

Book Notes #100

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By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
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Baseball Music: A Primer (Part One)

Editor's Note: Dr. Andrew Roth hits a milestone 100th Book Notes with his salute to "baseball music" in the article that follows. Congratulations, Andy!



What's the greatest baseball song?

What light does baseball music shed on American culture, on *The American Tapestry Project*?

And, since baseball music historically tends to tilt towards male interests, what cultural significance lies in the evolving nature of women's softball music?

In this first part of a two-part introductory series surveying baseball music, we will explore those questions. Before we dive into those questions, however, I want to take a moment to reflect on the fact that this is **Book Notes** #100. I find that number marginally astonishing as I recall the project's modest beginnings. As America began to shut down in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, Jefferson Educational Society President Ferki Ferati asked me if I could write a brief weekly note about a book or books I was currently reading to help the think tank navigate the three or four weeks before we could resume face-to-face programming. Well, here we are, almost two years and two months and 99 **Book Notes** later.

As I scan the list of previous **Book Notes**, I note (pun intentional) a pattern of interests. Given my concurrent *The American Tapestry Project* seeking to

understand the American story and our current cultural wars, there have been many on history, American culture, and politics, but there has also been a large number on a lifelong love affair of mine – poetry. Overlapping with poetry, I noted four **Book Notes** about baseball and 13 about music ranging from a detailed survey of Christmas carols to patriotic American music to American protest music and one about baseball music – “Take Me Out to the Ball Game.” All of these can be found [here](#). **The American Tapestry Project** can be found [here](#) and [here](#) and at WQLN/NPR [here](#).

In preparing next Thursday’s (7 p.m. May 12, 2022) presentation at the Jefferson Educational Society on “Take Me Out to the Ball Game’s Feminist Origins,” I discovered (rediscovered?) baseball’s rich musical history. And a rich musical history baseball does, indeed, possess. Nothing in America’s two other major sports – “major” here a function not of professionalism but of participant and spectator interest – nothing in football and basketball books, film, and music approaches baseball’s cultural impact.

Regarding books, although it is not listed on the NFL’s list of the Top Ten football books, I think Tom Callahan’s **Johnny U: The Life and Times of Johnny Unitas** the best football book and Adrian Wojnarowski’s **The Miracle of St. Anthony** the best basketball book. [1] About the latter, I might be biased, for Wojnarowski is an alumnus of St. Bonaventure University, which for a time I had the honor to serve as president. The best football movie of all-time is either **Friday Night Lights** or **Remember the Titans** and I don’t think I’ll get much pushback if I say the best basketball movie of all-time is **Hoosiers**. All of which, interestingly enough, are about high school sports. Make of that what you will, but therein lies a story I think fit for a future **Book Notes**. The best baseball movie, well, simply, there are too many to list.

Similarly, neither football nor basketball music approaches baseball’s rich cultural trove. If you “google” best football music you get a longish list of songs about international football, i.e. soccer. For American football, the lists primarily consist of either pre-game “pump up music” like “Sunday Night Football” and “Monday Night Football’s” themes and/or college fight songs like “On Wisconsin,” “Hail the Victors” or Notre Dame’s “Victory March.” Basketball, however, has an evolving musical library that might one day challenge baseball’s in the richness of its variety. It tilts young, as you might suspect, and it tilts towards the present with a definite multicultural and minority emphasis. It includes songs like Ron Artest’s “Champions,” Shaq’s “I Know I Got Skillz,” the venerable “Sweet Georgia Brown” of Harlem Globetrotters’ fame and ranks at #1, to my mind a dubious but perhaps apt choice, John Tesh’s “Roundball Rock,” the old NBA on NBC theme. [2]

Baseball music, however, to borrow a cliché, “covers all the bases.” It comes in two big buckets – walk-up music and music singing songs of the game and the society it reflects. Walk-up music is probably best described as a sub-genre of baseball music, but because it is so distinct it deserves a brief mention of its own. Walk-up music serves a clear-cut purpose. As Bonnie Stiernberg says at **InsideHook** “it’s meant to whip the crowd into a frenzy as a player makes his grand entrance while simultaneously getting him psyched up and intimidating the opposing team.” [3] More precisely, it is the music a batter chooses to have played as he approaches the batter’s box; it’s meant to amp him up and psyche out the opposing pitcher. There is a disagreement, however, about how walk-up music originated. Rather than a batter approaching the plate, Stiernberg says it began in “1972 with Yankees reliever Sparkly Lyle taking the mound to “Pomp and Circumstance.” [4]

