

# Abraham Lincoln and the Music of the Civil War

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## Introduction

Music pervades civilization in almost every institution and serves as a provider of important ideas. Today, music carries heavy political meanings, as artists frequently opt to explicitly voice their opinions and express their emotions through song and dance. The 19th century was no different. An especially turbulent period in American history, the years of Lincoln's presidency were marked by a staggering amount of political unrest. In this tumultuous time, music played a large role in spreading and reinforcing a wide breadth of beliefs. Acclaimed Lincoln and music historian Kenneth A. Bernard calls the Civil War a "musical war." His claim is further supported by the fact that more music was produced and performed over the four-year period of the American Civil War than during every other war combined.<sup>1</sup>

This paper will look at primary sources of music from the Civil War era that are still available to us for research. Thanks to Louis A. Warren, the director of the Lincoln National Life Foundation, there is an index of every piece of sheet music written about Lincoln at the start of his presidency, all throughout the Civil War, and after his death.<sup>2</sup> The index was released in 1940, and by using the pieces of sheet music provided, with the years of publication and the composers/artists listed in the index, a deep dive into the world of Civil War era music is possible. The Library of Congress holds digital copies of these pieces of music, sortable into different categories, and this online collection of sheet music provided easy access to these authentic primary sources.

Exploring the lyrics of these songs will reflect something that Lincoln cared very much about: public opinion of his office and administration. By researching and analyzing lyrics, it can be seen how the public interpreted Lincoln's policies and administrative goals. Lyrics can also demonstrate the support and opposition he received from followers and adversaries and display their reactions through popular music. By looking at a range of music over time, from the songs of Lincoln's electoral campaign in 1860 all the way to music commemorating his death, it will become clear how his image changed. Even pieces of sheet music that are instrumentals contain important information. What they lack in lyrics can be made up for in the style of song, the cover art and its depiction of Lincoln, and other annotations on the piece. The lyricists of the songs will also be a key factor in determining the utility of sheet music in uncovering themes of the Civil War. Although the ethnicities and backgrounds of the composers may not be information that is readily available, using the last names of the composers and the areas of publication and distribution as indicators can also shine a light on why certain music appeared, what audience it was meant for, and who was actually receiving it.

Each part of the paper investigates different parts of Lincoln's policy, including the preservation of the union, the military strategy and spirit of war, and emancipation. Within each section, relevant sheet music will be utilized to highlight different aspects of Lincoln's presidency. Specific lyrical excerpts will show the messages that the music conveyed. Then, secondary sources will reinforce the primary evidence. Additionally, a secondary goal of this paper is to advocate for the use of sheet music as a viable source of studying history.<sup>3</sup>

## Lincoln and Music

Abraham Lincoln, the most influential figure of the Civil War era, was not immune to music's influence. His love of all kinds of music has been well-documented by a number of historians, and the frequency with which he encountered music during his presidency helped to establish the political, cultural, and social implications that music could carry in the United States. From the very start of his

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth A. Bernard and Frank and Virginia Williams Collection of Lincolniana (Mississippi State University Libraries), *Lincoln and the Music of the Civil War* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1966), xviii.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Austin Warren and Lincoln National Life Foundation, *Lincoln Sheet Music: Check List* (Fort Wayne, Ind: Lincolniana, 1940), accessed Dec. 11, 2018.

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<sup>3</sup> See **Historiography** section.

political career, music had a large presence in his life. He enjoyed music during his entire campaign for the presidency as well as during his years as a lawyer during which he traveled up and down the country on the Eighth Judicial Circuit and crossed paths with itinerant musicians.<sup>4</sup> After Lincoln was elected, music continued to have a steady presence in his life. His inauguration ball was a lively and rather splashy event, with a typical Marine band playing patriotic tunes in addition to a full-scale opera performance, which historian Douglas Jimerson says was the first opera to have performed at a presidential inauguration.<sup>5</sup>

Henry Clay Whitney, an attorney and friend of Lincoln, spoke to Lincoln's love of music in contrast to his understanding of it. He mentioned that Lincoln claimed that music had no utility other than the ability to please the listener and that "he fancied that the creator... made music as a simple, unalloyed pleasure."<sup>6</sup> This quote slightly contradicts other reports of Lincoln's reception of music. With his re-election in doubt in 1864, Lincoln was reported to have been "deeply affected", his face "wet with tears," after hearing "Lead, Kindly Light." This religious hymn pleaded for God to lead the narrator, and the narrator would show undying loyalty and trust in return for guidance. Lincoln, who at this time used religion as a source of solace, appreciated the song in the context of the uncertain situation he was facing.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of his emotional response, it is likely that Lincoln himself did not realize the practical importance of music.

