

Making Sense of American Popular Song John Spitzer and Ronald G. Walters

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Tunes, lyrics, recordings, sheet music—all are components of popular songs, and all can serve as evidence of peoples, places, and attitudes of the past. Written by Ronald J. Walters and John Spitzer, *Making Sense of American Popular Song* provides a place for students and teachers to begin working with songs as a way of understanding the past. Ronald G. Walters is a Professor in the Department of History of The Johns Hopkins University. Author of *The Antislavery Appeal* (Johns Hopkins University Press and W.W. Norton), *American Reformers* (Hill and Wang), and editor of works on American sexual advice literature and on the authority of science in twentieth-century America, he has also published essays on film and American popular culture. His current project is a study of the mass media and popular culture in twentieth-century America. John Spitzer received a B.A. in History and Literature from Harvard University and his Ph.D. in musicology and ethnomusicology at Cornell University. In 1987 he joined the faculty at the Peabody Conservatory of The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. His chief research interests include the history of the orchestra, American song, and the relations between Western and non-Western musics.

What Is a Song?

It is commonplace to divide songs into different types, with three of the broadest categories being “classical,” “popular,” and “folk.” In practice these distinctions frequently break down. Is “Dixie” (1859) a “popular” or a “folk” song? We know its composer (Dan Emmett), and that it was created for the commercial theater. On the other hand, it is widely performed today in non-commercial contexts, and its transmission is primarily oral. For purposes of this guide, we will not distinguish between types of music. The techniques discussed will work equally well with most forms of American popular song.

We talk about a “song” at least two different ways. The first is as a musical work, an abstract entity that serves as an umbrella for many versions or renditions. In most cases a song’s title marks it as being the “same” in all its various versions, although occasionally the same song acquires different titles and gains or loses lyrics. Second, we conceive of a song as a rendition, that is, a realization of the song in a performance, a publication, or a recording. Each rendition of a song is unique, although renditions may be very similar to one another.

It is important to take a broad view of songs. They consist not just of the lyrics and the tune, but also of all the contexts in which a song is created, experienced, produced, and consumed. These contexts include such things as where the song was performed and by whom, the audience for it, and the technology that produced it and preserved it for us to appreciate.

American Popular Song: A Brief History

Americans have been singing since the first Europeans and Africans began arriving in North America in the sixteenth century. Work songs, hymns, love songs, dance tunes, humorous songs, and parodies—such songs provide a record of American history, serving both as historical sources and also as subjects of historical investigation.

During the colonial, revolutionary, and federal periods (1607-1820) most American songs were strongly tied to the musical traditions of the British isles. Hymn tunes, ballads, theater songs, and drinking songs were imported from England or based closely on English models. The main exceptions were the hymns of German-speaking communities in Pennsylvania, the music of African-American slave communities, and the songs of New Orleans, which were closely linked to the French West Indies and to France. Those exceptions aside, the most distinctively American songs were patriotic ones, like “Yankee Doodle” and the “Star Spangled Banner,” and even these were adaptations of English originals.

The first uniquely American popular song tradition arose with the minstrel show, beginning in the 1840s. Many songs still familiar today, such as “Turkey in the Straw” (“Zip Coon”) (c. 1824), “Oh Susanna” (1854), “Dixie” (1859), “Buffalo Gals” (1844), and “Old Folks at Home” (“Swanee River”) (1851), were originally composed for the minstrel stage and first performed on northern stages by white singers in blackface. These blackface performers adopted and exaggerated the styles of African-American song and movement in a politically charged process. After the Civil War, African-American performers were only able to establish a toehold in the entertainment industry by conforming to the still popular, and demeaning, forms that originated with white performers in blackface.

African Americans themselves created all-black minstrel shows, contributing songs like “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny” (1878) and “O Dem Golden Slippers” (1879) to the repertory. European songs, especially sentimental songs like those contained in *Moore’s Irish Melodies* (1808-1834) and arias from Italian operas, remained important in the first half of the nineteenth century, joined by similar songs composed in America, for example “Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair” (1854), “Lorena” (1857), and “Aura Lee” (1861), recorded with new lyrics in 1956 by Elvis Presley as “Love Me Tender.”

American song in the second half of the nineteenth century underwent a tremendous commercial expansion, which extended into the twentieth century and indeed has not abated today. Initially, sheet music and pocket songsters were the primary means of circulating songs, since many Americans played and sang music in their own homes. The music publishing industry was increasingly concentrated in New York City’s famous “Tin Pan Alley” by the 1880s. After that point, however, songs also came to be bought, sold, and preserved in a succession of new media: sound recordings and player pianos in the 1890s; radio in the 1920s, movie sound tracks in the late 1920s, television in the 1950s, cassette tapes in the early 1960s, CDs in the early 1980s, DVDs in the mid 1990s, and MP3s in the late 1990s. This commercial expansion meant that more songs were composed, performed, produced, and consumed in the United States, as well as exported to, and received from, the rest of the world.

