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Six Patriotic Songs for a Joyous July Fourth!

Editor's note: Following is a Book Notes Classic by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Andrew Roth. It was first published as Book Notes #64 in July 2021.



Happy Fourth of July!

Happy Independence Day!

Depending upon whether you consider *Back-to-College* and *Back-to-School* holidays (which I do not but the National Retail Federation does), July Fourth ranks only eighth or ninth in holiday spending, just ahead of St. Patrick's Day

and right behind the Super Bowl. [2] Regardless, July Fourth remains a potent day of national celebration.

That is precisely what John Adams predicted in a letter to his wife Abigail when he wrote:

[Independence Day] will be the most memorable Epocha, in the History of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary Festival. It ought to be commemorated, as the Day of Deliverance by solemn Acts of Devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more. [3]

This weekend, as we listen to patriotic music, nosh on our hot dogs and potato salad, look in on the odd sporting event and “ooh and aah” at the evening’s fireworks displays, please note that it is exactly what Americans have been doing these past 255 years.

Aside: In several previous **Book Notes**, we examined, oh, to choose a more or less neutral word, the **ambiguity** of history. That pervasive phenomenon of how diverse people either innocently or perhaps not so innocently see the “facts of the matter” differently. Facts are notoriously persistent yet tangled things. For example, note that John Adams wrote on July 3 about “the great Anniversary Festival.” He did not mean July Fourth; actually, he was referring to July 2 when the Continental Congress approved Richard Henry Lee’s, which Adams seconded, proposal of June 7 declaring the American colonies independent of Great Britain. They then spent the remainder of July 2, all of July 3, and some of July 4 editing it for style and taking out passages critical of the English people and slavery. They then adopted it on July Fourth. It wasn’t signed until August 2. [4]

Granted, a quibble, but it illustrates how something allegedly so straightforward as a “date” can get tangled, not to mention any topic freighted with emotional resonance such as racism, slavery, differing social classes, and anti-immigrant bigotry. As we celebrate “*The Fourth*” this weekend, let’s look at three more patriotic American songs of freedom. African American James Weldon Johnson’s *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, Jewish immigrant Irving Berlin’s *God Bless America*, and Woody Guthrie’s, an “Okie” from Oklahoma whose country-folk songs found an eager audience among the down-and-out of Depression-era America, *This Land Is Your Land*.

Lift Every Voice and Sing

Sometimes called “The Black National Anthem,” James Weldon Johnson’s *Lift Every Voice and Sing* speaks to African Americans’ struggles for inclusion. Born in Jacksonville, Florida, Johnson was both a man of letters and, like Katherine Lee Bates, who wrote *America the Beautiful*, an early 20th century social activist and civil rights leader. A man of many accomplishments, he graduated from Atlanta University in 1894. Returning home to Jacksonville, he taught school and founded a newspaper, the *Daily American*, “the first Black-oriented daily newspaper in the United States.” [5] Involved in civil rights work, Johnson still found the time to read law. In 1898, he became the first Black lawyer admitted to the Florida Bar since Reconstruction. [6]

A tireless worker, as a poet, novelist, and editor, Johnson is also one of America’s most accomplished writers. The Poetry Foundation says as a poet Johnson “brought a high standard of artistry and realism to Black literature in such works as *God’s Trombones* and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*.” They continue, “His pioneering studies of Black poetry, music, and theater in the 1920s introduced many white Americans to the rich African American creative spirit.” [7] Of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, Carl Van Vechten, one of the pioneers of the Harlem Renaissance, called it “an invaluable source-book for the study of Negro psychology.” [8] Of *God’s Trombones*, Johnson is quoted as describing it as “an art-governed expression’ of the traditional Black preaching style.” [9]

Johnson was also a major figure in early-20th century American politics. An ally of President Theodore Roosevelt, Johnson split with the Republican Party in the 1920s when the Harding and Coolidge administrations’ support of minority rights cooled. The first African American to lead the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Johnson served from 1920 to 1930. A major civil rights figure, he opposed colonization and separatist movements, advocated for anti-lynching laws and fought for African American political, legal, and economic rights. [10]