The news of the attack on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, brought out a strong effusion of emotions in the nation's capital. People feared war while concurrently experiencing a newfound sense

of excitement and spirit to jump into battle.<sup>8</sup> As a result of this unrest, a wave of relief flooded over the citizens of Washington as the New York Seventh regiment appeared in the city as the first wave of defense shortly after the event, on April 25. Along with defense, the regiment brought music, and it was the first military band to perform a concert at the White House for Lincoln. Sensibly enough, patriotic standards such as "Hail, Columbia" rang loudly through the streets as the Union military asserted itself as a proud defensive presence in Washington.<sup>9</sup>

Lincoln frequently heard "Hail, Columbia" in the early parts of the war, as the song represented the values of the Union and had done so since the days of George Washington. It discusses the value of staying "firm" and "united," and made a specific reference to a "band of brothers" in the oft-repeated chorus.<sup>10</sup> The song was very non-specific to the era, and yet was especially relevant as a period of disunion was about to completely dismantle the country over the coming months. Another patriotic standard, "Hail to the Chief!" was played with high frequency throughout the entirety of Lincoln's political career, often as an instrumental and with especially prominent stretches of popularity during election season. Again, this song was a traditional one, honoring presidents since the early 19th century. It was finally played at an inauguration ceremony for the first time in 1837 for Martin Van Buren.<sup>11</sup> In 1864, it is no wonder then that both Lincoln and McClellan welcomed the song as a part of their respective campaigns, while lyrics may have been slightly altered to denote who exactly was being hailed as "the chief."<sup>12</sup> Traditional songs, however important in continuing political customs and American rituals, were used predominantly for show and for entertainment.

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<sup>4</sup> Bernard, xvii.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Jimerson, "Music Played a Notable Part in Lincoln's Life," *The Washington Times* (Washington, D.C.), Mar. 22, 1997, accessed on Dec. 10, 2018, <https://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-56847999.html>.

<sup>6</sup> "Abraham Lincoln and Music," *The Lehrman Institute Presents: Abraham Lincoln's Classroom*, accessed on Dec. 10, 2018, <http://www.abrahamlincolnsclassroom.org/abraham-lincoln-in-depth/abraham-lincoln-and-music/>.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard, 147.

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<sup>8</sup> Ronald C. White, Jr., *A. Lincoln* (New York, NY: Random House, 2009), 407.

<sup>9</sup> Bernard, 19.

<sup>10</sup> S. T. Gordon, "Hail Columbia," New York: S. T. Gordon, 1862, loc.gov.

<sup>11</sup> "Hail to the Chief," *Library of Congress* (Washington, D.C.), 2002, accessed Dec. 10, 2018, <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihis.200000009/>.

<sup>12</sup> Bernard, 243.

They did nothing to differentiate themselves for the specific era of the 1860's in the United States, and did not influence or encourage the spread of ideas and opinions specific to the war years throughout the audiences in front of which they were performed. These audiences could be quite large. For example, over 30,000 people gathered for a concert in Washington after the news of Gettysburg and Vicksburg reached the capital, and some individual songs sold over 100,000 copies in print by war's end.<sup>13</sup> Music had a potential to circulate throughout the entire public.

Thus, music during Lincoln's time was important in many ways for the lawyer and politician and for all of the citizens, whether they were viewed as loyal unionists or as Confederate rebels. Music was a reflection of the hearts and souls of many American citizens during a time where popular opinion was especially important to the receptive commander-in-chief. Many of the songs were written with direct references to the president, and additionally would reference members of his cabinet, members of the Confederate government, and draw explicitly upon the issues of the time to communicate ideas throughout the struggling nation.

## Historiography

Although Kenneth Bernard's *Lincoln and the Music of the Civil War* extensively researches the president's relationship to music of the time, his work focuses on music that was popularly performed for or heard by the president. His detailed explanations of the president's emotional responses to certain songs and his accounts of performances help readers to develop a more complete view of the president as a person. Supplementing Bernard's historiographic approach on the music that Lincoln would have heard with the songs that most directly referred to the public opinion of Lincoln and the war provides an abundant source of information on the Union and the popular masses in the Civil War era.

