

# Whistlin' D ----.

## Why Songs of the Southland are Really Northern



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I was driving as fast as possible past Hartford, Connecticut, as one does, listening to one of the last of the weird stations, WJMJ at 88.9 FM on the radio dial. The station must have a tiny transmitter. At the high rate of speed one generally wants to use in approaching and getting past Hartford, you'll catch a total of about fifteen minutes. I highly recommend the experience, but for the full effect don't go searching or streaming it—just file my recommendation away for the next time you're barrel-assing past Hartford. The station's inexplicable.

Anyway, on came this song, "Christmas in Dixie," by the country-pop crossover outfit Alabama, who had their biggest hits in the 1980's. "Christmas in Dixie" is not among those hits (I'd know, having listened to a lot of top-forty country in those days). The song turned out to be a one-off novelty holiday number, with lyrics that make no sense, not really an acceptable example of the genre, in nobody's holiday rotation, and likely to be played nowhere but on 88.9, WJMJ Hartford, for reasons that nobody can fathom. (If anybody *has* fathomed the method behind the madness of that station's playlists, please don't tell me. It's the persistently

mystifying nature of the choices, along with certain other factors, that make those few minutes of bombing toward, through, and the hell out of Hartford such a pleasure.)

Alabama's "Christmas in Dixie" is notably lame holiday music, but the history of lame holiday music isn't my real subject today. Even if it had another title and hook, that song wouldn't be heard at holiday parties. Yet hearing it on the radio made me wonder how the non-weird stations are handling far better songs from the not-so-distant past that also use the word "Dixie."

You may or may not recall that eighteen months ago or so, there was a very public effort to scour out of popular music the term "Dixie," along with other musical terms of affection for the American South associated with white supremacy, Lost Cause iconography, the Confederacy, and the racial slavery that the Confederacy fought the Civil War to perpetuate. Amid the Black Lives Matter protests in response to the police murder of George Floyd, the band once known as the Dixie Chicks dropped their adjective and became just the Chicks. A few days earlier, the band Lady Antebellum had become just Lady A—a move less edifying, perhaps, than the Chicks', in part because it's still pretty easy to guess what the "A" stands for, and Lady A announced that it had never before understood the reference to the pre-Civil War, slaveholding South.

Which may actually be true, even though their name had already been publicly criticized. To secure its use of the new name, and prevent anyone else from using it, the band brought a lawsuit against the blues artist Anita White, who has been using the name Lady A for years. She's an artist of color. People in and around the band formerly known as Lady Antebellum aren't necessarily all that bright, or even, evidently, all that sincere. I don't think you can say that about the Chicks.

But I don't know how any of it is holding up. Nobody's still talking about the moral necessity of viewing "Gone with the Wind," if at all, only in its newly contextualized version. After the protests subsided, Amazon and Netflix pretty quickly stopped their temporary practice of promoting, by default on their home screens, black-themed and black-directed films and shows. Big corporate entertainment can't reliably pursue any position, let alone anti-racism, over an extended cultural time period like eighteen whole months.

Still, certain terminology, ideas, and tropes familiar in popular musical genres are pretty obviously at stark issue, in this context. As noted here and there even before 2020, the titles and lyrics of what's called classic rock include a number of sympathetic invocations of Dixie

and Confederate and Lost Cause-type imagery: the Band's "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down," Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama," and Little Feat's "Dixie Chicken" (from which, it's said, the Chicks took their original name). I recall discussions on Twitter as early as 2015 about the weird role the Band played in framing up the Confederacy as a kind of countercultural rebellion against authority. In 2017, the historian Eric Foner said in *The New York Times* that the line "they never should have taken the very best," from "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down," refers to Robert E. Lee himself (a weird reading, to me, but still).

Even Joan Baez had a number-three hit with that song, in 1971. She changed some of the words, to make less historical sense, but the subject remained firmly in place, and it raised no eyebrows that I can recall among Baez's lefty-liberal fanbase at the time. Later, the song did come in for criticism, by Ta-Nehisi Coates, for one. (I'll link to sources in the "Further Reading" section below).

Country music has gone even farther, of course, than classic rock in locating essential American values in a glorified image of the white-supremacist South. The country-pop band the Bellamy Brothers' top-five "You Ain't Just Whistlin' Dixie" fondly mentions both the Confederacy and Lee. It came out in 1979, and I can report that in no way did it stick out like a sore thumb: that iconography fit right into standard country radio format of the day (the fact that the Bellamys' re-recording of the song in 2006, with Alan Jackson, using the same lyrics, got little public reaction does seem a bit surprising). Bob McDill's "Good Ole Boys Like Me" a number-two hit for Don Williams in 1980, is a fine song about the emotional price of escaping a world where evangelical enthusiasm, Lost Cause nostalgia, and concepts of honor fail to cover up sheer self-destruction. The narrator recalls having a picture of Stonewall Jackson above his bed as a kid, though, and I just don't know how that would fly on commercial radio today.