Expansion and commercialization extended a process that began with the minstrel show: songs that had once been restricted to ethnic minorities or immigrant groups were marketed to the entire nation. Irish ballads like “Danny Boy” (1913), “My Wild Irish Rose” (1899), and “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling” (1913) became popular among non-Irish singers and listeners; so did Italian songs like “O Sole Mio” (1899).

Jewish composers and performers likewise incorporated elements from their culture into American music, as when Sophie Tucker alternately sang her popular “My Yiddishe Momme” (1925) in English and Yiddish. African-American traditions gave rise to a succession of distinctive song styles: spirituals, ragtime, blues, and, later, rhythm and blues, all appropriated enthusiastically by white American performers and audiences.

This was not simply a matter of cross-marketing or trading repertoires. Songwriters and performers from a wide range of backgrounds listened to each other’s music, learned from it, parodied it, created new styles out of it, and crossed back and forth between musical genres. By the 1970s, for example, an African-American performer like Ray Charles, deeply rooted in black religious music, the blues, and rhythm and blues, could easily take a country music song like “You Are My Sunshine” (1940) or a sentimental ballad like “Georgia on My Mind” (1930) and make them his own.

By the 1950s two different, seemingly contradictory, things were coming to be true about American popular music. The first is that some songs remained familiar across long periods of time and to very different people. A so-called “standard”—a song from Tin Pan Alley’s glory days (roughly 1910 to 1954)—might be recorded hundreds of times over several decades and remain familiar today. “St. Louis Blues” (1914), “Stardust” (1929), and “God Bless America” (1939) are still with us, in multiple versions. At the same time, with the rise of rock ‘n roll in the 1950s and the great commercial success of African-American rhythm and blues and soul music in the following decade, taste in popular song was increasingly separated by age, race, ethnicity, region, and gender. Perhaps the best sign of this is the proliferation of musical categories in record stores and in music award shows.

These seemingly contrary tendencies may well be two sides of the same coin and part of a long-standing process in American music. For at least the past two centuries, much of what is dynamic in American music arose out of a continual process of sampling, fusing, and appropriating the different musics that make up American popular song. Commercial music industries, from live entertainment to sheet music to recordings, while catering to mainstream audiences, have also sought out musical styles and performers from beyond the mainstream. Marginalized by factors such as geography, race, and economic class, performers and styles such as “hillbilly” or country music, delta blues, and hip hop have worked their way onto stages and into recording booths throughout the history of American popular song.

Who Created the Song? When? Why?

If the musical item at hand is a piece of printed music, then by law the names of the lyricist and composer will be printed at the top of the music. If it is an LP or CD, then the names will be printed on the label and/or the cover. Perhaps the same person composed both words and music, a practice that became much more common in the twentieth century. Even if we are dealing with a “folk song,” it is reasonable to assume that someone must have been the first to sing those words, to sing that tune, and to put words and tune together. In this case, however, the song’s creators are typically unknown to many people who sing the song, although research will sometimes reveal the identity of an author and lyricist in the not-too-distant past. Most people in the United States know “Auld Lang Syne” (1788, 1799) and “Happy Birthday” (1893). But how many know that Robert Burns wrote the words to the former or that Mildred and

Patty Hill composed the tune of the latter and published it in 1893 in a kindergarten songbook with the lyric, “Good morning to all”?

To assign credit to a lyricist and a composer, however, does not always tell us who created the song we see, much less the song we hear. Who created the harmonies? Who worked out the accompaniment on piano or guitar? If we’re listening to a recording, who produced it? If we’re watching a video, who created the choreography and the visual sequences? In this sense, most songs have many creators, particularly when we talk about songs as they are performed and recorded. Many of these creators can be identified, their roles explored.

We often want to date the creation of a song—for example, to understand the circumstances of its creation or to understand its place in the creator’s biography. Printed music almost always transmits a date of publication; by the 1970s recordings often included a date on the label. For earlier recordings, try to find the date in a discography like those published by Brian Rust and his collaborators, listed in the annotated bibliography. But in many cases a song was not published or recorded until several years after its creation, and here the search for an earliest date becomes a matter of research on biographies and performance history. If there are several versions of the song, then we may want to ask which versions are earlier, which are later, and what is the relation of the versions to one another.

Many songs were created for a specific purpose, often having to do with publication or performance and profit. To pick a few examples from songs mentioned above: Henry Clay Work wrote “Come Home Father” (1864) for publication; Irving Berlin composed “God Bless America” in 1918 as a response to the First World War. But songs often transcend the purposes for which they were written. “Come Home Father” gained tremendously in popularity when it was interpolated into Timothy Shay Arthur’s *Ten Nights in a Bar Room*, a play promoting the temperance movement. Berlin reworked “God Bless America” and published it in 1939, as the Second World War approached in Europe. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, “God Bless America” became a sign-off tune for television stations, and its title became a bumper sticker.

