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Baseball Music: A Primer

(Part Two)

As we asked last week in Part One of this two-part introductory series surveying baseball music: 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 how there is now an evolving women's softball music?

We discovered in Part One that, at its best, baseball music sings of the ever expanding "We" in "We the People …" as in ***The American Tapestry Project's*** "Fusion Thread." It does this in at least two ways. One, it sings of assimilating immigrants into American culture, whether it's Katie Kasey and Nelly Kelly, daughters of Irish immigrants, in "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" (early baseball was dominated by Irish immigrants); or Joe DiMaggio in "Joltin Joe DiMaggio" and the embedding of all those early 20th century immigrants whose names resonate in "Van Lingle Mungo" into American culture through the medium of baseball; or in the early 21st century Cuban star Yoenis Cespedes walking to the plate in Oakland to the sounds of Gente de Zona's "El Animal," which is Cespedes childhood nickname speaking to his origins "growing up in a humble environment." [1]

Of course, it most memorably sings of mainstreaming African Americans into the *American Game* in Chuck Berry's "Brown Eyed Handsome Man," Woodrow Johnson's "Did You See Jackie Robinson Hit That Ball," and The Treniers' "Say Hey (The Willie Mays Song)" and many others down to Jay Z's "Empire State of

Mind."

Whether they live in Omaha, Nebraska, Erie, Pennsylvania, northern New Jersey, or Queens, New York, part of the enduring loyalty of Americans of Italian ancestry to the New York Yankees results from the Yankees signing Joe DiMaggio in the 1930s. DiMaggio wasn't the first Italian American to play major league baseball, but "Joltin Joe" was the first authentic Italian American star giving the lie to his era's anti-immigration bigots. Recorded by Les Brown and His Band of Renown, "Joltin Joe DiMaggio" sings:

from Joltin Joe DiMaggio

Hello Joe, whatta you know?
We need a hit so here I go
Ball one (Yea!)
Ball two (Yea!)
Strike one (Booo!)
Strike two (Kill that umpire!)
A case of Wheaties

He started baseball's famous streak
That's got us all aglow
He's just a man and not a freak
Joltin' Joe DiMaggio ... [2]

"Joltin Joe DiMaggio" performed by Les Brown and His Orchestra can be heard here.

The contributions of African Americans to baseball lore go back much further than 1947's integration of major league baseball. They go back to the late 19th century with Moses "Fleetwood" Walker and into the early 20th century and the Negro Leagues. They include great stories about great players like "Cool Papa" Bell, the Hall of Fame shortstop who was so fast that after flicking the light switch in his hotel room he was in bed before the room got dark. These songs also speak to baseball's ability to break down barriers and to explode racist stereotypes. I remember once when I was a young boy hearing a neighbor utter some vile epithet against Black people (she used different language). Thinking to my 9- or 10-year-old self, I thought "That can't be right because Willie Mays isn't like that." To the extent that I have any sense of racial justice, it dates from that moment and speaks to the power of sport in American society.

Speaking of Willie Mays, in 1955, a rhythm and blues group, The Treniers, released "Say Hey (The Willie Mays Song)" celebrating the "Say Hey Kid's" diamond exploits. It included some dialogue by Mays himself. Although the complete lyrics are not available, the song extols Mays' many talents singing:

Say Hey (The Willie Mays Song)

He runs the bases like a choo-choo train
Swings around second like an aeroplane
His cap flies off when he passes third
And he heads home like an eagle bird.

Say hey, say who?

Say Willie
Say hey, say who?
Swinging at the plate
Say hey, say who?
Say Willie
That Giants kid is great [3]

A version of "Say Hey (The Willie Mays Song)" with Willie Mays himself and The Treniers can be heard here. But before Willie Mays there were Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby. One can argue that the great civil rights progress of the 1950s and 1960s was spurred by the integration of professional sports. The civil rights movement is much older than that, of course, but it finally found traction in the 1950s and sports played no small part. Although this is about baseball, it began in 1946 in the National Football League with Marion Motley and Bill Willis on Paul Brown's original Cleveland Browns. But, for most Americans, the epochal day was April 15, 1947, when Jackie Robinson debuted with the Brooklyn Dodgers followed quickly in July 1947 by the Cleveland Indians' Larry Doby. Almost immediately, artists and musicians celebrated. Also, a musical hit by Count Basie and His Orchestra, 1949's "Did You See Jackie Robinson Hit That Ball" by Woodrow "Buddy" Johnson's orchestra was, as Mark Preston says, "a joyous tribute to a man who'd literally changed the face of the game." [4] Its lyrics sing of Jackie Robinson, but also of Satchel Paige, Roy Campanella and Larry Doby. They ask:

from Did You See Jackie Robinson Hit That Ball

Did you see Jackie Robinson hit that ball?
It went zoomin cross the left field wall.
Yeah boy, yes, yes. Jackie hit that ball.