It is as an artist, however, that he is most famous. His fame rests primarily on his association with the Harlem Renaissance and his own poems, novels, and anthologies collecting black culture’s poetry and spirituals. His most famous poem is *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, which was written by Johnson in 1900. His brother J. Rosamond Johnson set it to music in 1905 for Abraham Lincoln’s birthday. [11]

Similar to many African American spirituals, *Lift Every Voice and Sing* sings of freedom by evoking images from Exodus as it celebrates the journey from slavery to freedom’s promised land. I am keenly aware that some might call what I am about to say, “cultural appropriation,” but if one of the major themes in American history is the struggle of the excluded – be they African Americans,

other minorities, women or immigrants – to be included in America’s “We the people,” then it has rarely, if ever, been said better than Johnson’s:

*Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat,
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?*

So that as the poem opens, he can say

*Lift ev’ry voice and sing,
‘Til earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty ... [12]*

Here is the complete *Lift Every Voice and Sing*:

Lift every voice and sing,
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the list’ning skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chast’ning rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat,
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered.
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past,
Till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;

Thou who hast by Thy might,
Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;
Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
May we forever stand,
True to our God,
True to our native land. [13]

There is a growing awareness of the song throughout American culture. One might lament that it took a hundred years, but nonetheless here we are in 2021 with the NFL playing it before games early in the 2020 season and Erie's own Gannon University showing the way by having it sung in conjunction with *The Star Spangled Banner* before all of their athletic teams' games. [14]

Some might oppose that.

I ask why?

I say the more songs the better and the more songs we sing the more people will be included and then one day some genius not yet apparent will weave them all into one song celebrating the ever-expanding meaning of "*We the People...*" and "Freedom's Faultlines" from my *The American Tapestry Project* will only be a fading memory.

OK, I'm fanciful, but it's a worthy goal, a goal worthy of song.

A video of the Spelman College Glee Club performing *Lift Every Voice and Sing* can be found [here](#).

God Bless America

A Jewish immigrant, Irving Berlin was born Israel Baline in 1888 in Russia. Fleeing the frequent anti-Jewish programs terrorizing Russian Jews, Berlin's family immigrated to America in the 1890s. [15] Landing on the lower east side of New York City, Berlin's family was part of that massive late-19th and early 20th century influx of immigrants that, despite the bigotry of anti-immigrationists like Henry Cabot Lodge, Sr., Prescott Hall and Madison Grant, enriched American culture. Having worked as a street singer in his teens, Berlin's first published song sang of another immigrant, *Marie From Sunny Italy*. His name was misspelled as I. Berlin on the published sheet; he kept the name and became Irving Berlin. [16]

Berlin became one of the early 20th century's greatest Tin Pan Alley figures. He had his first major "hit" in 1911 with *Alexander's Rag Time Band*. Name a popular American song of the early 20th century and Berlin probably wrote it. He practically created the "American Song Book." A list of his "hits" would make a **Book Notes** unto itself, but just the "major hits" on his discography include *How Deep Is the Ocean, Blue Skies, Always, There's No Business Like Show Business, A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody, Easter Parade, White Christmas, Puttin on the Ritz, Heat Wave, Let's Face the Music and Dance*, preferably by *Dancing Queen*, and, of course, *God Bless America*. [17]

Berlin wrote *God Bless America* in 1918 during World War I while serving in the Army, but Berlin did not use it in a musical show. He was preparing to aid the war effort. With Adolph Hitler on the rise in 1938, Berlin revived *God Bless America* as a peace song. Kate Smith featured it on an Armistice Day broadcast of her highly popular radio show. Berlin added an introduction that Smith always used:

*While the storm clouds gather far across the sea /
Let us swear allegiance to a land that's free /
Let us all be grateful for a land so fair, /
As we raise our voices in a solemn prayer.* [18]

A video of Kate Smith singing "God Bless America" during that broadcast can be found [here](#).

