

# GLORY, GOOBERS AND GORE: THE POPULAR SONG AND THE CIVIL WAR

Jim Graham

In our time it is the joke that does it. The horrifying uncertainty of something that could go fatally wrong seems to bring out the comedian in even the dourest sorts. There can be little doubt that this is one way of dealing with generous doses of stress. Most recently we have seen it in the American Midwest where flood victims tearfully wisecrack away the agony of losing everything they had ever worked for. Americans were delighted when their popular but aged president, Ronald Reagan, joked with doctors as they were about to put him under to remove a would-be assassin's bullet ("I hope you are all Republicans.")<sup>1</sup> It is not uniquely American to poke fun of doom, nor can we attribute such a habit exclusively to Americans of the current age. Nevertheless, the American people of this century have not had cope with violent and relentless horrors on their own turf the way their ancestors did in the four-year catastrophe that was the American Civil War. While humor was no stranger to American life in the 19th-century, there was then another way of living with impending disaster that is not quite as developed in our age. That was song, sung without blush or fuss, flat or on key, and the world be damned if it doesn't like it.

That is not to say that music plays no part in the American

experience today, but in the days before Edison, men and women had to supply their own performances. Naturally, soldiers in the field, harassed by the enemies of disease, boredom and fear, could ham it up with verve and gusto. Without the drone and whirr of diesel, the sweet and sour sounds of soldiers on the march reverberated crisply through the countryside.

When the music was not spontaneous or tapped from a memorized repertoire handed down through generations, it was sheet music tailored for parlor pastimes, and as such was the equivalent of our 'music industry' today. Scholar-performer Caroline Moseley points out that there was really no distinction between popular music and other forms such as "art song." Music was transmitted via oral tradition and the sheet music business. As is true with so many businesses during a war, the publishers of sheet music 'made a killing' all their own. When the war ended, the 'killing' ceased. A case in point was George F. Root's popular "Tramp, Tramp." It could have been a major hit for Root, but the war ended before he could tramp, tramp, tramp to the bank.<sup>2</sup>

Yet even when songs left the hit parade, they lingered in the nation's bosom as poignant mementos of a great and sweeping trauma. Songs that were unrelated to the war may have offered brief respites from the stress and tragedy of the struggle, but they were not lasting. Sad-eyed veterans would remember "The Drummer Boy of Shiloh" and how he "prayed before he died" with profundity far deeper than any emotion spawned by "General Tom Thumb's Grand Wedding March" - E. Mack's tribute to the marriage of America's great midget celebrities of the age. Nor was "Atlantic Telegraph Polka" or the comic

“Champagne Charlie” and “Woman is Likely to Vote”(!) as liable to call forth misty-eyed musings in the fashion of Reverend Webster’s “Lorena” or Stephen Foster’s “Old Folks at Home.”<sup>3</sup>

The most prolific publishers were based in the North which had more of a publishing tradition than the South. Not surprisingly, Southern publishers had no qualms about lifting their material from Northern sources, using a rollicking good Northern melody for lyrics suitable to the cause. But borrowing was a mutual thing. Between battles the contesting armies would entertain each other from opposite sides of a river or some other safe distance, one side serenading the other with its version of a particular song, and getting a musical reply with the same tune, different lyrics.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, it was counterproductive to create new melodies for new lyrics since not everyone could read music. Familiar tunes were frequently given new significance as anthems for the respective causes.

Indeed, many Civil War melodies were derived from Old World sources. John Ryder Randall’s “Maryland, My Maryland” was penned to the tune of “Lauriger Horatius,” better known as “Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum.” “The Bonnie Blue Flag” by Harry MacCarthy was set to an Irish air, “The Irish Jaunting Car.” A Confederate version of “The Marseillaise” was published in Richmond in 1863. The list goes on. This practice ideally meant the South would never run out of a music supply, but in reality it lacked the resources to get the music to print. The North outproduced them in virtually everything, and sheet music was no exception.<sup>5</sup>

Yet despite shortages, *The Stonewall Songbook* was printed in eleven versions for Southern soldiers to carry in their pockets. In the North, *Beadle's Dime Songs for the War* was a typical source for music, offered by the same publisher that helped soldiers on both sides spend the long intervals between battles in escapist bliss with pulpy dime novels about frontier adventure.<sup>6</sup>

But just what was in these songbooks?

