort of over-the-top commercial jingle!

A performance of *The Washington Post March* by “The President’s Own” U.S. Marine Band can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mxrh1CrMmTY>

America the Beautiful

As an article at **Boston.com** headlines: “A gay feminist badass from Massachusetts wrote *‘America the Beautiful.’*” [18] Well, whether or not she was a “badass,” Katherine Lee Bates, a professor at Wellesley College, was, indeed, an accomplished poet, social activist, and advocate for women’s rights. Among her many writings were poems, a young adult novel, other fiction, and assorted non-fiction in support of her many causes. An engaged social activist, she fought for “women’s rights, workers, people of color, tenement residents, immigrants, and poor people.” A peace advocate, she fought for American entry into the League of Nations. [19]

Bates composed *America the Beautiful* in the summer of 1893 sitting atop Pikes Peak. While teaching English at Colorado College, Bates and a group hired a wagon to go to the Peak. Tired when they got to the top, Bates was inspired by the view, saying “all the wonder of America seemed displayed there.” The poem was first published in **The Congregationalist** on Independence Day, 1895. [20] The poem went through several iterations before its final version in 1911. It was also set to music by a number of composers, but the definitive version was an adaptation of an 1882 composition by Samuel A. Ward, the organist and choir director at Grace Church in Newark, New Jersey. [21]

Here is *America the Beautiful*.

O beautiful for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain!

America! America!
God shed His grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!

O beautiful for pilgrim feet
Whose stern impassion'd stress
A thoroughfare for freedom beat
Across the wilderness

America! America!
God mend thine ev'ry flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control,
Thy liberty in law.

O beautiful for heroes prov'd
In liberating strife,
Who more than self their country lov'd,
And mercy more than life.

America! America!
May God thy gold refine

Till all success be nobleness,
And ev'ry gain divine.

O beautiful for patriot dream
That sees beyond the years
Thine alabaster cities gleam
Undimmed by human tears.

America! America!
God shed His grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea. [22]

As we have repeatedly seen, American history is more complex, more nuanced than many understand or want to understand. In this love song to America, Bates the social activist still manages to say, “May God thy gold refine/Till all success be nobleness,” which in the 1911 version is a softening of her original 1893 version, which said “God shed His grace on thee/Till selfish gain no longer stain,/The banner of the free!” [23] In her poem, however, Bates intuits that history is not a fixed thing. It evolves and changes, admits of improvement’s possibility and prays for its attainment. As she wrote, “God mend thine ev'ry flaw, / Confirm thy soul in self-control, /Thy liberty in law” so that America’s “ success be nobleness,/And ev'ry gain divine.”

If people are discontented with *The Star-Spangled Banner* as a national anthem, *America the Beautiful* is my candidate to replace it. A more beautiful song than *The Star-Spangled Banner*, less militaristic, and ego-strutting, it sings of America in all its imperfect beauty aspiring to be better. A mature lover, Bates sees the object of her love with all its flaws and all its beauty and, seeing it whole, loves it all the more.

There are numerous versions of *America the Beautiful* available online, but one of the most powerful is Ray Charles’ version from *The Dick Cavett Show* on September 18, 1972, which can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRUjr8EVgBg>

So, the composers of our first three patriotic songs, all Americans, constitute a varied mix of quintessential American backgrounds. Francis Scott Key’s father was a Continental Army officer, his mother a tavern-keeper’s daughter. They were both of English ancestry. Key, a resident of the border state Maryland, had that state’s ambiguous relationship to slavery. He owned slaves, but at times opposed the institution. At other times he vigorously defended it. Katherine Lee Bates was of that generation of American women in the northeast who had, as the saying goes, “enough.” An advocate for women’s rights and the rights of others, she was almost certainly gay, but the discreet “looking the other way” upper-class tone of the time never quite acknowledged, or maybe understood, the nature of her relationship with Katharine Coman. America’s “love/hate” relationship with immigrants finds its challenge in the success of John Philips Sousa, the son of immigrants.

The trio make up a tidy microcosm of American possibilities – the descendant of English settlers, the “modern woman” ahead of her time, and the musical genius of an immigrant’s child – all of whom in their fashion, sing of freedom and the American way. They *are* the American story. Next week, in Part Two, an African American, an immigrant, and an Okie sing songs of America.



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End Notes

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2. Photo Credit: **Star-Spangled Banner** at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Star_Spangled_Banner_Flag_on_display_at_the_Smithsonian_n%27s_National_Museum_of_History_and_Technology_around_1964.jpg accessed May 22, 2021.
3. “*Defence of Ft. McHenry*,” in **Library of Congress** available at <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.100010457> accessed May 22, 2021.
4. “*The Star-Spangled Banner*” in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Star-Spangled_Banner accessed May 22, 2021.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. “*National anthem lyrics prompt California NAACP to call for replacing song*,” **CBS News** available at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/national-anthem-lyrics-california-naacp-star-spangled-banner/> accessed May 22, 2021.
8. “*Star-Spangled Banner: The Lyrics*” in **Smithsonian Institution** available at <https://amhistory.si.edu/starspangledbanner/the-lyrics.aspx> accessed May 22, 2021.
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11. Seidule, Ty. **Robert E. Lee and Me: A Southerner’s Reckoning with the Myth of the Lost Cause** (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2020), p. 256.

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