

Our Flag Was Still There: Critical Patriotism in “The Star-Spangled Banner” and “This Land Is Your Land”

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This song was written as an angry song. — Bruce Springsteen

Even the angry songs are love songs. — Pete Seeger

Written by Woody Guthrie in 1940, “This Land Is Your Land” has traveled that ribbon of highway far and wide through American culture. As his daughter Nora wrote in the Foreword to a book about Guthrie’s composition, “It’s a song that seems to be open to all kinds of interpretations and manipulations.” In that same book, museum curator, historian, and now head of the Bruce Springsteen Center, Robert Santelli, describes “This Land Is Your Land” as a “musical mixed message.” that’s not a bad thing.

Often (mis)understood as an easy-going, inclusive singalong celebrating the United States as a land of opportunity, Guthrie’s song is in fact a far more complex, multifaceted entity. If, as Benedict Anderson famously argued in his book *Imagined Communities*, national anthems help to consolidate a nation-state through what he called “unisonance”—the simultaneous singing by members of a polity across time and distance—Guthrie’s version, we might say, is much more about something like *polyvalence*.

Today, I am going to talk very briefly about a few versions of “This Land” and of the “Star-Spangled Banner” as a way to consider what a “critical patriotism” might sound like,

musically, and feel like, culturally. There's so much more. Too much in fact. So I also have provided you with a link and QR code to a webpage that includes an extensive Spotify playlist (over 80 versions of "This Land"!) and also a selection of live clips relevant to my talk today on a YouTube playlist. I hope you will explore that possibly endless skyway of song. A transcript of this talk is there too as well as a longer article I wrote about this topic, originally published at the website *Clio and the Contemporary*. Eventually I will post a video version of the talk there, too, and there will also be a version as part of the Society for American Music's "Sounding the Nation at 250" project, available on the Society for American Music's website.

"This Land" began as a satire of Irving Berlin's maudlin, exceptionalist ballad "God Bless America." It was an "answer song" that challenged the straightforward, even smug assumptions of Berlin's tune, which Guthrie loathed. For Guthrie, Berlin's tune was ultimately "just another of those songs that told people not to worry, that God was in the driver's seat." [3] Guthrie's answer was originally titled, sardonically, "God Blessed America for Me." It lampoons the easy patriotism of Berlin's song. The original closing line of each verse mocked the idea that God had done any such thing. Indeed, the song has religious roots. It borrows its melody from a Baptist hymn, "Oh, My Loving Brother," which then became a commercial song, "When the World's on Fire" (1930), by the Carter Family. The simple melody and chords allow Guthrie to traverse rolling hills of notes, gently undulating up and down in steady motion, pattering along. The use of the Carter Family's song is also a clever move for Guthrie. "Don't you want to go to heaven / When the world's

on fire? / Don't you want God's bosom / To be your pillow?" the Carters sang. The world certainly was on fire in 1940, as World War II erupted even as the Great Depression continued, but Guthrie seems to be criticizing both the smug turn to God and nation that Irving Berlin offers and the apocalyptic salvation that the Carter Family presents. Instead of seeking the reassurance of God's heavenly saving, Guthrie wants Americans to face the pressing problems of this life, in the here and now. In this sense "This Land" began its life most of all as a song of urgent *religious* as well as *political* doubt: about the politics of the United States, about a divine power, and particularly about whether a divine power was guiding the fate of the United States—and which part of its population, more crucially.

Guthrie famously penned a socialist-oriented verse, later dropped by adopters of the song but never entirely forgotten, about the flaws of private property and economic inequality in 1930s America, but the song took an anti-communist turn too. Just think of the version bratty kids have sung to each other for decades now: "I got a shotgun, and you don't got one / If you don't get off, I'll blow your head off / This land was made for only me." It's as if without even knowing of the lost socialist verses, they knew that "This Land" needed to be defused ideologically. By the 1950s, however, as Guthrie grew more ill from Huntington's Disease and the Red Scare raged, the song mostly became an anodyne singalong anthem for grade schools and summer camps, its more socialist dimensions removed to render it a liberal encomium, its conservative satire producing, at most, chagrin. Woody's son Arlo tells a humorous story of singing the song at assemblies while attending the Woodward School in Brooklyn. None of his classmates knew his father had written it.