A more general account of music of the Civil War, Sanjek's *American Popular Music and Its Business*, discusses some of the most important publishers, writers, and performers of music. Sanjek

breaks down the prominent music publishers of the time, including Oliver Ditson, who oversaw a whole network of music publishers throughout the North and is a renowned publisher of the sheet music featured in this paper. Sanjek also details which songs were popular at certain times, which implies how the song may have had an effect on the nation during the Civil War.

What this work will do differently is look at the lyrics of songs regardless of whether Lincoln would have heard them, and take their popularity into account separately from the political, religious, or social connotations of each song. The usefulness of Bernard's and Sanjek's works here is that they shine light on the relative popularity of each song, but regardless of these facts, the songs' meanings have never before been explored to this extent. There is one instance in Ronald White's biography on Lincoln where he discusses the importance of "We Are Coming, Father Abraham," and looks into the lyrical implications.<sup>14</sup> However, lyrics do not receive serious treatment in his biography or in any others that look into Lincoln and the Civil War. My research complements Lincoln biographers as well, in that the analysis of lyrics helps to provide context of the time period in which the songs were released and inform readers about the motivations and opinions of the people living under Lincoln. Sheet music provides a rich source and method of researching popular history, and additional research into the composers themselves, the frequent locations of performance, and the relative popularity of certain songs could inform historians even more on life during the Civil War.

## The 1860 Campaign and Lincoln's Platform

The 1860 election was tightly contested from the very beginning for the Republican Party. Not until the third day of the Republican Convention did Lincoln take the lead over one of his fellow candidates, William H. Seward, whom he was trailing by three votes. One of the states in which Seward was leading going into that third day was Massachusetts, but by the end of the day, four votes had transferred over to Lincoln.<sup>15</sup> Several important pieces of music from the 1860 election

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<sup>14</sup> White, 491.

<sup>15</sup> White, 328.

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<sup>13</sup> Bernard, 141-143.

supporting Lincoln were written and published in the capital of this crucial state.

An instrumental entitled “The Railsplitter’s Polka” was written in Boston during the campaign. Written by A. Neuman and published by the aforementioned major printer Oliver Ditson, the cover page of this piece dedicates the song “To The Republican Presidential Candidate Hon. A. Lincoln” at the top of the page. Further down, the “R” that begins the title is made up of robust rail lines and wood.<sup>16</sup> This reputation followed Lincoln throughout his 1860 campaign whether or not it was his intention. Richard J. Oglesby, chairman of the convention, had brought in two rails and a banner that denoted Lincoln as the “Rail Candidate” which symbolized a movement away from slave labor and one towards free labor.<sup>17</sup> The railroad also represented Lincoln’s work ethic and desire to spread west. As this piece of music was disseminated, the first thing that recipients would read was this title and the front page dedication to the favored candidate.

Once Lincoln had been established as the Republican candidate, a divided Democratic platform stood in the way as the final opponent in becoming president. Lincoln believed that although the South threatened secession, talk of this sort was “mostly bluster” and that other focal points were more important.<sup>18</sup> Instead, Lincoln advocated for the promise of “justice and fairness to all.”<sup>19</sup> As his railsplitter reputation signified, he was totally against the extension of slavery so as to promote free labor. The songs of his campaign accurately reflect these ideas.

Karl Cora wrote two pieces of music in support of Lincoln’s campaign which were published in Boston by Russell and Tolman. Although both were distributed in the same packet

of sheet music, the two feature drastically different aspects of Lincoln’s platform. “The Campaign” is displayed across the top of the cover page, followed up by Karl Cora’s byline. Interestingly, the byline expresses that the words were “written expressly for the times,” as if to indicate that the lyrics may not have a perpetual significance. Karl and Cora are names that are very often German in origin, and so Cora’s allegiance to Lincoln, demonstrated in his campaign music, is appropriate based on the German opinion of the time. The Germans’ “commitment to free soil,” and thus opposition to slave labor, rang true in Cora’s writing.<sup>20</sup>

The first of Cora’s contributions, “We see the break of day,” focuses almost exclusively on the slavery aspect of the Republican party platform. Cora writes from the perspective of an enslaved African American, deploying profound lyrics such as the following:

