

CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Chants of Defiance: Music and Mindset in the Civil War

Michael Taylor

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Feature Essay

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Taylor, Michael *CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Chants of Defiance: Music and Mindset in the Civil War.*

In 1746, following Bonnie Prince Charlie's failed attempt to restore the Scottish House of Stuart to the British throne, Parliament passed the Disarming Act. One curious element of this law was the banning of bagpipes. Music, the anxious London legislators had discovered, has a way of stirring the passions, especially in wartime. Taking away the enemy's music can sometimes be as useful as taking away his weapons.

More than one hundred years later, during the American Civil War, the same scene played out in Union-occupied New Orleans, where people found out that something as simple as "Whistling Dixie" could get you in trouble with the law. On March 16, 1863, Miss Zoe Campbell recorded in her diary that three women had been arrested a few days earlier for singing the popular Confederate ditty "The Bonnie Blue Flag" at a house on Carondelet Street, in defiance of a ban put in place a year earlier by General Benjamin "Beast" Butler against singing the tune. Although the women were released within a few hours, the incident proved that singing was very much regarded as a political statement.¹

From the war's outset, Southerners had used music to advance their cause. The scope and variety of this output is remarkable, all the more so considering the fact that, although the South had always been a musical place, little had ever been composed or published there. With the outbreak of war, Southerners found their musical voice and, as historian and bibliographer E. Merton Coulter has written, "There was hardly anyone who was so inhibited as not to feel that he could write a song, either the words or the music, and frequently both."

Much of this music is now available to researchers in the LSU Libraries' Special Collections. One anthology in particular, *Souvenir of Confederacy*, contains many rare Confederate music imprints. The stories behind some of these songs can often give insight into the southern mindset at the time of the

Civil War.

For example, although Daniel Emmett's melody, "Dixie," became the Confederacy's unofficial national anthem, some Southerners disapproved of its burlesque "Yankee" origins, not to mention its comic lyrics, written in an exaggerated African-American dialect. The Virginia poet Henry Throop Stanton was one of several people who rewrote the words to the song. Instead of longing for a southern homeland, Stanton's "Dixie War Song" is a call to arms against a "boasting mad invader" who sought to "Trample Dixie and degrade her." Other songwriters tried to "sell" the southern cause by identifying it with the nobler elements of the French Revolution. In New Orleans, for example, the composer and publisher A. E. Blackmar (who would soon be arrested for publishing "The Bonnie Blue Flag") wrote "The Southern Marseillaise," with new words to the proud tune of the French national anthem. Some Southerners felt that the war was "the Lord's work," and songs such as "The Southron's Chaunt of Defiance," with music by Blackmar and lyrics by Natchez native Catherine Ann Warfield, draw on imagery from the Bible to portray the struggle between North and South. "But the battle to the strong is not given, While the judge of right and wrong sits in heaven," the aptly named Mrs. Warfield's lyrics run, "And the God of David still guides the pebble with his will. There are giants yet to kill, wrongs unshriven!"²

If music can be divisive and inspire people to acts of violence, it is worth remembering that it can also bring people together in more worthy causes. This is shown by another incident recorded in Zoe Campbell's diary. On February 16, 1863, she attended a benefit concert for destitute families at New Orleans's French Opera House.

To learn more about music during the Civil War, be sure to visit the LSU Libraries' Special Collections' summer 2012 exhibit "Old Times Here Are Not Forgotten: Remembering the Civil War." One part of the exhibit will include a selection of Confederate sheet music. For more information, contact the library at (225) 578-6544.

Notes:

1- Zoe J. Campbell Diaries, Mss. 1274, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

2- Several volumes of poetry by Warfield survive. See the Eleanor Percy Ware and Catharine Ann Warfield Papers, Mss. 1416, 1576, 1971, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.