

What Would Woody Sing
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My dad was worked for JFK in SF and supported Fr Bob Drinan. Protested Vietnam, helped end a mandatory dress code at the state college he taught at. Dropped out of Ohio State football scholarship to serve as a Marine in Korea.

We used to go Fenway in the summer a lot, he was a prof...so summer days get centerfield tickets day of game. I remember he whacked me good in the tummy one time I didn't take my hat off during the National Anthem.

It's a strange song, the national anthem and like other national songs, comes out at the 4th and memorial day, like Christmas carols. One of the hymns of civic religion.

We know there that Francis Scott Key was not a perfect man, far from it. A Smithsonian magazine article by Christopher Wilson notes that he used his office of DA of Washington DC to DEFEND slavery. Abolitionist made fun of the song in the 19th century as Land of the Free and home of the oppressed. He owned a bunch human beings that would have kneeled every time they heard the song.

He wrote the poem on board the British Ship Minden for POW release bombardment of Fort McHenry on the night of September 7, 1814, during the battle of Chesapeake Bay near the end of the War of 1812. US was a generation old and its' existence not guaranteed. A defeat that night, might lead to the loss of Baltimore and then Washington D.C. , the war itself.

Imagine the relief and pride Key felt as he saw the 15 stars and 15 stripes, rise above Fort McHenry on the morning of September 8th as penned the words to what he called The Defense of Fort McHenry. The fort had stood, his new, young nation would stand. We're still dealing with the question of the home of the oppressed.

The poem The Defense of Fort McHenry was published in newspapers

The Carr Music Store in Baltimore published the words and music together, all four verses, under the title The Star Spangled Banner. The tune was an interesting choice..A drinking song called To Anacreon in Heaven.

The Anacreonic Society was a London's gentlemen's club. The tune was tricky enough that if you could sing a verse through in key you were sober enough for another drink!

The song grew in popularity. There is record of the song being played at baseball games as early as 1887.

“On 27 July 1889, Secretary of the Navy Benjamin F. Tracy signed General Order #374, making The Star-Spangled Banner the official tune to be played at the raising of the flag”. On March 3, 1931, President Herbert Hoover signed a law making the Star Spangled Banner our country's national anthem.

When Key wrote the song our young nation was not perfect. It was largely a nation run by rich estate owners and businessmen, and others of noble English descent.

Women had no official say in the government, slavery was legal, native inhabitants of this country were, as the constitution put it, “bloodthirsty savages”.

Francis Scott Key's song was no longer just about a triumphant battle, but about a triumphant nation and the rich, white, English men who ruled it.

And his song came to be played anywhere people of this nation gathered: at parades, memorials, even sporting events. It celebrated our triumph, our glory, our power. We were somebody among the nations. A somebody made up of somebodies gathered from other nations.

Others began to write songs about this still relatively young and now newly powerful country. Some put new words to the national song of our former imperial mother country “God Save the Queen” and school children learned “My Country Tis of Thee.” Others wrote new songs about how beautiful this country is, while others asked God to bless this country.

Irving Berlin wrote the first draft of what would become “God Bless America” at Camp Upton on Long Island in 1918 for a Zeigfield style review.

The original lyric contained the line “Make her victorious on land and foam, God Bless America...” and seemed to reference U.S. involvement in World War I. Berlin thought it was too heavy for the whimsical mood of the review and shelved it.

Berlin decided to write a “peace” song as World War II geared up in Europe and recalled his “God Bless America” from twenty years earlier. He changed it around to reflect the different state of the world.

Singer Kate Smith introduced the revised “God Bless America” during her radio broadcast on Armistice Day, 1938. The song was an immediate sensation. The sheet music was in great demand. Berlin dedicated the royalties to the Boy and Girl Scouts of America.” America was forging through a depression and about to enter a war and it needed reassurance. It needed to be told God was standing beside us and guiding us: We were strong and mighty and above all, we would be okay. Americans loved this song. It told them what they wanted to hear. Well, most Americans loved it.

Some Americans didn’t like it and didn’t buy it, there are always such among us, thank God. One American in particular didn’t love the song. He thought that what the song said was what people *wanted* to hear, not what they *needed* to hear. It didn’t ring true to the America he knew up close and personal.

- The America that lost its farms in the dust bowl;
- The America that picked fruit in the migrant camps of California;
- The America that rode the rails and slept under bridges out of work;
- The America that stood hungry in the soup lines.

Irving Berlin’s song “God Bless America” made this man angry and he wasn’t gonna stand for it. He was gonna fight back - the only way he knew how. -- He was gonna write his own song. His name was Woody Guthrie and that’s what he did – wrote songs.

Woody Guthrie’s first version of an answer song to “God Bless America,” the song that would eventually become “This Land is Your Land,” was called “God Blessed America for Me.”

“Woody Guthrie lifted the melody of This Land Is Your Land essentially note-for-note from When the World’s on Fire, a song recorded by country/bluegrass legends, The Carter Family, ten years before Guthrie wrote his lyric.”

Guthrie first recorded the song in 1944, and first published it in 1945 (for an excellent source of Guthrie information see the biography *Woody Guthrie: A Life* by Joe Klein).