I prefer Peter Gammons' take on the issue. He also says it began in 1972, but quotes Hall of Fame pitcher Jim Kaat, who told him it began in Chicago when White Sox organist Nancy Faust "played 'Jesus Christ Superstar' every time Dick Allen came to the plate in his 1972 AL MVP season." [5] Stiernberg's list of walk-up songs and the players who used them slants heavily to the present; many fans' favorite is "Wild Thing" walking Ricky Vaughn in from the bullpen in the film "Major League." [6] My personal favorite "take" on the entire walk-up genre, however, did not occur at a baseball game but at a college graduation when ESPN's Chris LaPlaca had the Ramsey Lewis Trio's "Wade In the Water" played as he approached the podium to deliver the commencement address at St. Bonaventure University's 2017 graduation ceremony. He said it was probably the only chance he'd ever get to have walk-up music played for him. LaPlaca's speech, he is a St. Bonaventure alumnus, is the best graduation speech I've ever heard, and I've heard more than 60 of them. It can be found [here](#).

Setting aside walk-up music, baseball music showcases a catalog both very old and very new coloring American society as it ranges from 1858's "The Baseball Polka" to 2009's Jay Z's "An Empire State of Mind." Baseball music's catalog mines topics as wide ranging as youngsters imagining themselves heroes of that archetypal hero's moment – the bottom of the 9th of the 7th game, score tied, two out and you're at bat – to Meat Loaf's rendition of love's consummate moment accompanied by a baseball play-by-play of some eponymous game to Alabama's "Cheap Seats" singing the joy of simply going to a ballgame to Woodrow Buddy Johnson's celebration of social equity in "Did You See Jackie Robinson Hit That Ball?"

So, to go back to the questions with which we began, what are some of the great baseball songs?

What light do they shed on American culture? And what about the evolving women's softball music?

Avoiding the endless critical debate about good, better, and best, from which there is neither escape nor resolution, let's tour baseball music from its earliest stirrings down to the present's fractious times ending on a note of hope. The oldest known baseball song is J.R. Blodgett's "Base Ball Polka." Blodgett, who was a member of the Niagara Base Ball Club of Buffalo (NBBC) and whose musical skills, according to his teammates, exceeded his baseball talent, composed the song in September 1858 after a series of games between the NBBC and the Flour City Base Ball Club of Rochester, New York. [7] It can be heard [here](#).

In the 20th century, the first baseball song of note was not a baseball song, or at least not a song about baseball. From the 1902 Broadway musical *The Silver Slipper*, "Tessie (You Are the Only, Only, Only)," a song sung by a woman to her beloved parakeet "Tessie," somehow became the rallying cry of a group of loyal Boston Americans (later renamed the Red Sox) fans. Marching in from left field (in those days there was no "Green Monster"), the group had an informal band play the tune as the fans boisterously sang along. The fans were called the Royal Rooters. Their headquarters was the 3rd Base Saloon owned by avid Boston Americans' fan Michael McGreevey, better known as "Nuf Ced" McGreevey. "Nuf Ced" earned the moniker as a result of how he ended bar room disputes about who was the better team – the Americans or Boston's other team known as the Doves, Bees, and eventually Braves, who decamped for Milwaukee in 1953 and

now reside in Atlanta. When the debate got too hot, McGreevey would famously end the argument by slapping the bar and saying “Nuf ced.” The song’s fame grew when, in 1903, the Royal Rooters took it to Pittsburgh to support the Americans who were down three games to one in the first ever World Series. Rattled by the Royal Rooters’ endless singing of the song, the Pirates blew that 3-1 lead and lost in eight games, 5-3, as the American swept four games in Pittsburgh. [8] You can hear vaudevillian Billy Murray sing the original 1903 “Tessie” [here](#).

Showing baseball’s enduring popularity, “Tessie” got a second life in 2004 when the punk rock band Dropkick Murphys recorded an updated version in which any thoughts of parakeets were banished as the band celebrated the Royal Rooters and the Red Sox. It turned out to be fortuitous – for the superstitious, perhaps prophetic – because propelled by their resurrected and updated fight song, the 2004 Red Sox broke the “Curse of the Bambino” and won their first World Series since 1918. The Dropkick Murphys’ version of “Tessie” singing “Tessie is the Royal Rooters’ rally cry/Tessie is the tune they always sung/Tessie echoed April through October nights” can be heard [here](#).