Sometimes (but not very often) the creators of a song say why they originally composed it. Merle Haggard stated in an interview that “Okie from Muskogee” (1969) “started as a joke” when he and his band mates saw a road sign for Muskogee, Oklahoma, and speculated that no one there smoked marijuana. That did not stop people from taking Haggard’s song literally and turning it into an anthem of rural conservatism in the 1970s. The creator’s statement of intent may help answer the question of why was the song first created, but it does not answer questions about why the song appealed to people and what it meant to them.

What Is the Song’s Structure?

Questions about structure are addressed by literary and musical analysis rather than by historical research. What is the metric structure of the text? How many words to a line? How many lines to a stanza? Are lines of the same or different lengths? Do the ends of lines rhyme? If so, what is the rhyme scheme? Are there internal rhymes? Alliteration? Assonance? These are standard tools of literary analysis, particularly the analysis of poems, and they often work quite well for American songs.

Additional issues arise having to do with the relation of words and music. Is the song strophic—i.e. does the tune repeat over and over with new words? Or is it through-composed—i.e. neither words nor music repeat? Or does it have a verse-chorus structure, where the tune repeats in the verse with new words, but words and tune both repeat in the chorus? Many American songs rely on a “hook,” a memorable verbal phrase set with a melodic fragment that seems to fit the words like a glove: “My old Kentucky home,” “Take me out to the ball game,” “Someone to watch over me,” “Stand by your man.” The hook often occurs more than once during the song and becomes its most salient feature.

You do not need formal musical training to undertake the analysis of a song’s musical aspects. Understanding some aspects of songs does require musical training: for example well-trained musicians can look at a printed score and hear a tune. Those who do not read music, however, can get to the same place quickly by listening several times to a recording, or to a couple of different recordings. As listeners, many of us are familiar with tunes, harmonies, instrumentation and performance styles, even if we don’t have the ready vocabulary to describe these things. You should experiment with musical understanding and your ability to understand music within its musical, as well as historical, context. Even without formal training, most people can identify song as sounding “Irish,” or like a “blues,” or like “military music” and can interpret certain chords as “sad” or “mysterious.” In making those judgments, listeners are picking up important messages in the music itself.

What Was the Song’s Historical Context?

Historical context includes all of the factors relevant to understanding and interpreting a song at a given moment in history. Many features that appear unusual or unique today turn out to be typical when the work is viewed in its historical context. On the other hand, some features that seem unremarkable on first listen turn out to be unusual, thus interesting or significant. Finally, the work at hand may well be a response to an earlier work in the same genre—for example a cover (a remake of an earlier version), an imitation, an answer, or a parody.

It is helpful to distinguish between “primary” and “secondary” contexts. Primary contexts are the ones that would have been most important to people at the time a song was first created. Secondary contexts are contexts of the song at any subsequent period from then to the present. Take, for example, “Love in Vain” a famous blues that Robert Johnson first recorded in 1936 and that has been sung by many subsequent performers. The primary context of “Love in Vain” would include things like when and where was the original recording session? What was the recording company? What other singers and songs did the company record? What kind of guitar did Johnson play? How much was he paid? Secondary contexts are ones at any point in time from the song’s creation onward that may or may not have shaped the particular piece of music. They are, however, contexts that help listeners and students understand its significance and its relationship to the society and culture from which it emerged. Secondary contexts for “Love in Vain” might include things like the history of Mississippi Delta blues, race relations in the South, railroads in the early twentieth century, songs about leave-taking, and metaphors of light in American poetry. What secondary contexts matter most will depend on the questions asked of the music and how it is being used as a source.

Primary contexts can be very broad, secondary contexts almost limitless. Both are significant, but it is important distinguish between them and to begin by establishing the primary context to the extent possible. Contexts form a sequence, not just a chronological one but also a sequence of evolving meanings. Unless we begin this sequence at the beginning, we risk misreadings and misunderstandings.

What Does the Song Mean?

This seems like the most important question of all, but it is the one that has the most possible answers and where it is hardest to say that any single answer is right. It seems sensible to begin with the obvious: what do the words mean? The problem is that the literal meaning of song lyrics is often hard to establish, and this meaning is usually enriched with allusion, suggestion, and implied meanings. Moreover, the words are only the beginning. How a song is performed contributes a great deal to its meaning. A song performed at a dance tempo means something different from the same song performed as a ballad. Willie Nelson's performance with a Texas twang, an amplified guitar, and a lonesome harmonica, gives the "blue" in Irving Berlin's "Blue Skies" (1927) an entirely different meaning from earlier renditions of the song. "Old Folks at Home" (1851) in its original rendition performed by white men in blackface meant something different from "Old Folks" performed by a barbershop quartet, and different again from "Old Folks" performed by an African-American singer like Ray Charles. Contexts are important to meaning, and meanings change over time as contexts change.

One of the best ways to get an idea of the different things that a song means and has meant is to see what people have said about it. Responses to songs and interpretations of songs are available not just in reviews but also in poems, novels, and letters. The opinions of the original songwriter are sometimes available, and they should be given special weight. But they should not be taken as a gold standard of meaning, because performers and audiences add many meanings of their own that are also important to a song's history. The ways in which songs take on different meanings in different settings or eras provide potentially rich examples for understanding popular songs as historical evidence.