*The hands that hold the Sword and Purse*

*Ere long shall lose their prey:*

*And they who blindly wrought the curse,*

*The curse shall sweep away.*<sup>21</sup>

This verse seems to say that the owners of these slaves will lose their slaves without anything to gain from the loss.<sup>22</sup> Cora also writes about the maintenance of the “virgin beauty of the West” and encourages the prevention of anything that would stain it. The song ends on a triumphant note, claiming that the African Americans refuse to be slaves now or ever, and that the world shall soon find out that they are free.<sup>23</sup> Although Lincoln does not discuss emancipation this early into his political career, the Republican party’s supporters include abolitionists and free African Americans, and Cora

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<sup>16</sup>A. Neuman, “The Railsplitter’s Polka,” Boston: Oliver Ditson & co., 1860, Library of Congress website. Unless otherwise stated, all pieces of sheet music were researched through the Library of Congress website which will be denoted in footnotes as loc.gov.

<sup>17</sup> White, 320-321.

<sup>18</sup> White, 345.

<sup>19</sup> White, 332.

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<sup>20</sup> Louise L. Stevenson, *Lincoln in the Atlantic World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 115 and 120.

<sup>21</sup> Karl Cora, “We see the break of day,” Boston: Russell and Tolman, 1860, loc.gov.

<sup>22</sup> Lincoln hadn’t introduced his idea of compensated emancipation until July of 1862.

<sup>23</sup> Cora, “We see the break of day,” loc.gov.



connects with those audiences by speaking to the hope of freedom.

The second piece from Cora in this dual campaign set was “Freedom’s Call.” Instead of appealing to the more radical sector of Lincoln’s supporters, this song serves a broader audience by discussing themes of perpetual union and strong leadership. Cora emphasizes Lincoln’s belief in the founding fathers’ intentions with lines implying that Lincoln “makes certain the way” left behind by “the shades of the fathers for freedom who died.” Cora builds upon this patriotic and nostalgic sentiment and ends with “not for North or for South, but the best good of all, We follow Lincoln and his wild bugle call!”<sup>24</sup> As Ronald White mentioned, Lincoln did not like to focus on the growing threat of secession, and actually neglected the growing reality of its possible occurrence, and so these lyrics reflect that the president’s avoidance of the topic of secession rubbed off on popular music supporting his campaign.<sup>25</sup>

Music continued to reinforce the concept of unity after the election, with songs like “Viva l’America.” Written by H. Millard in 1861 and published in New York, the lyrics denounced the traitor and attempted to establish a strong sense of nationalism. The chorus of “united we stand, divided we fall! Union forever, freedom to all!” served as a direct counterpoint to the verse, which threatened the traitor and proclaimed “curs’d be his homestead... shame be his mem’ry.... Exile his heritage, his name, a blot!”<sup>26</sup> The song, “written to instill a new spirit of nationalism,” became massively popular as the decade began.<sup>27</sup>

Live performances of music during and immediately after Lincoln’s 1860 campaign featured popular songs that embodied the same themes of union and nationalism. *Hutchinson’s*

*Republican Songsters, For 1860* was a compilation of music of this sort performed by the widely popular Hutchinson Family, known for their abolitionist themes and overall strong support of republicanism. One of the most popular musical groups of the time, the Hutchinson Family was hired by Lincoln to perform in the Red Room of the White House for private parties, and so their music appealed not only to the wider audiences that would hear their music at celebrations and receptions, but also for private guests of the president.<sup>28</sup> The Rhode Islanders’ band, composed of troops, celebrated Lincoln’s election with performances of pieces like “The Flag of Our Union,” which stresses the preservation of all aspects of our nation, including the lakes, the lands, and the hearts and hands of citizens under the flag.<sup>29</sup>

### **Military Strategy and Emancipation: 1862-1864**

Unfortunately for Lincoln and the rest of the United States, the idea of perpetual unity was almost immediately destroyed when the Confederates attacked Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861. Military consequences had now emerged out of the political tactic of secession, and Lincoln’s role as commander-in-chief came into the public eye. Inadvertently, the Confederate attack stirred up the North to rally around a common cause and strengthened its unification.<sup>30</sup> As secession pulled more and more states out of the union, faithful Americans “dedicated to preserving the Union turned to patriotic music.”<sup>31</sup> Seven months after the attack, the North’s patriotic sentiment was to be reflected in what Kenneth Bernard calls “the greatest song of the war.”<sup>32</sup> Julia Ward Howe’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” still a recognizable tune today, had a major impact on the war spirit of the Union. It utilized the melody of “John Brown’s Body,” a popular Union song about the abolitionist

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<sup>24</sup> Karl Cora, “Freedom’s Call,” Boston: Russell and Tolman, 1860, loc.gov.

