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Way Down upon the Hudson River

BY JOHN THORN

We have been singing his songs for more than 150 years—"Camptown Races," "Oh! Susanna," and "Old Folks at Home," the one we called "Swanee"—with not much thought about who created them, for they seem to have sprung into life spontaneously, like folk songs. Those of us who thought we knew a thing or two about Stephen Collins Foster (1826–64) regarded him as a beautiful dreamer, an untutored country boy with a lucky gift for melody, an unworldly songster who permitted publishers to pirate his songs and others to take credit for their composition, a spendthrift alcoholic who died with thirty-eight cents to his name, a racist or at least a highly effective publicist for the South's peculiar institution. All of these elements of the folk tradition prove upon examination to possess elements of truth without being true, and thus leave us no better prepared to understand Foster's life as an artist.

In fact, Foster came from the outskirts of Pittsburgh and spent some formative years in Cincinnati and his last years in New York. He never lived in the Deep South. He never saw the Swanee, before or after composing the song. Given his rhythmic requirements, Foster might as well have chosen "Hudson"—and with more reason, as it supplied the current of the music industry, centered in New York, that dashed him against the rocks.

When Foster composed "negro songs" for his friends in Pittsburgh in the mid-1840s, it was for his own amusement and theirs. He was liberal in drafting duplicates of his compositions, and even made copies for members of visiting musical troupes. This practice led to the rampant piracy of "Oh! Susanna," which was copyrighted without Foster's name in New York many months before a Cincinnati publisher issued it in 1848 (again without credit, although Foster may have been paid) in a collection called *Songs of the Sable Harmonist*. Was Foster naive or clever?

In America's nascent music industry, performers and venue owners could make a living, but Foster became its first professional

composer. Furthermore, he crafted his own contracts—the first in the business—that provided for royalties and vested copyright in the composer unless he deemed it advantageous to sell his song outright. He also evaluated the future sales potential of his "catalog" and sold songs if the sums that publishers offered came close to matching his projections.

So if we are wrong about Foster's business sense, might we also be wrong about the music? Musicologists see links from "Oh, Susanna!" to "After the Ball" and "Maple Leaf Rag," and thence to "West End Blues," "Rocket 88," and "Born in the U.S.A." But if Foster is merely a progenitor and a link (black to white, rhythmic to harmonic), then we are trivializing him just as we reduce the genius of Louis Armstrong in making him a springboard to Elvis and Chuck Berry. It is as if confronting Foster head-on were taboo, so that no one today would be willing to make the leap of historical imagination required to hear the music as it was played in its year of composition.

Before 1840, airs were borrowed from across the pond for everything from our national anthem to sentimental ballads. Foster's genius was to jump on the success of the then-new minstrel show, to absorb the sounds and patter along the banks of the Ohio River, and to write songs that folks instantly recognized as American. Even when in later years he shifted from "Ethiopian" melodies to gorgeously harmonic ballads, his songs continued to reflect a longing for home and the past.

Because the lyrics of Foster's plantation songs are often marked by "dialect" that people of all colors find offensive today ("All de world am sad and dreary, / Ebry where I roam . . ."), it is an easy matter to call Foster a racist and Confederate sympathizer, even though Frederick Douglass commended his characterizations of black people. Similarly, Dan Emmett's "Dixie" is seen today as akin to flying the Stars and Bars at an NAACP meeting—no matter that the song was Lin-

coln's favorite and was sung by both sides in the Civil War, as was Foster's "Old Folks at Home." The chord that Foster and Emmett both struck was not love of slavery but love of home, a home and a way of life that seemed beyond recapture. This is what is meant by the Greek compound word *nostalgia*: *nostos*, "returning home," and *algos*, "pain."

The only verse of "Dixie" ever to be censored in the century of its composition was this original first stanza, regarded as blasphemous:

Dis worl' was made in jiss six days,
An' finished up in various ways;
Look away! Look away! Look away!
Dixie Land!
Dey den made Dixie trim and nice,
But Adam called it "paradise,"
Look away! Look away! Look away!
Dixie Land!

Yet our noses wrinkle today at "I wish I was in de land ob cotton, / Old times dar am not forgotten." I think it is a gift to be able to place oneself back in 1859, when the song was composed, and listen with old ears to this "walk-around" in the "git-up-and-git style."

Foster died in 1864 at age thirty-seven, striking his head against the sink in the Bowery room where, broke and despondent, he was lodging. A third attempt at reconciliation with his wife and child had failed, and they had returned to the Pittsburgh area, leaving him to write a song a week in New York in his last year, all of which were sold for cash; he knew he would not be around to collect royalties. ▼

John Thorn is the author and editor of many books, including *Baseball in the Garden of Eden* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011). He lives in Catskill, New York. Copyright © John Thorn.



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