On the other hand, it is not true that any meaning is as good as any other. Interpretations that contradict the literal meaning of the lyrics or the obvious intent of the performer, that are clearly anachronistic, or that do not correspond to anyone's actual reaction to the song have to be considered in a different light from meanings that were intended by the creators or that can be shown to be widely shared among audiences.

A related question addresses quality: is the song any good? Some American songs have been immensely popular. Most have not. A small number have stayed in the repertory as classics—songs that people know, sing, and love many years after their creation. People often suppose that the songs that become hits, and especially songs that become classics, are better in some way than songs that sink without a trace. People who talk about songs, people who perform songs, people who buy songs all seem to have clear ideas about which songs are good and which songs are bad. But they seldom articulate their aesthetic criteria. Is it possible to propose criteria that can explain why hits are hits and flops are flops? Probably not, since if one could explain a hit in retrospect, then one could also predict a hit, something that has always proved notoriously difficult. On the other hand it should be possible to find out what aesthetic criteria people used to decide whether they loved a song or hated it. And it should also

be possible to trace changes in these aesthetic values over time. Among the helpful sources for doing this are musical reviews, personal accounts, letters to performers, and fan magazines.

What Can Songs Tell Us about People and Society?

Songs serve to unify groups of people and to move them to common action or help them express common emotions. Certain songs become “anthems” for particular generations, as Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind” (1962) became for many in the 1960s. In times of national crisis certain songs seem especially appropriate, such as “God Bless America,” or even John Lennon’s “Imagine” (1971). They express widely-shared values or experiences and emotions that help define a group’s identity and solidarity.

Songs, singers, and genres also help people construct self-images and provide models for how to behave. Pop stars—from Jenny Lind in the nineteenth century to Bing Crosby, Elvis Presley, and Britney Spears in the twentieth century—set styles and shape their fans’ attitudes. They do this, moreover, in several ways. One is by how the singer represents him or herself: Lind’s charitable contributions, Bing’s pipe, Elvis’ ducktail haircut, and Britney’s bare midriff. Genres such as punk rock or bebop provided fans with styles of dress, slang, and non-conformist identities.

Song lyrics also express judgments—and even conflicts—about lifestyles, values, and appearances. In the early 1970s, for example, Neil Young released two songs expressing anti-southern opinions: “Southern Man” (1970) and “Alabama” (1972). A few years later a southern rock band, Lynard Skynard, responded with a defense of the South entitled “Sweet Home Alabama” (1974), containing the lines “I hope Neil Young will remember a southern man don’t need him around, anyhow.” Finally, music can express attitudes and values by how it sounds. Various popular forms like rock ’n roll, and, beginning in the 1970s, such forms as punk, heavy metal, and rap, sounded defiant, like an assault on the ears, as well as the values, of older generations.

Historians sometimes consider songs as more or less straightforward “reflections” of the society and culture in which they were produced. These songs are then used to illustrate what historians already think they know about that society and culture. Thus, an anti-drinking song like “Come Home Father” (1864) might be interpreted to mean that nineteenth-century Americans were concerned about alcohol and opposed to its abuse. On one level, this view of music makes sense: a musical work is a product and a part of the society and culture from which it emerges. But such a view is also highly simplistic. For one thing, it ignores the fact that songs exist in relation to other popular texts, including other songs. “Come Home Father,” for example, inspired a sequel by another composer, “Father Don’t Drink any Now!” (1866) and both were part of the same musical universe as songs that treated drinking lightly, like “Pop, Pop, Pop. A Comic Song” (1868).

The assumption that songs merely reflect their times also ignores the fact that songs are almost always open to multiple interpretations. For example, in the 1960s “Puff the Magic Dragon” (1963) was widely associated with marijuana and its effects. Yet the lyricist, Leonard Lipton, claimed that the song was about loss of childhood innocence. Evidently this interpretation prevailed because by the 1970s it had become standard repertory at nursery schools and children’s sing-alongs. The richness of using songs as sources for understanding history—and the need to delve deeply into the available evidence when doing so—lies in their openness to such multiple uses and interpretations.

The fact that multiple uses and interpretations exist, however, points to another important aspect of music: it serves as a forum for public debate about manners, morals, politics, and social change. Musicians and their audiences are social actors; while they reflect the world around them, they also interpret and change it. For every anti-Vietnam War song like “I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-To-Die Rag” (1967) there were pro-war (or anti-war) songs like “Ballad of the Green Berets” (1966). In cases like this, songs are most valuable for telling us what concerned people, how they saw issues, and how they expressed their hopes, ideals, anger, and frustrations.