There is no point in dwelling on the obvious similarities between North and South in terms of song content. It takes little imagination to picture longing for home and loved ones, lament for fallen comrades, or just wishing to be anywhere but on the battlefield. There is, however, some curious irony in the differences.

Union songs tended to treat blacks more derisively in song than their Confederate counterparts. As is often pointed out, Northern commitment to racial equality has historically dwelt in the realm of abstraction. That is to say, Northerners did not know, nor care to know, Negroes on a personal basis, though in a moral sense the black was seen as equal. Consequently, they did not feel they were offending anyone specifically by mocking the black in the style they had learned through the popular minstrel shows of the time. Yankee depictions of black life borrowed heavily from the goggle-eyed, thick-lipped Sambo stereotype with his toothy aproned Dinah at his side. Negro soldiers, a new phenomenon in America's military, were referred to as "sojers," a term that suggested lack of coordination and dull-mindedness, qualities that were all but absent in the vast majority of black fighters.<sup>7</sup>

Southerners, on the other hand, quite naturally saw the black as a part of their nostalgic hankerings for home. Negroes were not sung of as clumsy grinning oafs stumbling over their own feet. Caroline Moseley notes numerous songs popular with soldiers of the Confederacy were commonly sung in dialect, making references to "poor massa, possun coon, and the ever-present banjo." Moseley stresses that nowhere in the lyrics of such typical songs as "My Home in Kentuck," "Take Me Home," "Carry Me Home to Tennessee," and "I'm Coming to My Dixie Home" are slaves or slavery mentioned - a feature which supports the view that those fighting the South's battles did not see themselves as defenders of the notorious "peculiar institution." Southerners were vague about the war in general when it came to singing about the reasons for it, leaving the term "states' rights" speak for itself. The question of which rights was seldom if ever addressed.<sup>8</sup>

Southern pretensions toward a tradition of chivalry as that described in the novels of Sir Walter Scott made the Confederacy an open target for those inclined to poke fun of it. In the world of the knight there is no virtue grander than that of bravery, and the sight of fleeing rebels was observed by Union troops with more than a fair amount of contemptuous glee. There was plenty of "skeeddadling" on both sides, of course, but rebel claims to an aristocratic sense of valor made their examples of cowardice painfully conspicuous. "Legs. do your duty!" was a popular phrase in song which Union men loved to imagine their counterparts saying at the slightest suggestion of battle. The ultimate humiliation was the rumor circulated immediately after the war which claimed that the Confederacy's president, Jefferson Davis, had been

captured in women's clothing. The episode was celebrated in Henry Tucker's sarcastic tribute to the crestfallen leader, "Jeff in Petticoats," which assumes an added dose of vinegar when we consider that many Southerners had romanticized the conflict as a defense of Southern womanhood.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the best known irony of all is the fact that the supposedly most favored anthem of the South was composed by a Northerner. As Fort Sumter was bombarded in the volley that started the war, crowds of Charlestonians cheered in song—minstrel showman Daniel Decatur Emmett's "I wish I Was in Dixie's Land" or, simply, "Dixie." Emmett, a dedicated supporter of the Union cause, was wrongly accused of treason by many—and Southerners were understandably embarrassed that the one song most widely identified with their cause was Northern in origin. As few popular songs had done to that time, "Dixie" had swept the North as a smash hit, debuting in the South only on the very eve of the war. Starting in New Orleans where it was used in the musical "Pocahontas" on the last minute whim of the conductor, "Dixie's" infectious jingle rapidly echoed from one corner of the newly formed Confederacy to the other, serving as a musical centerpiece at the inauguration ceremony of Jefferson Davis himself.<sup>11</sup>

This was not the only instance in which songs of Northern origin were used for pro-Southern purposes, but it is certainly the best known example, especially since it was a Lincoln favorite. "I have always thought 'Dixie' one of the best tunes I have ever heard," he is remembered to have told a crowd at the White House shortly after the surrender. He joked that the song had been duly recaptured from the rebels and

requested the band "favor" him with its performance.<sup>12</sup>

It should be added that however anguishing the drudgery of war might have been for generations prior to this time, the varied use of song as a means of assuaging the pain of the soldier's life received an unprecedented prominence in the Civil War saga. Extremes swing from the utter farcical to the most personal and wrenching sadnesses.