Here is the complete *God Bless America*:

God bless America, land that I love
Stand beside her and guide her
Through the night with the light from above
From the mountains to the prairies
To the oceans white with foam
God bless America, my home sweet home
God bless America, land that I love
Stand beside her and guide her
Through the night with the light from above
From the mountains to the prairies
To the oceans white with foam
God bless America, my home sweet home
From the mountains to the prairies
To the oceans white with foam
God bless America, my home sweet home
God bless America, my home sweet home. [19]

What was the reception?

Mixed.

Anti-Semitic bigots like the Ku Klux Klan opposed it because Berlin was Jewish. In 1943, Smith sang it in Berlin's patriotic musical, *This is the Army*. Berlin gave the song's royalties to The God Bless America Fund for redistribution to Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts in New York City. [20] During the 1950s, the song was a regular feature of Kate Smith's NBC television series.

God Bless America had fans on both the political left and right. It was used at both 1950s era civil rights and organized labor rallies. In the 1960s, however, Christian conservatives began to use it to oppose America's growing [secular liberalism](#) and to support the Vietnam war and to counter the anti-war movement. In the 1970s, the Philadelphia Flyers played Smith's version at home hockey games which spurred other sports teams to do the same. [21]

A more melodious tune than *The Star-Spangled Banner*, at times advocates have promoted *God Bless America* as an alternative national anthem.

This Land Is Your Land

So, *God Bless America* spoke to all Americans, on the left and the right, but it annoyed Woody Guthrie. Annoyed by its over popularity, what he thought its self-satisfied lyrics, and its ignoring of the Depression era's less fortunate excluded from America's blessings, as a rejoinder, originally titled *God Blessed America For Me*, in 1940 Guthrie wrote *This Land Is Your Land*.

Born in Oklahoma, Woody Guthrie didn't write about the American West as it had been romanticized in the American imagination by dime novels, movies, and songs since Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show of the 19th century. Instead, Guthrie set out to tell the stories of common people working hard to make a life for themselves amid the real West's often challenging and sometimes unforgiving realities.

Raised by a middle-class family, when his mother's illness splintered his family, he left home to work as a migrant farmer. At 15, he began to travel the country by freight train, inadvertently beginning the creation of the myth of the itinerant folk singer emulated by untold numbers during the 1960s. With his ever-present harmonica and guitar, he sang for other migrants and drifters the country-folk songs he had learned at home. By the late 1930s, he had landed in California, where he appeared on radio singing traditional folk songs. In his performances he also included songs he had written while wandering the country with the Depression-era poor and what we would now call the "homeless." [21]

A champion of common people, Guthrie's songs reflected both a deep love of country and a strong commitment to ordinary working people. Written while Guthrie lived in New York, *This Land Is Your Land* celebrated America's beauty and Guthrie's belief that "the nation belonged to all the people, not merely the rich and powerful." [23]

Here is the complete *This Land Is Your Land*:

This land is your land, this land is my land
From California to the New York island.
From the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters
This land was made for you and me.

As I went walking that ribbon of highway
I saw above me that endless skyway
Saw below me that golden valley
This land was made for you and me.

I roamed and rambled and I've followed my footsteps
To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts.
All around me a voice was sounding
This land was made for you and me.

When the sun come shining, then I was strolling
And the wheat fields waving and the dust clouds rolling.
The voice was chanting as the fog was lifting.
This land was made for you and me.

As I went walking I saw a sign there,
And on the sign it said "No Trespassing."
But on the other side it didn't say nothing.
That side was made for you and me.
In the shadow of the steeple I saw my people,
By the relief office I seen my people;
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking
Is this land made for you and me?
Nobody living can ever stop me,
As I go walking that freedom highway;
Nobody living can ever make me turn back
This land was made for you and me.
This land is your land, this land is my land
From California to the New York island.
From the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters
This land was made for you and me.

A video of Woody Guthrie singing *This Land Is Your Land* can be found [here](#).

An interesting video with commentary by Bruce Springsteen singing Woody Guthrie's *This Land Is Your Land* can be found [here](#).

In all six of these songs, we've seen the marvel and the beauty of America's diversity. The composers range from a descendant of the earliest English settlers to a 19th century Jewish immigrant, from a Portuguese immigrant's son to the daughter of old-line Yankees, from a descendant of enslaved African Americans to a Dust Bowl "Okie" who practically invented the genre of American folk troubadour singing songs of protest and love for the land of his birth.