Model Interpretation

“Dixie” (1859), a familiar song from the nineteenth century, was composed and performed by Dan Emmett (a white native of Ohio) in 1859 when he was a member of the Bryant’s Minstrels troupe in New York City. It was to be a new closing, or “walk-around,” number for the group’s show. The style in which Bryant’s Minstrels and similar minstrel troupes performed “Dixie” owed a great deal to African-American traditions of singing, dancing, and banjo playing. In its catchy polka rhythm it resembles earlier minstrel songs like “Turkey in the Straw” (1824) or “Oh Susanna” (1848). Its text, like the closing “walk arounds” from other minstrel shows, pictured the South as a happy land bathed in rural nostalgia, an appealing contrast, perhaps, to the urban squalor of New York, not to mention its cold winter weather. The chorus to “Dixie” (“I wish I was in Dixie, Hooray, Hooray!” etc.), tells us what we already know: that sectionalism and slavery were important issues in American politics in 1859, particularly in defining the distinctness of the South and the North.

When the Civil War came in 1861, “Dixie” reinforced and strengthened southern white identity. Some lines of the chorus (“In Dixie land I’ll take my stand, live and die in Dixie”) hint at the belligerence of southern sentiment in the 1850s and helped symbolize white southern defiance ever after, eventually including defiance of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s.

On the other hand, the jaunty rhythm seems to imply that sectionalism and factionalism are just a kind of sport. To the white audience at a minstrel show in New York, with white men using burnt-cork to portray “darkies” singing about the joys of the rural South, it may indeed have sounded this way and served to help deny the cruelty of slavery or the importance of sectional differences. Indeed, many of the lyrics to “Dixie” had nothing to do with slavery or other moral and political differences between the sections (“Old Missus marry Will de Weaber [weaver], Will-yum was a gay deceaber [deceiver]” or “Dars buckwheat cakes an’ ingen [Indian] batter, makes you fat or a little fatter”). But by 1861 the Confederacy had taken up the song as its anthem and marching song, beginning when it was played at Jefferson Davis’s inauguration as President of the Confederacy. Its meanings in the South became very different from its meanings in the North, where it usually signified rebellion, support for slavery, and sedition.

Northern publishers issued versions of the song with titles like “Dixie Unionized,” with the words rewritten to support the northern cause, but these never really caught on. Even so, “Dixie” remained one of Abraham Lincoln’s favorite songs and he requested it be played for him a few days before his assassination, saying “I have always thought ‘Dixie’ one of the best tunes I have ever heard. Our adversaries over the way attempted to appropriate it, but I insisted yesterday that we fairly captured it. . . .”

For large numbers of Americans in both North and South, however, the song retained its wartime and racial connotations well into the twentieth century. In the North, “Dixie” returned gradually to the repertory, but mainly in private rather than public contexts (although it appeared as a “Patriotic Song” in a collection published in Boston in 1888). In the theater it was typically heard in parody versions or as a quotation within another song, as when used ironically by African-American performers like Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake in “Bandana Days” from their 1921 musical *Shuffle Along*.

Other than online sheet music, what sources might exist for helping us understand the song, its influence, and its meaning to different people? Sources for “Dixie” include Dan Emmett’s autographed copy of the song, which has been preserved at the Ohio Historical Society and the publication of the words without the music in a little songster called *Bryant’s Power of Music* in 1859. Recorded performances of “Dixie”—by choral groups, by marching bands, by “Dixieland” bands, etc.—also count as sources. So do parody versions and snatches of the words or tune. Dan Emmett’s letters and notebooks illuminate some of the early contexts of “Dixie”; so do newspaper and magazine accounts of performances by Bryant’s Minstrels in New York. “Dixie” also had many later contexts, documented by accounts of minstrel shows, photographs, arguments in the press, legal proceedings, and movies. The latter include a highly fictional 1943 film biography of Dan Emmett, starring Bing Crosby. Perhaps there is some significance to the fact that such a movie appeared during World War II, a time when Hollywood was trying to promote national unity.

During the civil rights movement and afterward, “Dixie” often served as an anthem for white southerners and a reminder of slavery and racism for African Americans. That sometimes produced ironic results. In the 1960s an exiled black power advocate, Robert Williams, called his radio broadcast from Havana “Radio Free Dixie.” In 2002 the same phrase appeared on a Web site advising white southerners on how to proclaim their confederate heritage.

The historical sources for “Dixie” clearly encompass a tremendous diversity of materials, dating from 1859 up to the present and much of its curious history remains untold. It is often offensive to African Americans. For example, a recent book by Howard and Judith Sacks, *Way up North in Dixie: A Black Family’s Claim to the Confederate Anthem* (Washington: Smithsonian Institutions Press, 1993), argues that “Dixie” was not composed by Dan Emmett, but came from the repertory of the Snowden family, black musicians who were neighbors of Emmett’s in Mt. Vernon, Ohio. The Sacks’s book is a reminder that “Dixie” is a part of our national cultural heritage and continues to have multiple meanings nearly a century and a half after it was first sung.

Sources of Songs

Songs of the past and the contexts of past songs are preserved in the present through historical **sources**. Anything that transmits a song, a rendition of the song, or the context of the song to future generations might be considered a source for that song.

