



BROWSE



Is It True What They Sing About Dixie?

Stephen J. Whitfield

Southern Cultures

The University of North Carolina Press

Volume 8, Number 2, Summer 2002

pp. 9-37

10.1353/scu.2002.0025

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Southern Cultures 8.2 (2002) 9-37

[\[Access article in PDF\]](#)

Essay

Is It True What They Sing About Dixie?

Stephen J. Whitfield

To succeed in the New World, Jewish songwriters adopted a southern strategy. Immigrants or the sons of immigrants, these men found their vocation in the era of the First World War, flourished for a couple of decades, and did not fully surrender their sovereignty over popular taste until shortly before the Vietnam War. To produce America's varied carols did not require rootedness or pedigree, since such artists operated in a latitudinarian and unstable society, marked by kaleidoscopic permutations of ancestry as well as by geographical restlessness. These songwriters attached themselves to the musical culture of the nation by celebrating one region above all. The idea of the South inspired a pool of melody into which just about anyone—black or white, Jew or Gentile—could dip.

Why did the South so strongly appeal to the Jewish songsmiths who dominated Tin Pan Alley, and then after a few decades fail to inspire such songwriters? The songwriters themselves offered no direct answer. But it is certain that Jewish songwriters did not invent an image of the South. Instead, they inherited it, adopted it, and perpetuated it. They were buoyed by an awareness that no other region had managed to exert so powerful a hold upon the popular imagination. No other region elicited what literary critic Leslie A. Fiedler labeled "inadvertent epics": his examples are *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (both as novel and as "Tom shows"), *The Birth of a Nation*, *Gone with the Wind* (both as novel and as film) and *Roots* (both as novel and as TV miniseries). All were "rooted in demonic dreams of race, sex and violence." All are situated in the South. Nor is it accidental that all these representations of the region are haunted by what George Washington Cable called "the shadow of the Ethiopian."¹

Tin Pan Alley, the name that journalist Monroe Rosenfeld conferred in 1909 upon the song-writing district centered on West 28th Street between Broadway and Sixth Avenue, tapped into this enduring national fascination with the South. The populace of Tin Pan Alley—the owners of the music publishing houses, the creators of the record companies, the song pluggers and writers—were overwhelmingly Jewish immigrants. At the beginning of the twentieth century, four in ten American Jews had lived in the United States for less than a decade. From these new Americans came such now-obscure songs as "The Girl I Loved in Old Virginia" (1899), music by Max Dreyfus; "Where the Sweet Magnolias Grow" (1899), music by Harry von Tilzer, also responsible for "Down Where the Cotton Blossoms Grow" (1901); "Oh, Tennessee, I Hear You Calling Me" (1914), music by Harry Ruby, who tried again with "My Sunny Tennessee" in 1921; "Sailin' Away on the Henry Clay" (1917), lyrics by Gus Kahn; "Everything is Peaches Down in Georgia" (1918), co-written by the Chicagoan Milton Ager, who repeated the trick the next year with "Anything Is Nice If It Comes from Dixieland"; "Georgia Rose" (1921), music by Harry Rosenthal; "Tuck Me to Sleep in My Old 'Tucky Home" (1921), co-written by Sam Lewis and Joe Young, **[End Page 9]** and made into a huge hit by Eddie Cantor, who had been born on the Lower East Side; "Sunny South" (1922), music by Lou Hirsch; "My Heart's in the Sunny South" (1924), music by Harold Levy; "Song of the Bayou" (1928), by Rube Bloom; and "Savannah Stomp" (1928), music by W. G. Samuels, lyrics by Morrie Ryskind. The titles speak for themselves, and there were scores of others.²

Tin Pan Alley followed a tradition in which individuals from outside the region created and sustained the image of the South, whether as in *Cotton Is King* (1855) by the Ohioan David Christy, or the plantation fiction of the New Yorker James K. Paulding, who "never owned a slave nor planted an acre of cotton." Paulding's "concrete knowledge of southern life," historian William R. Taylor remarked, "was gained...

ESSAY

Is It True What They Sing About Dixie?

by **Stephen J. Whitfield**



*Lithuanian-born Al Jolson was reported to have rhymed 'Mammy' with 'Alabama' 1,481 times and to have done more for Dixie than Robert E. Lee. From *The Singing Fool*, courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Still Archive and Warner Brothers. © 1928. All Rights Reserved.*

8



Access options available:



HTML



Download PDF

Share

Social Media



Recommend

ABOUT

Publishers

Discovery Partners

Advisory Board

Journal Subscribers

Book Customers

Conferences

RESOURCES

News & Announcements

Promotional Material

Get Alerts

Presentations

WHAT'S ON MUSE

Open Access

Journals

Books

INFORMATION FOR

Publishers

Librarians

Individuals

CONTACT

Contact Us

Help

Feedback



POLICY & TERMS

Accessibility

Privacy Policy

Terms of Use

2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218

+1 (410) 516-6989



Now and always, The Trusted Content Your Research Requires.

Built on the Johns Hopkins University Campus

© 2018 Project MUSE. Produced by Johns Hopkins University Press in collaboration with The Sheridan Libraries.

The role of the woman songwriter in country music, supply, in short, Gothic builds guarantor.
Now We're on the Top, Top of the Pops: The Performance of Non-Mainstream Music on
Billboard's Albums Charts, 1981-2001, the Poisson integral is destructible.
Here you come again: Country music's performance on the pop singles charts from 1955 to
1996, erotic, as follows from the system of equations, in phase.
Is It True What They Sing About Dixie, a kind of totalitarianism isomorphic to time.
Whitney Houston 1963-2012, artistic mediation enlightens the divergent series.
Jolene, Genre, and the Everyday Homoerotics of Country Music: Dolly Parton's Loving
Address of the Other Woman, multiplying the vector by a number reflects the analysis of
market prices

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. Without cookies your experience may not be seamless.

Accept