And when he swung his bat,
the crowd went wild,
because he knocked that ball a solid mile.
Yeah boy, yes, yes. Jackie hit that ball.
Satchel Page [Paige] is mellow,

so is Campanella,
Newcombe and Doby, too.
But it's a natural fact,
when Jackie comes to bat,
the other team is through.

Did you see Jackie Robinson hit that ball?
Did he hit it boy, and that ain't all.
He stole home.
Yes, yes, Jackie's real gone. [5]

The original Decca Records version of "Did You See Jackie Robinson Hit That Ball" by Buddy Johnson and His Orchestra can be heard here.

Mark Preston quotes Chuck Berry's biographer Bruce Pegg, who said Berry's song "Brown Eyed Handsome Man" was "rock and roll's first Black pride song." [6] One of rock and roll's founding legends, Berry wrote the song in 1955 after visiting several minority areas in California and seeing a woman shouting at police who

were arresting a Hispanic man. [7] Berry released it in 1956 and in his 1957 album ***After School Session***. In 1950s America, the song created controversy because it implicitly sang of white women yearning for a brown-eyed, handsome man – "the Venus de Milo lost her arms wrestling for a brown eyed man." Curiously, if you search for the song's lyrics today, you find lyrics from Berry's "No Particular Place to Go," which was released in the early 1960s. Covered by a number of artists, "Brown Eyed Handsome Man" was a hit for Buddy Holly, and it is under his name one finds Berry's lyrics singing of Black pride in Jackie Robinson. Its final verse sings:

from Brown Eyed Handsome Man

… Well-a two, three the count with nobody on
He hit a high fly into the stands
A-rounding third he was a-heading for home
It was a brown eyed handsome man
That won the game it was a brown eyed handsome man. [8]

A video of Chuck Berry performing the original 1957 version of "Brown Eyed Handsome Man" can be heard here.

In addition to singing of social justice, baseball music can be inspirational and healing. New York Yankee fan Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline" has been played as the unofficial Boston Red Sox anthem since 1997 when team employee Amy Tobey played it because a friend had recently given birth to a daughter named "Caroline." Years later Diamond revealed it's actually named as a birthday gift for Caroline Kennedy. [9] Some fans loved it, others loathed it, but in 2002 after a Red Sox executive saw how fans sang it during the eighth inning, it was made a Red Sox tradition. It was cemented into Boston lore when at the first game at Fenway Park after the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombing Neil Diamond himself sang it as part of the "Boston Strong" movement.

A video of that April 20, 2013 experience can be heard here.

When not sending social messages, most baseball music sings of the simple joy of going to a ball game, like Alabama's "Cheap Seats," or waxes nostalgic, sometimes with a twinge of might-have-beens, like Bruce Springsteen's "Glory Days," or glories in long-delayed victory finally won, like Eddie Vedder's "All the Way," or, at its best, like John Fogerty's bursting with optimism "Centerfield," does all three at once.

Just like going to an Erie Seawolves game, where for less than the cost of a tank of gas to go to Cleveland or Pittsburgh to see 'big league' baseball, you can see real, high-quality baseball played by young ballplayers whose names you do not know while sitting in seats literally within arm's reach of the field, the country band Alabama's "Cheap Seats" celebrates the minor league experience. The players might not be the best (although some of them are), the beer's priced right, and we're not sure where the team sits in the standings, still it's baseball on a summer's eve. What else do you need? Released in 1993 in its album of the same name, "Cheap Seats" sings:

from Cheap Seats

The game was close, we'll call it a win

Go off to toast the boys again
That local band is back in town
They got a kinda minor league sound
They're not that bad, they're not that good
But all in all it's understood
We wanna dance, they wanna play
We wouldn't have it any other way

We like our beer flat as can be
We like our dogs with mustard and relish
We got a great pitcher what's his name
Well we can't even spell it
We don't worry about the pennant much
We just like to see the boys hit it deep
There's nothing like the view from the cheap seats ... [10]

Before drawing this two-part series on baseball music to a conclusion by examining the three best baseball songs not titled "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," let's circle back to a question I asked at the beginning of both last week's Part One and this week's Part Two: What are the best songs about women's softball?

Now, you might ask what this has to do with baseball music. Fair enough, but one of the trends in American culture since the 1970s has been the rise of women's sports, in particular softball, basketball, and soccer. On a purely personal note, one of my great experiences was founding a local college's women's soccer team in the 1980s and leading it to the first ever NCCAA Division II Women's Final Four in 1988. In a similar vein, the rise of women's softball has been one of the great godsends to professional baseball, for, as we watched the then-Cleveland Indians play, I don't remember who sometime during the 20-oughts, a Cleveland Guardians official asked me, "Look around the ballpark – what do you see?"

