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# Musick Has Charms

BY DAN BERGGREN

“Musick has Charms to sooth a savage Breast,  
To soften Rocks, or bend a knotted Oak.”

—William Congreve  
(*The Mourning Bride*, 1697)

**Music can inspire**, stir emotions, create vivid images, and sometimes, soothe a troubled soul. Experiencing the power of music is one of life’s great pleasures, and some would say as well, one of life’s necessities. Like a magic charm, it empowers a tired heart and turns a gray sky blue. Recently, a song on the radio transported me to long ago, far away kitchens where our family gathered for breakfast, and the journey brought me great joy.

When I was a teenager in the Adirondacks, we had a small black radio the size of a toaster—a 1949 Emerson. As we sat around the breakfast table, the radio was our companion and connection to the world. Weeknights, while doing my homework, rock and roll kept me company, as my bedroom radio picked up AM signals from Albany, Buffalo, and Chicago. On Saturdays, the shortwave dial helped me explore sounds and voices from around the world; and tuning into West Virginia’s “Wheeling Jamboree” introduced me to country and bluegrass. Sunday nights were holy, with the radio reserved for the Boston folk scene via records and in-studio guest musicians. Those nights brought special delight, filling me with songs that have lasted a lifetime.

A few years before we moved to the Adirondacks, that same black radio sat on our kitchen table in Brooklyn. Every weekday morning, it was tuned to “Rambling with Gambling,” an upbeat program, hosted for decades by John Gambling. He helped listeners face the day with bits of news, upbeat music, jokes, and even exercises; but the most memorable part of the breakfast show was its theme song, “Pack Up Your Troubles.”

Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag  
And smile, smile, smile,  
While you’ve a lucifer to light your fag,  
Smile, boys, that’s the style.  
What’s the use of worrying?  
It never was worthwhile  
So, pack up your troubles in your old kit bag  
And smile, smile, smile.

My young ears didn’t know that a kit bag was a duffle bag or that lucifer and fag were slang for match and cigarette, but my mother filled me in on these Britishisms, learned from her mother Ella and grandmother Mary Louise, both born in England. I’m told that they loved to sing, whether music hall songs or hymns. How I wish I had known them and been able to ask about the music of home, like this upbeat message that worrying was never worthwhile. How I loved singing along whenever “Pack Up Your Troubles” came on the radio—or popped up in my memory. It has since become part of my personal soundtrack, showing up just when my spirit needs boosting.

“Pack Up Your Troubles” was written in 1915, by two Welsh musicians, well known among the British music hall crowd, and it became a very popular First World War marching song. George Henry Powell (aka George Asaf) and his brother Felix Lloyd Powell had rescued the song from their pile of rejects and submitted it to a wartime competition. They won first prize and recognition for what was then considered, perhaps, the most optimistic song ever written.

George, the lyricist brother, was also a pacifist, and when conscription was imposed in 1916, he became a conscientious objector. In the wake of the song’s success, George felt uneasy about its use as a rallying cry to war. Eventually, Felix, who enlisted and spent time in the trenches, also became uncomfortable with the song’s success, knowing it was on the lips of thousands as they marched to their deaths. He took his own life in 1942.

From its time as a morale booster for the troops until its commercial use as John Gambling’s daily radio theme song, “Pack Up Your Troubles” had been included in numerous movies and sung by many musicians. One of the singers who performed and recorded it was Oscar Seagle. Born in Tennessee, 38 years before the song was written, Seagle was a professional musician who studied in Paris. He became a renowned baritone who toured the United States and Europe and was a recording artist for Columbia Records, which released his version of “Pack Up Your Troubles” in 1918, accompanied by the

Columbia Stellar Quartette. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZZr5Oqv6B8>

The very same year that the Powell brothers wrote their big hit, Oscar Seagle began an educational mission that continues to this day: to share the world of opera and musical theater with young people from all over the United States. To serve this purpose, he bought a piece of Adirondack property in 1922, and established a summer residency called the Seagle Music Colony. It continues to this day as the Seagle Festival at its Schroon Lake location, and so does its educational mission to teach singing, acting, and dance to young people who are exploring the world of opera and musical theater.

Seagle not only provided guidance for young people who wanted to study music, but he also served a broader, more diverse clientele. In 1945, the Glens Falls *Past Star* reported that he was instrumental in establishing the community singing movement there and applauded him in a December 22 editorial: “Mr. Seagle could take and shape uncultivated voices, he could tune them into surpassing masterpieces for the projection of sound.” I like to think that Mr. Seagle packed up the troubles of two world wars and let his love of music soothe the savage breast, paving the way for generations to benefit from his passion and joy.

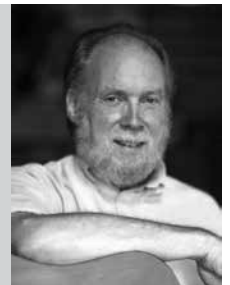
What’s the use of worrying?

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So, pack up your troubles in your old kit bag

And smile, smile, smile. ▼

Dan Berggren’s roots are firmly in the Adirondacks, but his music has taken him throughout the United States and abroad. Dan has worked in the woods with a forest ranger and surveyor, was a radio producer in Europe, professor of audio and radio studies at SUNY Fredonia, and owner of Sleeping Giant Records. An award-winning musician and educator, Dan is also a tradition-based songsmith who writes with honesty, humor, and a strong sense of place. Visit [www.berggrenfolk.com](http://www.berggrenfolk.com) to learn more about Dan and his music. Photo by Jessica Riehl.



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