In the humorous category, "Goober Peas" is a hearty survivor that is readily identifiable to many Americans today. As is true with so much humor, the ditty was inspired by hardship, namely the lack of standard rations. Of course, "goobers" is the Southern term for peaunts, a term in common use now as it was then.<sup>13</sup> (Grown extensively as livestock feed in the southern states, the junk food idea for peanuts is the brainchild of Yankee veterans who saw peanuts as a tasty and nostalgic way to pass the time during dull moments at baseball games.)<sup>14</sup> During the Civil War, however, goobers described as "delicious" as they are in the song no doubt precipitated gales of hilarity to soldiers and civilians alike.

Another example of the Southern soldier's knack for poking fun of himself was "Do They Miss Me in the Trenches," a parody of "Do They Miss Me at Home." The song was apparently a good therapeutic rationalization for running and the stress of false bravado: "But when the Yanks commence shelling,/ I run to my home down the hill;/ I swear my legs never will stay there,/ Though all may stay there who will." "Mister, Here's Your Mule" was yet another knee-slapper about a dense farmer who had lost his mule, an animal lacking in the dignity of the horse and, as such, the beastly embodiment of slave subservience.

Northerners mocked the incompetence of their top commanders, recounting the revolving door changes in command that finally ended with Grant. To the tune of Patrick Sarsfield Gilmore's "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" was sung "We Are the Boys of Potomac's Ranks." The final stanza goes: "Next came General Meade, a slow old plug./ Hurrah! Hurrah!/  
Next came General Meade, a slow old plug./ Hurrah! Hurrah!/  
For he let them get away at Gettysburg,/ And we'll all drink stone drink stone blind,/ Johnny, fill up the bowl."

Commanding officers were at a loss to know which was more damaging to morale—apathetic surrender of the war-worn cynic or the nostalgic ooze of the maudlin sentimentalist. "Lorena" is a song of Southern origin, but its hauntingly beautiful melody was performed on both sides. Attributed to H.D.L. Webster, the authorship of the song is not known for certain. Only Stephen Foster songs could match "Lorena" for evoking the heartwrenching hopelessness of separation from a loved one in music: "The years creep slowly by, Lorena,/ The snow is on the grass again;/ The sun's low down the sky, Lorena,/ The frost gleams where the flowers have been,/ But the heart throbs on as warmly now,/ And when the summer days were night;/ Oh, the sun can never dip so low,/ Adown affection's cloudless sky. "Robert E. Lee is to have said he didn't believe the South could have an army without music, but some generals felt "Lorena" was just too much of a tear-jerker and consequently had it banned.<sup>18</sup>

Likewise, the typically pro-Union composers of minstrelsy found their war-weary audiences reacted most sharply to mournful songs of mothers and dying sons. Fathers were portrayed as stoic and resolute,

whereas women and boys were given free access to an inexhaustible supply of handkerchiefs. The list of mother-son songs is long. Good representatives of these were the ever-popular "Mother I've Come Home to Die" and its sequel, "My Boy, How Can I See You Die?" In the latter, a grieving mother aches: "You told me that you'd soon return/ You have, but oh, you've come to die." What began as an adventure to bring the wayward South back into the Union, eventually seeped into the personal life of every citizen as monstrous nightmare, not only ruining the dreams of young lovers, but killing off entire families as well. This great and unexpected sacrifice was made all the more difficult to bear by the fact that the war's focus would shift from preserving the Union to freeing the Negro, a prospect about which many Northerners were either apathetic or outwardly apprehensive.<sup>19</sup>

The reader is quite aware of Civil War songs not mentioned above. There are so many, both famous and forgotten, to be studied in greater detail for the unique perspective they provide in examining the war's influence on popular culture. What is hoped can be gleaned from the above offering is an appreciation for how the popular song has changed in the past 130 years. If it can be agreed that it is desirable for every man and woman to be competent with a musical instrument, then surely the Americans of the 19th-century were musically superior to their descendents of today. Nevertheless, the electronic media have broadened our span of musical appreciation whether we can play an instrument ourselves or not.