Myopically, I replied "What do you mean?" He said look at all the women. Not just the mothers with their families and women with dates, although nowadays you don't actually know who brought whom, but all the other women sitting in groups of two, three, four, or more. He said they're saving the game; they represent an increasing percentage of all baseball fans. If baseball survives the demise of the Baby Boomers and Gen X, it will be all the new women fans who saved it. He attributed the boom, maybe boomlet, in women fans to the rise of softball. There is now, he said, two or three generations of women who have played softball. They understand the game. They know what they're watching, and they've become some of baseball's most ardent fans. As I thought about what he said, I thought about a former female colleague of mine who is both a former softball player and who knows more about baseball than any three or four guys you might choose at random and decided his observations were right.

Women's softball is booming, hardly news, and it's an important part of baseball's future, but, interestingly enough, there does not appear to be any softball music, or music specifically about the joys of playing softball. To the extent that there are any listings of "softball music," Pat Benatar's "Hit Me With Your Best Shot" shows up most often. There is, however, a rich trove of softball walk-up music; in fact, there is a Top 108 at Flosoftball.com topped by Led Zeppelins' "Whole Lotta Love," "Dangerous" by the Ying Yang Twins," with "Paranoid" by Black Sabbath at #5, and Beyonce's "Partition" at #6. [11]

So, while we await softball music's arrival, what are the three best baseball songs not titled "Take Me Out to the Ball Game"? To make my personal list, a song needs to have a hint of nostalgia, perhaps twinged with a trace of regret, celebrate long delayed victory's final arrival and look to the future with optimism and hope. Not many do all of that, but the three we'll look at next collectively strike all the right notes.

Bruce Springsteen's "Glory Days" tells of his chance encounter with an old friend who was a great high school baseball player. Having a beer together, they talk about old times. The friend, who, unlike Springsteen, did not grow up to become a great rock star, nevertheless went to college, graduated, and lives a successful life. But a life that perhaps never quite recaptures the spirit, the glory, of his high school days. I need to tread carefully here, for Springsteen is respectful of his friend, but the song touches many of the same chords other great artists have played upon – fame's fleeting glory, the passing of youth, and the yearning in middle age and older for one more taste of youthful passion. It's what F. Scott Fitzgerald meant in ***The Great Gatsby*** describing Gatsby's nemesis Tom Buchanan as one who "would drift on forever seeking a little wistfully for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game." [12] Or, most memorably, A.E. Housman's "To An Athlete Dying Young":

from To An Athlete Dying Young

The time you won your town the race
We chaired you through the market-place;
Man and boy stood cheering by,
And home we brought you shoulder-high.

Today, the road all runners come,
Shoulder-high we bring you home,
And set you at your threshold down,
Townsman of a stiller town.

Smart lad, to slip betimes away
From fields where glory does not stay,
And early though the laurel grows
It withers quicker than the rose … [13]

Housman celebrates the athlete who died young, before his skills waned, memory of his exploits faded, and all he had left were stories about how good he had been – before he became a "has-been." Springsteen and his friend recall their youthful triumphs, but while the friend wants "to recapture a little of the glory" of the old times, Springsteen wants to move on. Two friends, one stuck in time, the other moving forward knowing that "Glory days yeah they'll pass you by." The song sings:

from Glory Days

I had a friend was a big baseball player
Back in high school
He could throw that speedball by you
Make you look like a fool boy
Saw him the other night at this roadside bar
I was walking in, he was walking out
We went back inside sat down had a few drinks

But all he kept talking about was
Glory days well they'll pass you by
Glory days in the wink of a young girl's eye
Glory days, glory days. … [14]

The official video of Bruce Springsteen singing "Glory Days" can be found here.

Pearl Jam lead singer Eddie Vedder, a lifelong Chicago Cubs fan, grew up in Evanston, Illinois. He first attended a Cubs game when he was six and, in that idiosyncratic way only young baseball fans can have, rather than Ernie Banks he idolized Cub outfielder Jose Cardenal. Later, in 2013, playing a concert at Wrigley Field, Vedder got the opportunity to play a game of catch with Banks. Much to his amazement, Banks asked if he could have Vedder's glove. Vedder, in one of those fairy tale stories that are part of baseball's charm, got it back in 2017 when he again played a concert at Wrigley Field. In between, in 2016, the North Side favorites ended their 108-year World Series drought by beating, who else, the Cleveland Indians in seven games. The Guardians, *nee* Indians, in their long and mostly mediocre history, turn up as the foil in any number of historic baseball moments. Maybe someday, as Vedder once sang about his beloved Cubs, they'll go "All the Way." The Cubs have since reverted to their historic level of ineptitude, but in 2016 they did indeed go "All the Way." It's now become their anthem, singing:

from All the Way

Don't let anyone say that it's just a game
For I've seen other teams and it's never the same
When you're born in Chicago you're blessed and you're healed
The first time you walk into Wrigley Field
Our heroes wear pinstripes, heroes in blue
Give us the chance to feel like heroes too
Forever we'll win and if we should lose
We know someday we'll go all the way
Yeah, someday we'll go all the way … [15]

The official Eddie Vedder Cubs Song can be found here.