Speaking of that 1918 World Series Red Sox win, it was also the year “The Star-Spangled Banner” was first played at a baseball game. With World War I still raging, before a subdued crowd at Chicago’s Comiskey Park where the Cubs were hosting the Red Sox, in the bottom of the seventh inning of Game One of the World Series on September 5, 1918, a military band began to play “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Red Sox third baseman Frank Thomas, who was in the Navy but on furlough to play in the Series, snapped to attention, turned around to face the flag and saluted. The crowd erupted in applause singing the song and a tradition was born. Oh, by the way, the Red Sox beat the Cubs that day 1-0 in an epic pitchers’ duel between the Cubs’ Hippo Vaughn and Red Sox ace Babe Ruth. [9]

Another song from the early 20th century ranks atop almost all listings of baseball songs. It comes in at #8 on the National Endowment for the Arts and Recording Industry of America’s list of the top 365 songs of the 20th century and is frequently cited as the third most popular song in America after “Happy Birthday” and the national anthem. [10] Of course, I am referring to “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” by Jack Norworth and Alfred von Tilzer. We discussed it at length in **Book Notes** #68, which can be found [here](#).

The tune’s extremely interesting back story was first noted by George Boziwick in an article in **Base Ball: A Journal of the Early Game**. The song’s putative feminist origins will be the subject of a presentation on May 12 at the Jefferson Society, complete with original images and music from the era. Trust me, you won’t want to miss the great vaudeville star Nora Bayes, one of Norworth’s love interests, singing “Over There.”

Baseball music also has its own novelty songs; let’s take a quick look at three. Dave Frishberg’s “Van Lingle Mungo” claims most famous honors in this category. As Steve Wulf points out in a marvelous article in **Memories and Dreams: The Official Magazine of the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum**, Juliet first asked the question in Shakespeare’s **Romeo and Juliet** – “What’s in a name?” But it was Frishberg who answered the question in 1969 as he perused the recently issued **The Baseball Encyclopedia**, the first one-volume collection of all the data about all the players who ever played major league baseball. [11] Frishberg was fascinated by the rich mélange of names from

every ethnicity around the globe. He was particularly struck by the name Van Lingle Mungo, who actually pitched for the Brooklyn Dodgers in the 1930s and won 14 games for the World War II era Yankees in 1945. I verified it in my own copy of *The Baseball Encyclopedia*, a first edition of which I have lugged about for more than 50 years. There is no accounting for some behavior; in the internet era, it is a collector's item. Mungo's stats can be found on page 2021 where it is duly noted that he pitched for 14 years and won 120 major league games. [12] Inspired by Mungo, Frishberg organized the rich mix of names into a rhyming song to the bossa nova rhythm of the song he originally intended to write. It became an instant and continuing baseball cult classic as it sang:

from Van Lingle Mungo

Heeney Majeski
Johnny Gee
Eddie Joost
Johnny Pesky
Thornton Lee
Danny Gardella
Van Lingle Mungo

Augie Bergamo
Sigmund Jakucki
Big Johnny Mize and
Barney McCosky
Hal Trosky

Augie Galan and
Pinky May
Stan Hack and
Frenchy Bordagaray
Phil Cavarretta
George McQuinn
Howard Pollet and
Early Wynn
Roy Campanella
Van Lingle Mungo [13]

A version of "Van Lingle Mungo" with superimposed pictures of the players named can be heard [here](#).

Twelve years later in 1981, Terry Cashman, a former minor league baseball player, had another name driven hit with "Talkin' Baseball," which was originally titled "Willie, Mickey & the Duke." [14] Just as we discovered in the four-part *Book Notes* series on Christmas Carols, "A-caroling We Will Go," which can be found [here](#), there is a definite "Baby Boomer" bias to baseball music, as much of it was written in the latter half of the 20th century by aging boomers nostalgically recalling their youth in the 1950s and 1960s just before the societal wrenching convulsions of the counter-culture. One can see in much of this music a yearning for a simpler time and the seeds of early-21st century neo-populism. That might be too much of a load to carry for a simple song like "Willie, Mickey and the Duke," which celebrates the three great stars of the 1950s. Still, Cashman's opening stanza points in that direction as it sings:

from Talkin' Baseball

The Whiz Kids had won it,
Bobby Thomson had done it,
And Yogi read the comics all the while.
Rock 'n roll was being born,
Marijuana, we would scorn,
So down on the corner,
The national past-time went on trial ... [15]

A video of "Talkin' Baseball" can be heard [here](#).