Historians often distinguish between **primary** and **secondary** sources. Primary sources are sources that were created at the same time or in close connection to the subject of historical research. Secondary sources are later commentaries on the subject. It is important to recognize, however, that something may be a secondary source in one context but a primary source in another, depending on the questions being asked. For example Alec Wilder’s book *American Popular Song* (1972) is a secondary source for

songs by Jerome Kern and George Gershwin, but a primary source for songs by Alec Wilder.

In general, sources for American song can be divided into five broad categories, according to the form in which they are preserved in libraries and archives. Each category can transmit both songs themselves and information about the context of songs.

Manuscript materials.

Manuscripts are materials written by hand or, more broadly, materials, like typescripts or computer files, that are directly produced by the person or persons being studied. Many autograph copies of songs by their lyricists and composers are extant, like Dan Emmett's or Stephen Foster's notebooks, or twentieth-century composers like Aaron Copland, Irving Berlin, and Cole Porter. Manuscripts include letters, diaries, and travelers' accounts that comment on songs and performances. Also relevant are papers from show business people and businesses connected with musical performances such as theaters and booking agencies, like the famous Keith-Albee vaudeville circuit in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Libraries, archives, and museums usually keep manuscripts in separate collections. Music manuscripts may be in yet another collection. Some manuscripts are eventually published: two important examples are the nineteenth-century diaries of George Templeton Strong and Philip Hone, New Yorkers who commented on the city's musical life. Manuscripts are also beginning to appear on the Internet as facsimiles, for instance those of the composer, Aaron Copland.

Printed materials.

This is probably the largest single category of potential sources, especially for the period after 1800, when various innovations in printing technology led to a rapid expansion of the kinds and quantity of materials published relating to music. Broad­sides, songsters, sheet music, and anthologies of songs are among the most accessible and valuable sources for lyrics, tunes, and arrangements of songs. Among the many different kinds of printed materials available to tell us about songs and their performance are books by musicians, critics, and scholars; newspapers; fan magazines (now including online ones); show business publications like *Billboard* and *Variety*; plays; biographies; memoirs; and concert programs.

Recordings.

In the late nineteenth century Americans and Europeans began to invent various ways of reproducing musical performances mechanically, first through wax recording cylinders and paper rolls for player pianos, then through ever more sophisticated formats—records, movies, long-playing records, audio tape, CDs, and DVDs. These technologies make research easier by enabling us to hear, and even to see, actual performances. They must, however, be used with the same caution reserved for all kinds of evidence—who made the recording? for what purpose? what and who might not have been recorded? did the technology shape or limit the performance (as in early recordings, which could only play about three minutes of music and did not reproduce its full sonic spectrum)?

Visual materials.

These include sources already mentioned—most notably movies, television shows, and DVDs—but also such things as photographs of performers and performances, the latter of which can tell us much about performance styles and about audiences. The covers of sheet music and record and CD jackets contain useful information about songs, as well as about how performers and publishers wanted to represent themselves and their music to the public.

Oral history.

A growing list of oral history projects documents the lives and work of twentieth-century musicians. When available, oral histories are extremely valuable when handled with care. Like all human beings, musicians misremember things, tell stories that aren't true, and see things from their own particular perspectives. Use oral histories to gain insights unavailable through other sources and find clues to other sources that might otherwise not be apparent. (For a guide to analyzing oral history, please see the *History Matters* guide to “Making Sense of Oral History” at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/>).

Documenting Sources

When working with music, document songs and renditions of songs as fully and carefully as possible. For a piece of printed music the basic documentation includes title, composer, lyricist, date of composition, publisher, date of publication, and place of publication. For a commercial recording it includes the above plus names of the performers, the recording company, catalog number, date of recording, and date the recording was issued. For a video or film it includes similar information about the item and the people who produced and performed in it. The most important thing is to identify the song or the rendition unequivocally, so others can locate it if they wish. Good documentation also enables you to know which songs or renditions are the same, which are different, and to compare them. You can trace, for example, how Elvis Presley's music changed when he moved from a small independent company, Sun Records, to RCA, a major commercial label, and as he worked with different musicians, producers, and songwriters. Often it is impossible to obtain all of the basic documentation for a song, but every little bit helps to locate it in its proper context and to tell one item from another.

American Song Online

Music in American history is rich and varied, including everything from marches to waltzes, from ragtime to rap. Music available online for historical research is also diverse, ranging from written music and sheet music covers to interviews with musicians and sound recordings. Due to copyright restrictions, music before the early twentieth century is most widely available. This list is intended as a brief overview to the two most common music resources available on the Web, Sheet Music and Sound Recordings, providing links to some of the largest collections as well as a glimpse at the diversity of materials available online. Many other collections can be found in *History Matters*.