Still, the simple immediacy of being there and experiencing what

you are singing about gives your music a transcendental power that all the synthesizers and electric guitars of the world could not reproduce. We are reminded of the acoustic folk movement that was concurrent with the Vietnam War protest. Bruce Springsteen sings convincingly of unemployment and bad times. Billy Joel composes majestic laments for fishermen desperate for a good catch or shell-shocked Vietnam veterans starved for fellowship and understanding. It is up to the listener to determine the integrity of these so-called artists, but their fabulous wealth seems to widen the gap between the message and the all-important ingredient of sincerity. Springsteen is no street bum, nor does Joel appear to be struggling fisherman or Nam vet. Americans of the 1860s, on the other hand, could hardly escape being influenced by the "irrepressible conflict" in some way. Conveyed in song, their feelings were authentic and artless.

And that, to our view, was part of their problem. "Marching through Georgia" and "The Yellow Rose of Texas" are among the many songs in which "authentic" racial epithets make them suitable only for those instances where historical accuracy is at issue. Otherwise, "darkey" has been stricken from the score for posterity, and for good reason.

Regrettably, scholars and buffs of American history recognize the sharp echoes of the past in the slick recordings of Clinton's America. The 19th-century struggles among classes, regions and races that exploded once in military conflict continue to sizzle in the country sounds of the frustrated worker and farmer—and in the unpolished and bitter frankness of rap.

NOTES

- 1 Lu Ann Paletta and Fred Worth, *Presidential Facts* (New York, World Almanac, 1993) p. 194.
- 2 Caroline Moseley, "Irrepressible Conflict; Differences Between Northern and Southern Songs of the Civil War," *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 25; 2, Fall 1991, pp. 46-48.
- 3 "Music Had Charms," *American Heritage*, Vol. 9, No. 3, April 1958, pp. 53, 60; Caroline Moseley, p. 55, fn.
- 4 Charles Hamm, "Songs of the Civil War," New World Records (liner notes for CD of the same title), p. 9.
- 5 Norm Cohen, "200 Years of American Heritage in Song; An Historical Perspective," CMH, (liner notes for CD set of the same title), P. 18.
- 6 Charles Hamm, p. 9; Buz Swerkstrom, "Wartime Reading Rage," *America's Civil War*, September 1993, pp. 46-52.
- 7 Caroline Moseley, p. 53; John Fraser Hart, *The South*, (New York, Van Nostrand, 1976), pp. 19-20. For an account of minstrelsy's cold reluctance to embrace the cause of Negro equality and its stubborn adherence to the "Zip Coon" image, see Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up* (New York, Oxford, 1974), pp. 104-133.
- 8 Caroline Moseley, pp. 53-4.
- 9 Caroline Moseley, p. 50. Civil War veterans, slaves—almost anyone alive at the time, relished recollecting the joke about the fleeing deserter or escaping slave being seen in a frantic sprint. To the question "Why are you running?" was the inevitable answer—

- "Because I don't have wings to fly!" See *Echoes of the Blue and Gray*, Vol. 2, dir. William B. Styple, Belle Grove Publishing; *Songs of the Civil War*, prod. Ken Burns, PBS.
- 10 Caroline Moseley, p. 50.
  - 11 Ernest Abel, "Ohio-born minstrel Daniel Emmett wrote the South's best loved song, the immortal 'Dixie.'" *America's Civil War*, November 1989, p. 10, 55.
  - 12 Geoffrey C. Ward, *The Civil War* (New York, Knopf, 1989), pp. 382-83.
  - 13 Norm Cohen, p. 53.
  - 14 "Peanut," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1953 ed.; Claire Shaver Haughton, *Green Immigrants*, (New York, Harcourt-Brace-Jovanovich, 1978), p. 259.
  - 15 Henry Steele Commager, ed., *The Blue and the Gray*, Vol. 1. (New York, New American Library, 1973), pp. 571-73.
  - 16 Commager, p. 574.
  - 17 Commager, p. 576; Hamm, p. 9; *Songs of the Civil War*.
  - 18 Hamm, p. 19.
  - 19 Robert C. Toll, pp. 111-12.