Most people only know what became the refrain and the first two verses, but the song in its initial form was very long and in its final version has six verses. Many song books leave out the verses about class and poverty. In the original version of “This Land is Your Land” Guthrie spoke about depression era poverty with the verse,

***In the squares of the city, In the shadow of a steeple;
By the relief office, I'd seen my people.
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking,
Is this land made for you and me?***

Guthrie protested the institution of private ownership of land with the verse:

***As I went walking, I saw a sign there;
And on the sign there, It said, 'NO TRESPASSING.'
But on the other side, It didn't say nothing.
That side was made for you and me.***

In another version, the sign reads “Private Property.”

Our national songs make me think of the images we have of our country and ourselves, how those images were created, what those images looked like and meant to those who created them, and what they look like and mean now. And what these might mean to us as a people of faith.

When Francis Scott Key wrote the Star Spangled Banner, a new nation was breaking away from the old model of nationhood in European Christendom.

Founding Fathers (not mothers or siblings or citizens) - were not Christians creating a christian country

John Fugelsang, who at one time presented a segment on Current TV's *Viewpoint* program entitled "Viewpoint's Revoltingly Fake Christian of the Week." The segment for the week of 29 May 2013 targeted Tennessee congressman Stephen Fincher, of whom Fugelsang said:

But if you don't want your tax dollars to help the poor, then stop saying you want a country based on Christian values. Because you don't.

The American Revolution was basically a bunch of rich English white men wanting to be free of other rich white English men. Neither of them paid a ton of attention to things a religious thinker like Jesus was actually talking about. When Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God he is speaking of a radical idea of community. A community where the first shall be last and the last first. A community where sinners are welcomed home and feasts are thrown in their honor. A community where, as St. Paul would comment, there is no distinction between male and female, slave or free, Jew or gentile. The Christian community is so radical that some think the word *kingdom* shouldn't be used to describe it. Instead we should use the word *commonwealth*.

The word commonwealth dates from the fifteenth century when the phrase common wealth or common weal, both terms using two words, meant common well-being. Jesus spoke of this directly in Luke's gospel. "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise"(Luke 3:11). That's a radical community, committed to the common weal, actually practicing what Jesus

taught about selling all they have and giving the money to the poor instead of spouting moral platitudes and economic and patriotic righteousness in Jesus' name.

Our nation, in its struggle to be born fought to incorporate the idea of common weal. America declared in its right to exist, in the words of Thomas Jefferson, that human beings have inalienable rights and chief among them are "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." An idea that was incorporated almost verbatim into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and later into the UUA Principles.

Our nation, with whatever faults it had and has, began as a novel community for its time: no kings, democracy, and pledges in its constitution to "provide for the common defense and promote the general welfare in order to secure the blessings of liberty." We know this was the general welfare of rich white English men, BUT it doesn't say that exactly and we've been trying to achieve the true general welfare ever since, it is what we're about.

And yet, our nation has had a long and difficult history of realizing the beloved community and of actualizing the common weal. We've struggled with giving life, liberty and a genuine pursuit of happiness to all Americans. We've struggled with giving every American soul the right to breathe free. It's because of this that I hear our national songs with a critical ear.

Things tumble together recently, Ferguson, Baltimore, Charleston, Orlando, Parkland, we need supreme court intervention to get gay marriage and easier access to health care... and legal abortion. And now both of these victories are under seige by the rich white men divorced from the Christianity they claim to practice and instead practice a gospel of meanness, cruelty, and hatred.

And I wonder... What Would Woody Sing?

When Francis Scott Key wrote the “Defense of Fort McHenry” he was emboldened by a new nation, and its stirring, elegant and aspiring rhetoric to be the home of the free and the land of the brave. When the flag rose over Chesapeake Bay, it carried the hope that America could be America; that the new nation could live to fulfill its destiny.

Now, when I hear The Star Spangled Banner, I hear it at sporting events, accompanied by a flyover of military jets and its words describing bombs bursting in air remind me of Iraq and Afghanistan and Syria, and the cost of war not only in dollars but in human lives, and the bigotry and hatred masquerading as patriotic defense of the country against terrorists.

I see stadiums full of flag waving, saluting patriots, not wanting to feel that they are not supporting people in the armed military, cheering wildly... and...in my mind’s eye I see the armies of despotic dictators on parade and wonder how uncritical much of society has become of military imagery in sporting events, television, and in our national image, and I wonder if Francis Scott Key envisioned this for his song? Then I think, What Woody Would Sing?

I imagine someone with a guitar at the microphone near home plate at the Fenway Park, singing about how in the middle of the city, in the shadow of the steeple, by the relief office, I saw my people, and as they stood there hungry, I stood there wondering, If this land was still made for you and me?

And instead of fighter jets, I imagine a line of homeless people walking across the field.
And I wonder what difference it would make if Woody's song was our national song?

Would we be any better at commonwealth? Would God bless America any less or any more? Would people think it was a song of weakness because it lacked military and war imagery? Or would people begin to think of our country and themselves differently?

These are the things I have think about at Fenway remembering my dad's admonition to take my hat off with paying my respects to my country and those who gave their lives to preserve it and its best qualities. I know my dad would do this today - he would take off his hat and kneel. it's my hope that maybe someday instead of wealth for a privileged few, there will be real commonwealth.

I think, What Would Woody Sing?