Sheet Music:

African-American Sheet Music, 1850-1920, Brown University and Library of Congress American Memory

memory.loc.gov/ammem/award97/rpbhtml/aasmhome.html

More than 1,000 pieces of sheet music composed by and about African Americans, ranging chronologically from antebellum minstrel shows to early twentieth-century African-American musical comedies. Includes works by renowned black composers and lyricists, such as James A. Bland, Will Marion Cook, Bert Williams, George Walker, Jesse A. Shipp, James Weldon Johnson, and Eubie Blake. "Development of an African-American Musical Theatre, 1865-1910" provides a chronological overview of the emergence of African-American performers and musical troupes. In addition, sheet music can be studied to examine racial depictions, visually and in lyrics; styles of music, such as ragtime, jazz, and spirituals; and topics including gender relations, urbanization, and wars. Much of the material is disturbing due to its heavy dependence on racial caricatures; however, students can gain insight into racial attitudes through an informed use of this site.

America Singing: 19th-Century Song Sheets, Library of Congress American Memory

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amsshtml/amsshhome.html>

Before the phonograph, America learned the latest music fads from printed song sheets. These single printed sheets, often beautifully illustrated, included only lyrics and were sung to familiar tunes like "Yankee Doodle." The lyrics and illustrations on these song sheets offer a unique perspective on the political, social, and cultural life of the time. This collection offers 4,291 song sheets, spanning the years from 1800 through the 1880s, but primarily from 1850 to 1870. Each item offers an image of the song sheet, publication and repository information, and a transcription of the lyrics. The site is keyword searchable and can be browsed by subject, title, composer name, and publisher.

The Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music, Johns Hopkins University

<http://levysheetmusic.mse.jhu.edu/>

Scanned images of more than 18,000 pieces of sheet music, including covers published prior to 1923, and cataloging for an additional 11,000 items not in the public domain. While the collection, compiled by an American musicologist, covers the period 1780-1980, it focuses on nineteenth-century popular music, especially songs relating to military conflicts, presidents, romance, transportation, and the minstrel stage. Users may search for songs on hundreds of topics such as drinking, smoking, fraternal orders, the circus, and death, or look for composers, song titles, or other catalog record data.

Nineteenth-Century California Sheet Music, Mary Kay Duggan, University of California, Berkeley

<http://www.sims.berkeley.edu/~mkduggan/neh.html>

More than 1,800 scanned images of sheet music published in California between 1852 and 1900. Includes more than 800 illustrated covers, 45 audio selections, seven video clips of singers, and a handful of programs, posters, playbills, periodicals, catalogs, broadsheets, books on music, and maps. More than 350 items contain advertising.

“We’ll Sing to Abe Our Song”: Sheet Music about Lincoln, Emancipation, and the Civil War, Library of Congress American Memory

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/scsmhtml/scsmhome.html>

More than 200 sheet music compositions representing President Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War in popular music from the 1860 presidential campaign to the centenary of Lincoln’s birth in 1909. The digital archive includes campaign jingles, war songs, compositions about emancipation, funeral marches, and commemorative songs. Each piece of music is accompanied by an image of the sheet music cover and notes on the full song title, name of composer(s), date composed, and a transcription of the lyrics.

Sound Recordings:

California Gold: Northern California Folk Music from the Thirties, Library of Congress American Memory

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/afcchtml/cowhome.html>

Features 35 hours of folk and popular music sound recordings from several European, Slavic, Middle Eastern, and English- and Spanish-speaking communities. The Work Projects Administration California Folk Music Project collected these 817 songs in Northern California between 1938 and 1940, representing 12 languages and 185 musicians. The collection also includes 168 photographs, 45 instrument sketches, and numerous written documents, including ethnographic field reports and notes, song transcriptions, published articles, and project correspondence. Organized by folk music collector Sidney Robertson Cowell, this was one of the earliest ethnographic field projects to document folk and popular music of such diverse origin in one region. In addition to folk music of indigenous and immigrant groups, the collection includes popular songs from the Gold Rush and Barbary Coast eras, medicine show tunes, and ragtime numbers.

Dismuke’s Virtual Talking Machine

<http://www.dismuke.org/>

More than 225 music selections from a private collector’s 78 rpm recordings produced between 1900 and 1940. Music is organized according to type of recording: acoustical (pre-1925) and electrical. Includes music in a variety of styles;ragtime, opera, jazz, classical, marching band, and swing. Listings provide information on vocalist, band, and soloist, and include annotations of a few sentences each. “Dismuke’s Hit of the Week” updated weekly with one to three new audio selections, also offers explanatory material of 100 to 300 words in length.

Hispano Music and Culture from the Northern Rio Grande, Library of Congress American Memory

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/rghhtml/rghome.html>

This ethnographic field collection documents the religious and secular music of Spanish-speaking people from rural Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado. It features the audio recordings and transcriptions of more than 100 songs that Juan Bautista Rael of Stanford University recorded during a 1940 research trip. Recordings include alabados (hymns), folk dramas, wedding songs, and dance tunes. Descriptive information about the title, performers, genre, instrumentation, location and date of recording, and any other brief (10-25 words) notes about the music accompanies each tune.