<sup>25</sup> White, 345.

<sup>26</sup> H. Millard, “Viva l’America,” New York: Firth, Pond & Co., New York, 1861.

<sup>27</sup> Russell Sanjek, *American Popular Music and Its Business, Volume II: The First Four Hundred Years Volume II: From 1790 to 1909* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 240.

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<sup>28</sup> Bernard, 56-57.

<sup>29</sup> Bernard, 26; Wm. B. Bradbury, “The Flag of our Union,” New York: Firth, Pond & Co., 1861, loc.gov.

<sup>30</sup> Michael P. Johnson, *Abraham Lincoln, Slavery, and the Civil War* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2011), 70-71.

<sup>31</sup> Sanjek, 234.

<sup>32</sup> Bernard, 50.

from Harper's Ferry.<sup>33</sup> Howe's song "stir[red] the conscience of the whole North" and pinned religious undertones to the whole cause of the war.<sup>34</sup> By deploying lyrics like "As He [Christ]<sup>35</sup> died to make men holy, Let us die to make men free," the war effort was elevated to one that put the morality of citizens at stake unless they fervently supported the war effort.<sup>36</sup>

On July 1, 1862, Lincoln made a bold move as commander-in-chief. A wave of "great Northern discouragement," no doubt a response to a long series of Union losses under General George McClellan in his Peninsula Campaign, led to Lincoln's call for 300,000 volunteers.<sup>37</sup> Soon after, James Sloan Gibbons, a quaker abolitionist and economist by trade, wrote a poem titled "We Are Coming, Father Abraham."<sup>38</sup> The words of the poem were set to music at least seven times by different artists, including the hugely popular Stephen Foster. The song, written in the plural first person, unites all listeners together in a zealous attempt to invigorate the North. Different versions of the song, depending on the composer, contain subtitles with different numbers of volunteers. A version released in Philadelphia, for instance, is subtitled "600,000 more," while a version published in Boston only subtitles the piece "300,000 more."<sup>39</sup>

The differing numbers of volunteers aside, the song officially frames Lincoln as more than just

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<sup>33</sup> Bernard, 50.

<sup>34</sup> Bernard, 51.

<sup>35</sup> My addition.

<sup>36</sup> Julia Ward Howe, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," Boston: Oliver Ditson & Co., 1862, loc.gov. The LoC website says the piece was received by the LoC in 1890, and so can't put a date on the actual age of the sheet music. However, the song itself was first published in 1862.

<sup>37</sup> White, 490.

<sup>38</sup> Bernard, 76.

<sup>39</sup> White, on page 490, claims that Lincoln issued a call for 300,000 volunteers in July, 1862, whereas Johnson, on page 109, writes that Lincoln called for 600,000 volunteers in July and August 1862. Different versions reflect both of these claims.

a president and commander in the public eye. Lincoln had now attained a patriarchal presence. The lyrics of this song recognized many of the emotions that Unionists were experiencing: the volunteers were sad to leave their homes, but their "hearts [were] too full of utterance" even as "a farewell group stands weeping at every cottage door."<sup>40</sup> Expressing the cognitive dissonance that the volunteer must have felt made the song more personal and thus more salient. Lincoln himself commented that the song "contained an excellent sentiment and was sung in a manner worthy of the sentiment."<sup>41</sup> Father Abraham's recognition of the song helped bolster the song's success as shown by the two million copies of the song that were distributed before Gibbons's death in 1892.<sup>42</sup> George F. Root's "Yes, We'll Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys (The Battle Cry of Freedom)," a similar theme song of the Northern war effort, was printed 500-700 thousand times.<sup>43</sup> The sheer quantity of pieces published demonstrate the immense success that these songs had.

Wartime songs did not always carry positive and enthusiastic messages. A parody of Gibbons's famous tune reflected a drastic change in Northern attitudes as the war dragged on. The first federal conscription bill passed in March, 1863 sparked a series of protests. One part of the law that enraged poorer Northern citizens was the clause that accepted a "\$300 commutation fee" in order to exempt someone from the mandatory draft.<sup>44</sup> Anti-draft rioters paraded through the streets of New York and sang the "Song of the Conscripts," which contained the following verse:

*We are coming, Father Abraham,  
three hundred thousand more.*

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<sup>40</sup> James S. Gibbons, "We are Coming, Father Abraham," multiple versions, loc.gov.

<sup>41</sup> Bernard, 82.