From there, Guthrie's composition spread far and wide. I have created a playlist of over 30 versions for the obsessive at the following link. It has long been used in politics as well. Do check out Bernie Sanders's—yes, that Bernie Sanders—remarkably weird 1987 reggae version. And since we are here, it's worth highlighting that Bruce Springsteen began performing it on 1980s tours. "This song was written as an angry song," he declares at the start of a live version recorded at Nassau Coliseum in 1980. Springsteen doesn't sing the lost verse about private property, but by ending the chorus's final words, "you and me," on a suspended chord, in a musical trick taken from gospel, he adds in the question mark underneath Springsteen and the E Street Band's arena-rock sound. Harmonica adds to the small curl of skepticism within the anthemic version.

All hail the boss, of course, but for the rest of this talk I'd like to emphasize a 2005 cover of "This Land" by soul singer Sharon Jones and the band the Dap Kings before turning back to the official national anthem itself, the "Star-Spangled Banner." Jones's version begins with mournful horns sounding like they are at a funeral parade. Over a slinky R&B re-arrangement, Jones adds numerous blues notes to her singing, bending around the song's iconic melody. She is the one traveling the land, noting (in a clever, soulful double entendre) how "on the backside" of the sign that says private property there she found a land truly made for you and me. A subaltern nation comes into view, a different America than the one the powerful portray. It shimmies loose. It doesn't stand still. As the drum shuffle intensifies toward the end of the song, Jones turns the "This Land" into a "Dancing

in the Streets” geographic call out. In various versions, she heralds Riverside, California, Philadelphia, PA, North Carolina, South Carolina, Houston, Los Angeles, and her own birthplace of Brooklyn, among other cities. There’s a party going right here, in fact, an invitation across the nation.

Jones and the Dap Kings take us on a journey to an alternative unofficial national anthem with “This Land,” but where does this leave us when return to the official national anthem? It led me to a version of the “Star-Spangled Banner” itself that also, cleverly, like “This Land,” bends the patriotic into something profoundly inclusive. When Sailor Sabol sang “The Star-Spangled Banner” at the 2021 Conservative Political Action (CPAC) Conference, she seemed to circle through keys and tonalities randomly, earning a thorough roasting on social media for her strange rendition of the song. One pianist, however, Kevon Carter, took a different approach. He posted a YouTube video in which he accompanied her on keyboards, following her every modulation, no matter how odd, with beautiful gospel and church-inflected accompaniment. He chased her seemingly random key changes with dexterity, finding chordal flourishes and filigrees to make it all fit musically. As background for the story, Sabol is white; Carter is Black. As he cheered her on with “c’mon” and “sing your song,” he was at once poking fun at her musically and, just as crucially, keeping up with every weird musical twist and turn she made. Wherever the singer went in her bizarro version of the national anthem at the world’s leading conservative political conference, he could go with her too, drawing upon his knowledge of African American church keyboard approaches to vocal accompaniment. One might say that Carter channeled the ethos of

what is sometimes known as the African American national anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” into Sabol’s CPAC version of “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

If Jimi Hendrix’s iconic version of the “Star-Spangled Banner,” captured in the 1969 Woodstock film, used the electric guitar as a kind of incendiary weapon to “kill facists,” as Woody Guthrie famously wrote on his guitar in the early 1940s when the antifacist fight of World War II intensified, Carter’s video brought to mind what Pete Seeger, inspired by his friend Woody, inscribed on his banjo. Seeger changed the phrase from “This machine kills fascists” to “This machine surrounds hate and forces it to surrender.” This is just what Carter seemed to be doing. In his virtuosic handling, he does not erase Sabol or the intolerant politics CPAC embodies; rather, he includes and adjusts. He wrests the national anthem away from her and the conservative politics she represents even as he accompanies her and lets her sing. As with Jones (and in fact others) singing Woody’s “This Land,” so too here with Carter’s version of the “Star-Spangled Banner.” The fog is lifting for a moment, and a voice is chanting, and the many contradictions of the United States—contradictions that Guthrie himself tried to confront—burst into air as music fosters a transformed state of sovereignty, if for moments at a time. It’s a widening of belonging, and maybe, just maybe, from dark times, we glimpse a freedom highway and that endless skyway of possibility.