I'm not certain anyone ever called anything Bob Dylan wrote and sang a "novelty" song, but his "Catfish" marked a departure from his more typical fare. Then again nothing Dylan ever did or sang can be labeled "typical," so let's say his "Catfish," about Hall of Fame pitcher Jim "Catfish" Hunter, caught me by surprise. Written in the mid-1970s with a rare co-author, Jacques Levy, and covered by Joe Cocker in 1976, Dylan never released his own version until 1991's the ***Bootleg Series Volumes 1-3 (Rare and Unreleased) 1961-1991***. [16] Its lyrics sing of "Catfish's" rebellion against baseball's restrictive reserve clause as he bolted from Charles Finley's Oakland Athletics to accept a million dollars from George Steinbrenner's New York Yankees. Dylan reaches for a Woody Guthrie-esque populist atmosphere, but it's hard to feel the labor movement solidarity for millionaire jocks. In the workingman's populist left genre, I much prefer his "North Country Blues." Still, "Catfish" sings:

from Catfish

Lazy stadium night
Catfish on the mound
'Strike three,' the umpire said
Better have to go back and sit down.

Catfish, million-dollar-man
Nobody can throw the ball like Catfish can

He used to work on Mr. Finley's farm
But the old man wouldn't pay
He packed his glove and took his arm
He just run away ... [17]

I'm tempted to say there is a reason Dylan never released it, but you can judge for yourself. It can be heard [here](#). For a lengthier look at Bob Dylan, you can consult my ***Book Notes*** #74, which can be found [here](#).

"Paradise by the Dashboard Light" rates either as one of the greatest rock songs ever or as an unlistenable (and seemingly unending) aural torture depending upon who you're talking to; as for me, I land somewhere in the middle. I actually enjoyed it the first several times I heard it, but I haven't listened to it in its entirety in years and years and years. Like I mentioned, it can make you wordy. The history behind its composition by Jim Steinman, its production by a veritable "who's who" of '70s era rock nobility, including Meat Loaf himself (aka Michael Lee Aday), Mark Moody Klingman, Ellen Foley, several members of Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band and Todd Rundgren is beyond our interest here, but

recruiting New York Yankees announcer Phil – *the Scooter* – Rizzuto to do the play-by-play backdrop to the two young lovers reaching love’s consummate moment illumined by the dashboard light was a touch of genius. As the lover’s found their peak (“We’re gonna go all the way tonight”), the “Scooter” intoned:

from Paradise by the Dashboard Light

OK, here we go, we got a real pressure cooker going here,
Two down, nobody on, no score, bottom of the ninth,
There's the windup, and there it is, a line shot up the middle,
Look at him go. This boy can really fly! He's rounding first and really
Turning it on now, he's not letting up at all, he's gonna try for
Second; the ball is bobbled out in center, and here comes the
Throw, and what a throw! He's gonna slide in headfirst, here he
Comes, he's out! No, wait, safe-safe at second base, this kid
Really makes things happen out there. Batter steps up to the
Plate, here's the pitch-he's going, and what a jump he's got,
He's trying for third, here's the throw, it's in the dirt-safe at
Third! Holy cow, stolen base! He's taking a pretty big lead out
There, almost daring him to try and pick him off. The pitcher
Glances over, winds up, and it's bunted, bunted down the third
Base line, the suicide squeeze is on! Here he comes, squeeze
Play, it's gonna be close, holy cow, I think he's gonna make it! [18]

If you’ve got the time, you can hear it in its entirety [here](#).

As suggested above commenting on “Talkin’ Baseball,” baseball music is not only about sports and nostalgia. It also touches the deep chords, the deep threads in ***The American Tapestry Project***. On the one hand, like Cashman’s “Talkin’ Baseball,” it hints at a desire to freeze frame America in a nostalgic picture of its past; on the other, it points to baseball’s role in healing “Freedom’s Faultlines” – all those times Americans fumbled in living up to their ideals of liberty, equality, and opportunity.

Next week in Part Two, we’ll pick up the thread of baseball music and ***The American Tapestry Project*** examining those songs that sang of immigrants and their “exotic” names, that sang of African Americans and their inclusion in the mainstream of American society via baseball’s finally welcoming doorway. And we’ll take a glance at the emerging phenomenon of women’s softball music.