<sup>42</sup> Bernard, 75.

<sup>43</sup> Bernard, 75.

<sup>44</sup> Adrian Cook, *The Armies of the Streets: The New York City Draft Riots of 1863* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 51.

*We leave our homes and firesides  
with bleeding hearts and sore,*

*Since poverty has been our crime, we  
bow to the decree;*

*We are the poor who have no wealth  
to purchase liberty.*<sup>45</sup>

The biting sarcasm apparent in these words show a complete contrast, albeit from a single group, to the jubilant expression of respect for Lincoln displayed less than a year earlier. It wasn't the only time the song had been made into a parody. In 1864, the meaning of the song changed to advocate the Democrat party candidate, George McClellan. "We are coming Father Abraham" was proclaimed not in a supportive tone, but in a threatening tone, and was followed up by "two millions strong I'm sure, to drive you from the white house; Abe your acts we can't endure." The acts are then specifically listed and mention his suppression of habeas corpus among other alleged violations.<sup>46</sup>

Some songs, rather than resorting to anger, tugged at the heartstrings of listeners to protest the war and sympathize with those who had to deal with the domestic effects of the enduring conflict. Charles Carroll Sawyer's "Weeping, sad and lonely (When this cruel war is over)" was among the most popular songs at anti-administration protests in New York.<sup>47</sup> The war is called "cruel" and is written from the perspective of a family member awaiting his/her beloved soldier to come back home. A particularly powerful line suggests the harsh reality made possible by the war, as the narrator solemnly says,

*Oft in dreams I see thee lying*

*On the battle plain,*

*Lonely, wounded, even dying,*

<sup>45</sup> Cook, 52. Actual source of song could not be found, but is cited in multiple different articles.

<sup>46</sup> Bernard, 245.

<sup>47</sup> Bernard, 137.

*Calling, but in vain.*<sup>48</sup>

While the lyrics do not directly refer to Lincoln, his unwavering stance that war must go on stood in contrast to the longing desires represented in this popular song. Sawyer's moving piece sold over one million copies and was the most popular song of the entire Civil War era due to its message "which so strongly appealed to two great armies and to an entire people."<sup>49</sup>

The positive spirit of war intertwined with the longing for emancipation and the amalgamation of the two aspects of the war manifested itself in the lyrics of songs sung at contraband camps. Lincoln himself would hear some of these songs in his visits to the camps, and would even join in the singing.<sup>50</sup> The songs often suggested religious worship as a crucial part of emancipation. Before the proclamation was officially announced in September of 1862, Lincoln had generally acceded to the North's contraband policy through which fugitive slaves could work for the Union army.<sup>51</sup> At a contraband camp in Washington, D.C., the fugitive slaves sang songs that blessed Abraham Lincoln in anticipation of their hopeful freedom.<sup>52</sup> Although Lincoln's policies do not exactly reflect that of a great religious emancipator, a role that many of the songs bestowed upon him, it is probable that songs allowed these ideas to be disseminated and further entrench Lincoln into this position.

One title, the appropriately named "Song of the Contrabands," was full of references to Moses and Pharaoh, and the popular biblical motif of "Let my people go!" rang true throughout the lyrics and acted as the subtitle of the song. Arranged by

<sup>48</sup> Charles C. Sawyer, "Weeping, sad and lonely (When this cruel war is over)," Brooklyn: Sawyer & Thompson, 1863, loc.gov.

<sup>49</sup> Sanjek, 245-246. Sanjek also notes that "criticism is baffled in an attempt to discover a reason for its popularity," on the same pages.

<sup>50</sup> Bernard, 92.

<sup>51</sup> Johnson, 115. However, Lincoln insisted that the slaves be returned if their master was a "loyal" one, but Johnson argues that this distinction was never made clear.

<sup>52</sup> Bernard, 93.

Thomas Baker, the song was said to originate “among the ‘Contrabands’ and was first heard sung by them on their arrival at Fortress Monroe.”<sup>53</sup> In all eleven verses, there is no mention of any current political figure or issue, but the intentions are completely clear. Perhaps to give the song legitimate political meanings, Baker created a parody of the song, changing the lyrics to represent the modern times and published it alongside the original sheet music of the “Song of the Contrabands.”

