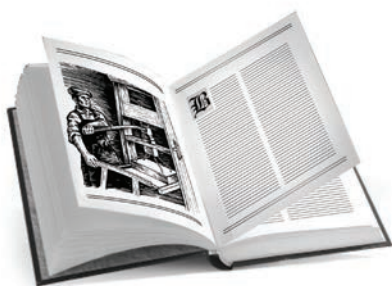


# BOOK REVIEWS



## *My Old Kentucky Home: The Astonishing Life and Reckoning of an Iconic American Song*

By Emily Bingham  
Alfred A. Knopf, 2022  
325 pages with footnotes, bibliography, and index  
Hardcover, \$30.00

**Reviewed by Cody M. Jones, PhD candidate, musicology, University of Michigan**

Stephen Foster is an iconic American songwriter. Often credited as the “father of American music,” this Pittsburgh native penned many of the most popular and impactful melodies of the last 150 years, including “Oh, Susanna,” “Old Folks at Home (Swanee River),” “Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair,” and “My Old Kentucky Home.” These songs accompanied the prospectors as they moved to California during the 1849 Gold Rush. Commodore Matthew Perry took them on his ship when he sailed to Japan in 1853. Millions read the story of Scarlett O’Hara and Rhett Butler consoling their White, Confederate compatriots during the Union Army’s advance to Atlanta with a Foster song in *Gone with the Wind*. Countless schoolchildren across the world, including many of you at one time or another, have learned and sung Foster’s songs.

Emily Bingham’s 2022 book, *My Old Kentucky Home: The Astonishing Life and Reckoning of an American Song*, is a “song biography” of one of Foster’s most enduring compositions, “My Old Kentucky Home.” Bingham, a trained historian and Kentucky native, tells the history of this song from its creation in 1852 to the present day. The book details the many ways that individuals and groups have used the song in public performances, staged shows, Kentucky Derby celebrations, and Civil Rights protests long after Foster set it to paper. It is organized chronologically with each chapter also focusing on specific themes or stories.

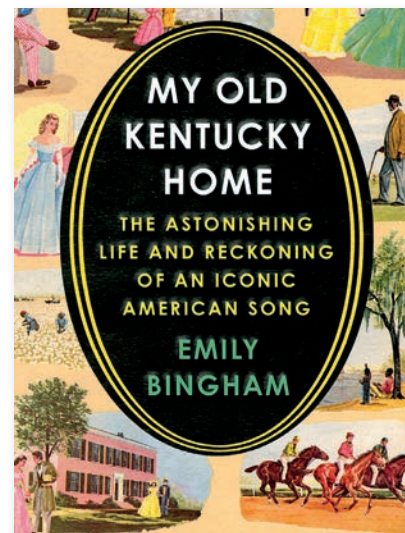
Bingham compellingly argues that the history and meaning of this song have always been contested: “This

song’s story tracks both what has divided Americans, White and Black—the realities of slavery and racial prejudice—and what has brought them together: culture and music.” (p. xviii) In this excellently sourced and engagingly written book, Bingham teases out the meaning and importance of the song in the small details of how many different Americans have heard the song and performed it over the years.

“My Old Kentucky Home” began its life as a draft in Foster’s notebook titled “*Poor Uncle Tom*, Goodnight,” a reference to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s controversial blockbuster abolitionist 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. While Foster’s final version includes no direct references to Stowe’s novel, the song (in its full version with three verses) features a narrator, an enslaved Black man from Kentucky, telling the listener that he is being sold down the river to harsher working and living conditions at a plantation in the Deep South “where the sugar-canes grow.” He laments his condition and tells an unnamed woman to “weep no more” and to join him and “sing one song for the old Kentucky home.”

Despite being inspired by an abolitionist novel, Foster’s song—as Bingham argues—is not an abolitionist work. It is a mix of two common musical genres of the 19th century: the sentimental parlor ballad, which was performed in the genteel middle-class homes, and the blackface minstrel song, which was performed by White men in burnt cork makeup in popular theaters. This hybrid style defined many of Foster’s works of the early 1850s. While “My Old Kentucky Home” is sentimental and nostalgic, in a perverse twist, Foster relies on a Black narrator to tell a story that ultimately presents slavery as good so long as the enslavers are not cruel. Historians of American slavery have documented the terrors and cruelty of even the most “benign” enslavement, and contemporary accounts of American slavery force us to acknowledge the horror of that institution, not to sentimentalize it.

Bingham explores how sentimentalized depictions of slavery accompanied “My Old Kentucky Home” as it became an iconic American song. She writes “this book is my effort to scrub [‘My Old Kentucky Home’] of the decades of nostalgia and burnt cork and confront what is underneath.” (p. xvii) By placing the efforts to celebrate and enshrine this song in the context of political movements at the end of the Reconstruction Period and



the beginnings of Jim Crow, Bingham compellingly illustrates how the song became a monument to a vision of the past often rooted in fictions of White supremacy and Black inferiority. She traces how the song was used by prominent White politicians and journalists during the early years of the 20th century to shape a version of American history defined by romanticized images of the antebellum South—sweet tea, mint juleps, southern belles and beaux, white-columned mansions—that has culminated in the internationally televised, romantically Southern-tinged performance of “My Old Kentucky Home” at the Kentucky Derby every year.