Last week when we began this brief tour of American patriotic songs, I asked 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's first verse sings of America's resilience, its gallant defense of the "free and the brave" while its third verse unwittingly betrays one of its direst secrets – that the "free" did not include everyone. Still, its gallantry stirs the patriotic spirit. As does the invigorating tempo of *The Washington Post March*, which, devoid of lyrics, avoids all linguistic snares and historical cul-de-sacs, including its own teasingly commercial origins. *Lift Every Voice and Sing* shares with us the strength of those who overcame and labor still to complete freedom's journey. *God Bless America* shares an immigrant's joy, if perhaps too cloyingly, and *This Land Is Your Land* reminds us all that, indeed, we are all in this together – rich and poor; black, white, brown, and multi-hued; urban and rural; East and West, North and South!

But of the six, I think Katherine Lee Bates' *America the Beautiful* gets it mostly right. We're humans and therefore any society we create will also be imperfect, but if we acknowledge that, work to correct our flaws in the spirit of mutual caring and while doing that take the time to look up and note the beauty of the land we're fortunate enough to occupy, then we just might be able to fulfill freedom's promise, to lift our voices to make this land over which the flag still

waves everyone's land, crowning it with brotherhood, mending every flaw and all our successes will be touched with nobleness from sea to shining sea.

If change the national anthem we might, then it would be very hard to do better than *America the Beautiful*, properly understood.

Happy Fourth of July!

If you want to hear the music discussed in this and last week's **Book Notes** 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, the program will be posted to WQLN's website later in that week and can be found [here](#).



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L-R; Francis Scott Key [Here](#); John Philips Sousa [Here](#); Katherine Lee Bates [Here](#); James Weldon Johnson [Here](#); Irving Berlin [Here](#); Woody Guthrie [Here](#). All of the above accessed May 22, 2021.

End Notes

1. "Retail Insights and Trends: Holiday and Seasonal Trends" at **National Retail Federation** available [here](#) accessed May 22, 2021.
2. "Letter: John Adams to Abigail Adams, July 3, 1776" at **Massachusetts Historical Society** available [here](#) accessed May 22, 2021.
3. Two brief but accurate accounts of the sequence of events can be found at "Declaration of Independence" at **History.com** available [here](#) and "John Adams's vision of July 4 was July 2" in **Pieces of History at National Archives** available [here](#) both of the above accessed May 22, 2021.
4. "[James Weldon Johnson.](#)" at **The Poetry Foundation** available [here](#) accessed May 23, 2021.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.

8. "God's Trombones" in **Encyclopedia Britannica** available [here](#) accessed May 23, 2021.
9. "James Weldon Johnson," at **The Poetry Foundation** available [here](#) accessed May 23, 2021.
10. "Lift Every Voice and Sing," in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available [here](#) accessed May 23, 2021.
11. Johnson, James Weldon. "Lift Every Voice and Sing" at **Poets.org** available [here](#) accessed May 23, 2021.
12. Ibid.
13. Reisenweber, Tom. "Gannon adds Black national anthem to sports pregame ceremonies for inclusion" in **GoErie.com** available [here](#) accessed May 24, 2021.
14. "Irving Berlin," in **Biography.com** available [here](#) accessed May 24, 2021.
15. Ibid.
16. "Irving Berlin: Concise Biography," at **Irving Berlin.com** available [here](#) accessed May 24, 2021.
17. "God Bless America," in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available [here](#) accessed May 24, 2021.
18. Ibid.
19. "Irving Berlin Gives 'God Bless America' Royalties to Scouting," at **Copyright.gov** available [here](#) accessed May 24, 2021.
20. "God Bless America," in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available [here](#) accessed May 24, 2021.
21. "Woody Guthrie writes 'This Land Is Your Land'" at **History.com** available [here](#) accessed May 24, 2021.
22. Ibid.
23. Guthrie, Woody. "This Land Is Your Land" in **Musixmatch** available [here](#) accessed May 24, 2021.

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