Baker’s parody, titled “The Lord doth now to this nation speak,” continues the refrain of “Let my people go!” from the original, but replaces biblical characters with current figures and themes. Verse seven pleads:

*Save freemen, saver our land from stain,*

*O let my people go!*

*Go say to Congress yet again,*

*O let my people go!*

Verse nine features Simon Cameron, William H. Seward, and Salmon P. Chase in the lyrics, and is followed up two verses later by more members of Lincoln’s cabinet.

*Go say to Smith, Welles, Blair, and Bates,*

*If you let my people go;*

*Peace shall return to the Rebel States,*

*Then let my people go!*<sup>54</sup>

The two songs had the same melodies and choruses, but the utility of each served the appropriate audience differently. Fugitive slaves and still-unfree slaves sang the song as a call for hope and for emotional unity among each and every one of them. Baker’s agenda was to get the song into the public

and rally support for Lincoln’s eventual proposal of emancipation.

When emancipation did finally occur, popular music discussed it frequently. A piece released in Boston in 1863, “We’ll fight for Uncle Abe,” continued the themes of patriarchy and military spirit. Even as the proclamation freed them, the sentiment still favored going into battle both to support Lincoln and to fight back against the side that caused decades of oppression. The cover of the sheet music denotes it as a “plantation song” and states that it is sung “with great success” by the Buckley Serenaders.<sup>55</sup> This group, one of the most popular blackface groups at minstrel shows in the United States in the 1850’s and 1860’s, would have been heard often.<sup>56</sup> The song supports General Grant, General McClellan, and mentions the great presidential power and leadership possessed by Lincoln. It even brings international politics into play, claiming that “Johnny Bull and Mister France are ‘fraid of Uncle Abe.’”<sup>57</sup> Here, Great Britain and France are seen as scared to interfere with the war due to Lincoln’s executive proclamation. The Emancipation Proclamation, as demonstrated through popular music, further elevated the stature of the Rail Candidate into a powerful, patriarchal, and practically religious figure. “Kingdom Coming (Year of Jubilo),” written by abolitionist Henry Clay Work, had existed before emancipation but took on a new meaning when Lincoln’s proclamation reached the public. It was by far the most popular “freedom song” sung by both whites and blacks in the North, and sold over 3,000 copies a month.<sup>58</sup> The themes of religion that began in contraband camps had now resonated with the greater public, as Lincoln appeared to be “coming with his chariot” to free all of the slaves.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> James Buckley, “We’ll fight for Uncle Abe,” Boston: Oliver Ditson & Co., 1863, loc.gov.

<sup>56</sup> Vera Brodsky Lawrence and George Templeton Strong, *Repercussions, 1857-1862*, Strong on Music, V. 3., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 95-96.

<sup>57</sup> Buckley, “We’ll fight for Uncle Abe.”

<sup>58</sup> Bernard, 99; Sanjek 236.

<sup>59</sup> Henry Clay Work, “Kingdom Coming,” Chicago: Root & Cady, 1862, civilwarfolkmusic.com.

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<sup>53</sup> Thomas Baker, “The Song of the Contrabands,” New York: Horace Waters, 1861, loc.gov.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Baker, “The Lord doth now to this nation speak,” New York: Horace Walters, 1861, loc.gov.



It is worth noting that not all emancipation songs carried a completely positive sentiment with them. For some Northern songs, the support of Lincoln combined with innate racism to create music that had ambiguous intentions. “Abraham my Abraham,” released in 1863, sets the tone with just the title. The writer, listed as Wm. K.

O’Donoughue, clearly possesses an Irish surname, and this helps us to understand why the lyrics may reflect multiple different opinions in regards to Lincoln’s policies. The Irish, strong in their anti-nativist sentiment, supported the North in order to preserve the Union in fear that otherwise immigration would be not as accessible. The Irish stood out among other nations in their disproportionately large number of immigrants.<sup>60</sup> However, the Irish did not support the Republican Party’s platform of abolition and anti-slavery. Emancipation could interfere with the Irish’s ability to hold down jobs for cheap labor in the North as well as take up spots in the military.<sup>61</sup>

“Abraham my Abraham” portrays the Irish opposition to Lincoln’s presidency. Freed blacks are referred to as “darkies,” and Lincoln’s proclamation is viewed as a “fatal word.”<sup>62</sup> Whether the word “fatal” refers to the Confederates hopes of surviving the war, or the status of the North after emancipation introduces freed blacks into everyday life, is up to the interpretation of the listener. Regardless, the constant refrain of “Abraham my Abraham” transforms from an endearing remark in the beginning of the song to an almost shameful and reprimanding remark at the end.