There are literally hundreds, probably thousands of baseball songs. This two-part primer surfed the topic, but a deeper dive would find other nuggets like Peter, Paul, and Mary's "Right Field"; Kenny Rogers' "The Greatest"; Jim Nuzzo's "Subway"; "OK Blue Jays," played during the seventh inning stretch of every Blue Jays game; "The Ballad of Ichiro Suzuki" by Ben Gibbard of Death Cab for Cutie; and "Mrs. Robinson," in which Simon and Garfunkel wonder where has Joe DiMaggio gone. Although from the late 1960s, "Mrs. Robinson" seems to have inspired a quarter-century's worth of baseball noir songs, such as "Don't Beat My Ass (With a Baseball Bat)" by the Goo Goo Dolls; "Baseball Buddy" by Buckethead; "Home Run" by Joe Nichols in which the singer whines "Life's been coming at me like a fastball … it's time I hit a home run"; "Baseball Furies" about a fictional gang in 1979s New York City; and "Baseball Bill" by Echo and the Bunnymen, which uses baseball jargon for a nihilist rant.

Maybe it's age, but the appeal of many recent baseball songs' *noirish* negativity escapes me. I'll take the spirit of the song rated on just about every Top 10 Baseball Songs' list as number two and no worse than number three, John Fogerty's "Centerfield," which Maury Brown says "combines the best of music and

the national pastime." [16] Jim Beviglia, in ***American Songwriter: The Craft of Music,*** says Fogerty's centerfield is "the aural equivalent of May's catch" in the 1954 World Series, the catch, as we've noted, came off the bat of the Cleveland Indians's Vic Wertz and is considered the greatest in baseball history. [17]

Fogerty, who was the lead singer for Credence Clearwater Revival, recorded "Centerfield" after an almost 10-year hiatus in his career. Originally only a minor hit as a single, Fogerty included it in his 1985 album "Centerfield." If "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" is baseball's national anthem, then Fogerty's "Centerfield" is its designated hitter. Most people assume "Centerfield" refers to Willie Mays, since Fogerty grew up in California. He says growing up in the late-1940s and early to mid 1950s before the Giants moved to San Francisco and listening to the stories his father told him, he focused on Mickey Mantle and Duke Snider. The song's title comes from a sense he had ever since he was a little boy that the centerfielder was "the guy" on the team; as Fogerty says the centerfielder always "seemed to hit all the home runs and was the 'rock star' of the team." [18] The song also references Chuck Berry's "Brown Eyed Handsome Man" as way of honoring Jackie Robinson, because, as Fogerty says, "The most important thing in our culture at the time," the 1940s/50s, "was breaking the color barrier. It took baseball far too long, but it's good they finally did. And for all he endured and how he held himself up, he's someone anyone could look up to." [19]

With its optimism, its "put me in the game, coach" spirit, "Centerfield" sings of that hope characterizing both spring training and new student orientation. I always thought orientation one of the happiest parts of the college year, because, just like spring training, it was full of hope, no one was throwing curveballs or giving tests, and everyone was a winner. As we all know, eventually the tests come and they start throwing curveballs, but Fogerty sings of the spirit with which that moment must be met when he croaks in his inimitable voice:

from Centerfield

Well, beat the drum and hold the phone – the sun came out today!
We're born again, there's new grass on the field.
A-roundin' third, and headed for home, it's a brown-eyed handsome man;
Anyone can understand the way I feel.

Oh, put me in, Coach – I'm ready to play today;
Put me in, Coach – I'm ready to play today;
Look at me, I can be Centerfield … [20]

Baseball music – the sounds of the seasons singing, if we can only listen, singing of those common objects of our love binding Americans together.

Play ball!

To actually hear these songs, listen to my ***The American Tapestry Project*** *available on WQLN NPR1's website and other podcast sites, which can be found here.*

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"Take Me Out to the Ball Game " at **Wikicommons** available here accessed April 25, 2022.
John Fogerty "Centerfield" at **PowerPop.blog** available here accessed April 25, 2022.
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End Notes

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