Max Hunter Folk Song Collection, Southwest Missouri State University

<http://www.smsu.edu/folksong/maxhunter/>

Audio files and song transcriptions of more than 1,000 songs recorded in the Ozark Mountains of Missouri and Arkansas between 1956 and 1976 by Max Hunter, a traveling salesman. Includes lyrics for all songs; musical notations for many songs with annotations providing information on how singers phrased certain notes; listings of the name of the singer and recording location and date; and links to variant versions or similar songs. No information is offered for composer or lyricist. Users may listen in three formats: RealPlayer, AIFF, and in some cases MIDI.

The Red Hot Jazz Archive: A History of Jazz before 1930, Scott Alexander

<http://www.redhotjazz.com/>

This comprehensive site offers biographical information, photographs, and audio and video files for more than 200 jazz bands and musicians active from 1895 to 1929. It includes more than 200 sound files of jazz recordings by well-known artists, such as Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, and Django Reinhardt, and by dozens of less well-known musicians.

Southern Mosaic: The John and Ruby Lomax 1939 Southern States Recording Trip, American Memory Library of Congress

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/lohtml/lohome.html>

In 1939, John A. Lomax and his wife Ruby Terrill Lomax embarked on a 6500-mile journey through the American South. They recorded more than 700 folk tunes by more than 300 performers during their trip. Music genres represented include ballads, blues, children's songs, cowboy songs, field hollers, lullabies, spirituals, and work songs. Each recording includes a brief (50-75 word) description and history of the tune and lists musical features, instrumentation, performers, place, and date of recording. Images and transcripts of the Lomaxes's field notes contain lists of song titles and performers. There are also more than 70 images of dust jackets and 50 letters to and from the Lomaxes regarding their trip.

Annotated Bibliography

Austin, William W. "Susanna," "Jeanie," and "The Old Folks at Home": *The Songs of Stephen C. Foster from His Time to Ours*. New York: Macmillan, 1975.

Austin puts Foster and his songs in an extraordinarily rich historical perspective.

Popular Music and Society. Published by the Sociology Department of Bowling Green State University. Began in 1971.

Articles tend to put songs into historical contexts and to consider them to be "reflections" of their society.

Cockrell, Dale. *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Although several good books about blackface minstrelsy appeared in the past decade, this is probably the best for discussing its musical and performative aspects.

Crawford, Richard. *America's Musical Life: A History.* New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.

An up-to-date and comprehensive attempt to capture the diversity of American popular music.

Forte, Allen. *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era, 1924-1950.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Analyses of melodies, harmony, and lyrics of American “standards.”

Fuld, James J. *The Book of World-Famous Music: Classical, Popular and Folk.* Foreward by William Lichtenwanger. New York: Crown Publishers: 1966.

Important, useful, and trivial information about a wide range of music, including many American songs.

Grove Dictionary of American Music. Restricted database available online at through some schools and colleges.

Good information about composers and performers. The online version is more current and searchable.

Hamm, Charles. *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America.* New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1983.

Yesterdays remains an extremely helpful, engaging overview of major works of American popular song.

Krummel, Donald William. *Bibliographic Handbook of American Music.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987.

Annotated commentary of resources for American music history, resources.

Lawrence, Vera Brodsky. *Strong on Music: The New York Music Scene in the Days of George Templeton Strong.* 3 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987-1999.

A wonderful thorough look at New York's music scene between 1836 and 1865, mostly through the eyes of an elite and astute observer, George Templeton Strong.

Levine, Lawrence W. *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America.* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1988.

Levine devotes only one chapter to music—and that to the popularity of opera in nineteenth-century America—but makes an important case regarding the distinction between “popular culture” and “art.”

Music of the United States of America. Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, 1993-.

This is an extremely valuable series of works containing a wealth of primary material on a wide range of American music.

Nathan, Hans. *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962.

An early and excellent study of minstrelsy and minstrel songs.

Nevins, Allan, ed. *The Diary of Philip Hone, 1828-1851.* New York: Krause Reprint, 1969.

A day-by-day view of life in New York, with many of Hone's comments and activities pertaining to music.

Nineteenth-Century American Musical Theater. New York: Garland, 1994.

A series that includes works on shows that introduced many important American songs.

Peterson, Richard A. *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Peterson traces the development of country music and its institutionalization from Fiddlin' John Carson's pioneering recordings in Atlanta in 1923 to the posthumous success of Hank Williams. He separates country music into "hard core" and "soft shell" subcategories and explores what it means to be authentic within popular culture.

Riis, Thomas Laurence. *Just before Jazz: Black Musical Theater in New York, 1890-1915*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989.

Detailed study of African-American composers, performers, songs, and shows at a turning point in American song.

Southern, Eileen. *The Music of Black Americans: A History*. New York: Norton, 1983. 2nd ed.

A classic, comprehensive study that includes much material and many songs.

Toll, Robert. *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.

Even after the appearance of recent works on minstrelsy, *Blackening Up* remains indispensable for continuing the story past the Civil War and for its inclusion of African-American minstrels, generally left out of later accounts.

Wilder, Alec and James T. Maher. *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Analysis of music and lyrics, written by a noted songwriter.