### **End of War and Death/Remembrance: 1864-1865**

Like many other pieces of art have shown, Lincoln’s post-war depiction is almost always heroic. His reelection in 1864 coincided with key military victories to affirm his status as an idol throughout the North, and popular music reflected his heroism. “Abraham the Great and General Grant his Mate,” written as a campaign song in 1864,

concluded prematurely that Grant would run alongside Lincoln in the election. The usage of “Uncle Abe” continues throughout the lyrics, as Lincoln’s familial presence had now nearly been set in stone. Grant, a military hero for recent victories and the eventual force that warranted Robert E. Lee’s surrender, would soon rise to celebrity status in the North. This song very well may have contributed to Grant’s thrust into the national spotlight.

There was still some unrest as the war came to an end about the status of African Americans once the war was over. This crucial component of reconstruction was a cause of fear in many Unionists who were not strong proponents of complete emancipation, and popular music picked up on this anxiety, as well. “That’s what the niggers then will do,” published in 1865, claims to have been sung with immense success on its title page, which may mean that it resonated with a lot of listeners. Sung from the point of view of a free African American, the narrator asks “but now our work is almost done, then what are we poor niggers guan to do!”<sup>63</sup> While this line may have sparked worry in white listeners who were not ready for the introduction of free African Americans into their community, subsequent verses work to show that African Americans can work to become proper citizens. The lyrics ask to “let us learn to read and write,” advocate for their ability to “be faithful and true,” and provide evidence that “we have proved that we can fight” and that all they ask for is to be men like everyone else.<sup>64</sup>

Wartime enemies were portrayed in popular music as well. An instrumental titled “Jeff’s Double Quick” was an upbeat title, and even without lyrics, the release of the song in sheet music spread a political message. Published for the Western Sanitary Fairs of 1865, the cover art shows Jefferson Davis in a woman’s dress, disguised so that he could steal food from more deserving people at the fair.<sup>65</sup> The absence of masculinity present in

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<sup>60</sup> Kevin Kenny, “Abraham Lincoln and the American Irish,” *American Journal of Irish Studies* 10 (2013): 41.

<sup>61</sup> Kenny, 49-51.

<sup>62</sup> Wm. K. O’Donoughue, “Abraham my Abraham,” Buffalo: Sheppard & Cottier, 1863, loc.gov.

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<sup>63</sup> Tom Russell, “That’s what the niggers then will do,” Boston: Oliver Ditson & Co., 1865, loc.gov.

<sup>64</sup> Russell, “That’s what the niggers then will do.”

<sup>65</sup> E., M., “Jeff’s double quick,” Philadelphia: Lee & Walker, 1865, loc.gov. The only composer cited is listed as M. E.

this image of Confederate cowardice not only lifted Northern pride, but demoralized the South for following such an incompetent leader. Perhaps such an image could additionally transform former Confederate loyalists into Northern supporters due to their embarrassment.

After Lincoln's untimely death, an outpouring of popular music hit on the mournful feeling that had swept the North. Of these songs, "Farewell Father, Friend and Guardian" became the best known of Lincoln's funeral pieces, and the title shows how his image had transformed from a humble and honest worker into a familial icon.<sup>66</sup> "Rest, Noble Chieftain," "Let the President sleep," and "Lincoln's Requiem" are all other songs that achieved popularity in mourning of the assassinated president. Instead of dwelling on the assassination, but still in a very solemn mood, the lyrics of these songs acknowledge that Lincoln left the earth once he knew he had fulfilled all of his responsibilities and freed the nation from the massive burden of slavery. "Uncle Abe" had only accepted death once he had succeeded in his monumental goals, and everyone in the North could agree that his passing was a tragedy worthy of memorializing.

### **Further Research**

The works explored throughout this paper only serve as a small representative sample size of the numerous pieces of music from the Civil War era. There are many avenues of research that music opens up. For one, the sheet music itself could be the focus, and discovering the commercial success of each song's sheet music could lead to understanding which opinions and ideas the public had seen most frequently. Breaking down music by the ethnicity and background of the lyricists and composers could reinforce and enhance our understanding on certain groups' opinions of the Lincoln and the Republican party. In addition, music released before and after the war most likely would continue to develop the patterns of popular opinion that this paper has just begun to uncover. Regardless of the focal point of the research, looking at music and lyrics is a fantastic supplemental source of historical information when accompanied by the facts of the times.

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<sup>66</sup> Bernard, 309.

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