Bingham’s narrative is not solely focused on the uses of the song by White Americans. She documents many of the powerful efforts of Black Americans to utilize Foster’s song to tell stories of Black freedom and humanity. Most notable amongst these is her account of playwright Henrietta Vinton Davis’s play *Our Old Kentucky Home* (pp. 95–103). Written in the 1890s, Davis’s play paints a realistically horrific picture of the lives of the enslaved who then capitalize on the unrest of the Civil War to free themselves and to triumphantly purchase the plantation on which they were formerly enslaved after the war. Davis struggled to mount her play and was met with a vitriolic reception from many reviewers and audiences. Nevertheless, Bingham includes examples like this to show how Black Americans engaged with the song in efforts to resist the false and sentimentalizing message the song and its many White boosters sent about slavery and Black inferiority.

Bingham's book traces how his songs—using “My Old Kentucky Home” as a microcosm to examine the rest—have shaped American narratives about our past. This is an effort not undertaken in Foster scholarship since William W. Austin's book *Susannah, Jeanie, and The Old Folks at Home: The Songs of Stephen C. Foster from his Time to Ours* (Macmillan, 1975). Those looking for a Foster biography should read Ken Emerson's *Doo-Dah!: Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture* (Simon & Schuster, 1997). This book, though not a biography of Foster, creatively uses the songwriter to convey a great deal about American history and culture. Bingham also finds herself in good company with other recently published song biographies of important American songs such as Mark Clague's *O Say Can You Hear?: A Cultural Biography of The Star Spangled Banner* (W. W. Norton & Co., 2022) and Imani Perry's *May We Forever Stand: A History of the Black National Anthem* (University of North Carolina Press, 2018). Bingham's work is a valuable contribution to the bookshelf of any person interested in American history, music, and culture.

**Cody M. Jones**, originally from Vine Grove, Kentucky, is a doctoral candidate in musicology studying the intersections of music, race, and history in the United States. He also works as a Research Associate on the interdisciplinary project “Singing Justice: Recovering the African American Voice in Song.”

## WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY MAGAZINE WON THE FOLLOWING AWARDS DURING 2022



### GOLD

Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion category for publications by non-profits  
*Launched: The Life of Olympian Herb Douglas*  
by Anne Madarasz



### SILVER

Writing (Feature Article)  
“August Wilson & Romare Bearden: A Playwright's Debt to an Artist” by Larry Glasco

### SILVER

Overall Design (Marketing/Promotion)  
Spring 2021 *American Democracy* issue



### SILVER

Individual Achievement-Copywriting for Design & Print  
“August Wilson & Romare Bearden: A Playwright's Debt to an Artist” by Larry Glasco



### WINNERS

Excellence in Written Journalism, Public Affairs/Politics/Government  
“American Citizenship” by Melissa E. Marinaro

Excellence in Written Journalism, Arts/Entertainment  
“The Delirious Adventures of Pittsburgh Poets Tom Boggs and Robert Clairmont” by Jennie Benford

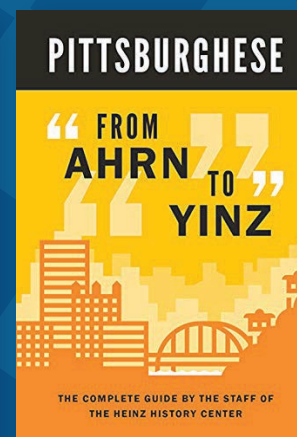
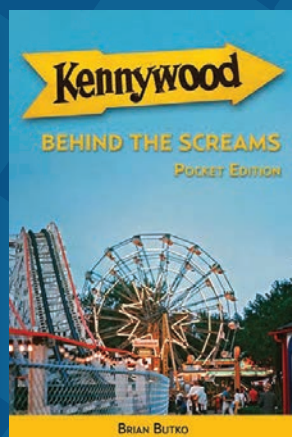
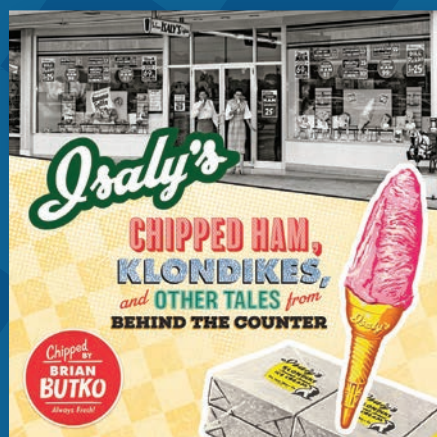
Excellence in Written Journalism, History/Culture  
(also winner of the Ray Sprigle Memorial Award – Division 7)  
“Bring Home the Soldier Dead League: A World War I Saga” by Andrew Capets



### WINNERS

“Walter L. Roberts: Pittsburgh's Standout Black Architect” by Martin Aurand

“Pittsburgh's John Kane” by Maxwell King and Louise Lippincott



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