In the meantime, you’ll want to listen to ***The American Tapestry Project*** on WQLN NPR1 on Sunday, May 8, at 4 p.m. to actually hear these songs; it’ll then be posted to WQLN’s website and other podcast sites, which can be found [here](#).

CORRECTION: In the original version of ***Book Notes #68***, which appeared on July 29, 2021, there were two errors in the citations. First, in End Note #25, the correct author of the article is George Boziwick and not John Thorn. In his MLB blog, Thorn introduces a longer article by Boziwick about the origins of “Take Me Out to the Ball Game.” Similarly, in End Note # 22, the correct link to Anna Laymon’s ***Smithsonian*** magazine article is available [here](#). The Jefferson thanks George Boziwick, historian and former chief of the music division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, for bringing this to Dr. Roth’s attention.

Mr. Boziwick conducted the research and originated the discussion of the feminist origins of “Take Me Out to the Ball Game.” His research first appeared in *Base Ball: A Journal of the Early Game*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., June 2, 2012. John Thorn was editor of *Base Ball* at the time Boziwick’s article was published.



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“Take Me Out to the Ball Game” at **Wikicommons** is available [here](#) accessed April 25, 2022.
John Fogerty “Centerfield” at **PowerPop.blog** is available [here](#) accessed April 25, 2022.
Joltin Joe DiMaggio at **RateYourMusic.com** is available [here](#) accessed April 25, 2022.
Did You See Jackie Robinson Hit That Ball at **You Tube** is available [here](#) accessed April 25, 2022.
Bruce Springsteen “Glory Days” at **Amazon.com** is available [here](#) accessed April 25, 2022.
“Tessie” at **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia**, is available [here](#) accessed April 25, 2022.

End Notes

1. For a list of the best football books, cf. Chris Wesseling “10 Football Books You Must Read” at **NFL.com** is available [here](#) and for the best basketball books cf. “The Ten Best Basketball Books of All Time” at **ESPN.com** is available [here](#), both accessed April 28, 2022.
2. Daniels, Nick. “10 Best Basketball Songs Ever – Hoops in Your Headphones” at **Hoopsfiend** is available [here](#) accessed April 28, 2022.
3. Stiernberg, Bonnie. “The 25 Best Walk-Up Songs in Baseball History” at **InsideHook** is available [here](#) accessed April 28, 2022.
4. Ibid.
5. Gammons, Peter. “Diamond Notes” in **Memories and Dreams: The Official Magazine of the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum** (Opening Day 2022, V.44, No.2), p. 6.
6. Stiernberg, cited above.
7. Cf. “Baseball Polka” at **Swann Auction and Galleries** is available [here](#), “The baseball polka” at **The Library of Congress** is available [here](#), and “Base Ball Polka – World’s Oldest Known Baseball Music” at **You Tube** is available [here](#) all accessed April 28, 2022.
8. “Tessie,” in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia**, is available [here](#) accessed April 28, 2022.
9. Pitoniak, Scott, “The Song is the Star” in **Memories and Dreams: The Official Magazine of the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum** (Opening Day 2022, V.44, No.2), p. 34.
10. “Songs of the Century” at **CNN.com/ENTERTAINMENT** is available [here](#) accessed April 28, 2022.
11. Wulf, Steve. “Sing a Song” in **Memories and Dreams: The Official Magazine of the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum** (Opening Day 2022, V.44, No.2), p. 8.
12. “Van Lingle Mungo,” in **The Baseball Encyclopedia** (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969), p. 2021.
13. Frishberg, Dave. “Van Lingle Mungo, lyrics” at **GENIUS** is available [here](#) accessed April 29, 2022.
14. “Talkin Baseball” in **Baseball Almanac** is available [here](#) accessed April 30, 2022.
15. Ibid.
16. “Catfish” by Bob Dylan and Jacques Levy – cf. both “‘Catfish’ by Bob Dylan” at **Songfacts** is available [here](#) and “Catfish (Bob Dylan song)” in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia**, is available [here](#) accessed April 29, 2022.
17. Dylan, Bob and Jacques Levy, “Catfish, lyrics” at **Musixmatch** is available [here](#) accessed April 29, 2022.
18. Steinman, Jim et. al. “Paradise by the Dashboard Light, lyrics” at **GENIUS** is available [here](#) accessed April 29, 2022.

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