

THAT'S AMERICA TO ME

by Fred Hobbs

What is America to me?
A name, a map, or a flag I see;
A certain word, democracy.
What is America to me?

Those are the opening words in the lyrics to "The House I Live In", the song, written in 1943 at the most critical time in World War II, presented in a ten minute movie short featuring Frank Sinatra.

The stirring patriotic work pays homage to America, the place, "the things I see about me, the big things and the small," "the little corner newsstand...the town hall and the soapbox...the house a mile tall...the church, the school, the clubhouse." The lyrics note the "words of old Abe Lincoln, of Jefferson and Paine, of Washington and Jackson and the tasks that still remain." The song includes praise for the workers, the merchants such as the grocers and the butchers and to "my neighbors black and white, the children in the playground... all races, all religions, that's America to me."

America's popular music is full of similar tributes performed in styles reflecting the times in which they were delivered. The words of the National Anthem, "Star Spangled Banner" were taken from a poem written in 1814 marking the defense of an American fort under attack by the British forces in the War of 1812. "...The rockets' red glare, bombs bursting in air, gave proof through the night that our flag was still there."

Poet Samuel Francis Smith wrote "My Country 'Tis of Thee" (sweet land of liberty), also known simply as "America" in 1831. Set to the same melody as the British national anthem, "God Save the Queen", the song became a favorite piece learned in elementary schools, much easier to sing than the tricky words in the "Star Spangled Banner."

In 1895, Katherine Lee Bates wrote a poem extolling the beauty and grandeur of the Pikes Peak region of Colorado. Set to music, it became "America the Beautiful" ...with homage to "spacious skies" and "purple mountains majesties."

Irving Berlin, the most prolific contributor to what has become known as "The Great American Song Book" wrote "God Bless America" in 1918, but it wasn't well known until twenty years later when the now beloved melody was first sung by Kate Smith on her radio show, heard in millions of American living rooms.

John Philip Sousa penned the favorite patriotic song performed at almost every civic 4th of July musical celebration in the nation, "Stars and Stripes Forever."

Woody Guthrie gave us an inspired depression-era folk-style melody, "This Land is Your Land."

In more contemporary times, Lee Greenwood's version of "God Bless the USA" became a favorite, and Bruce Springsteen declared "I'm a cool, rockin' daddy..." "Born in the USA."

Unlike citizens in so many countries with oppressive regimes, individual Americans are free to express publicly what their country means to them and embrace a particular poetical or musical sentiment that matches their beliefs.

Mine is summed up in one short line from "The House I Live In" ..."especially the people, that's America to me."