Coming to terms with these issues in American popular music, and with many songs' use of the word "Dixie," brings us up against the song that we actually call "Dixie," with its famous chorus "Away, away, away down South in Dixie." Considering the history of that song can complicate matters to a degree that may leave us wondering what to make of our music, instead of just canceling or defending it.

Last year, when the Chicks dropped "Dixie" from their name, a stab was made, in *The New Yorker*, at confronting the original song's history. But that stab missed, and if confrontation

with history really is the important exercise such pieces always want to suggest it is, then it's important not to miss—important to me, anyway, who has been mulling over “Dixie” and its ramifications for a long time. And before I mulled it over, I sang it, as every schoolchild in my day did, everywhere in the country.

The *New Yorker* piece, by Amanda Petrusich, fuzzed and garbled the song's origins:

. . . Yet among historians, there is little ambiguity about what the word “Dixie” communicates. Its use as a dotting nickname for the Confederacy was popularized by “I Wish I Was in Dixie's Land,” a minstrel song published in 1860 and usually performed in blackface.

The song does seem to have been published in 1860, under that title, though it may have been composed as early as the 1840's and put in a drawer; it seems to have been first performed in 1859. So it didn't popularize a dotting nickname for the Confederacy, which, because it wouldn't come into existence until 1861, had no dotting nicknames awaiting popularization that year. The confident “Yet among historians, there is little ambiguity. . . .”—that throat-clearing gravitas, prior to making an error—may be *New Yorker* house style, and it's easy for me to blame this example on copyediting and fact-checking. All writers are loose and lazy and need to be pulled up short (a disastrous feature of this blog is that it's unedited). Yet the error here by no means amounts to a technicality. In covering up the song's real origins, it exemplifies the general misunderstanding of “Dixie,” and of the origins of American vernacular style as a whole.

The blackface minstrel show: that's the all-important fact about “Dixie.” Quickly noted and then breezed past in the *New Yorker* article (it's rushing to get to Irving Berlin in three sentences), blackface minstrelsy tells us something essential about the song's authors and first performers, and something essential about the “dotting” attitudes toward the South that the article misconstrues.

And here's what the song's origin in minstrelsy tells us. “Dixie,” not just originally unrelated to the Confederacy, which it precedes, is in no way rural-or-plantation Southern. It's originally urban. It's originally Northern. And that complicates and explains everything.

The article goes on to say that songs expressing nostalgia for the antebellum South “continued to appear throughout the first decades of the twentieth century.” What's left out of that gallop through a misunderstood history is the one thing critical to the creation of our entire pop culture. Such songs didn't “continue to appear,” as if here and there and sometimes. They

overwhelmingly dominated. Songs sung by white men in blackface and black wigs, in a grotesquely clownish, denigrating mimicry and appropriation of black music and speech, ascribing to its black characters an unquenchable desire to return to a happy life of enslavement, in a beautiful South, from which they've been somehow painfully separated: that just *was* American show business, beginning as early as the 1840's, in the Northern cities, where theater entrepreneurs and music publishers created and developed this seemingly inexhaustible entertainment goldmine.

All of the big blackface producers, composers, and stars were Yankees: Dan Emmett, Stephen Foster, Edwin Christy, and many more. They made a musical theater for stomping middle- and working-class white audiences, packed into crowded, smoky venues in quickly industrializing New York, Philadelphia, Cincinnati. Longing for a lost, fantastical plantation South—longing not by white Southern narrators, but by fake black caricatures, invented and played by Northern white men—came into existence, in Yankeeland, a long time before the Civil War. When “Dixie” was first performed, in 1859, by Bryant’s Minstrels, in New York, at Mechanics Hall on Broadway, just above Grand Street (*there’s* a whole lost world for you!), the moods were fully established and the form was beginning to hit a commercial and artistic peak.

So if “Dixie”—the whole concept, marked by this yearning for and celebration of the so-called antebellum South, as heard in so many songs both old and more recent—was really invented, in a myriad of racist acts, by Northerners, for the enjoyment of Northerners, and *during* the “antebellum” period it’s so nostalgic for, when the Civil War hadn’t even happened yet, and the iconography of Lost Cause nostalgia was unimaginable, then what the hell is going on here? What the hell *has* gone on, here, in the beloved popular music of these United States?

Hearing “Christmas in Dixie” when traveling in Connecticut isn’t so weird after all, for one thing—but no, that remark, too, leaps over a rich, strange, unsettling history that we don’t have time for today. So, for now, I’ll just put the matter only slightly too simply. The “songs of the Southland,” as Skynyrd had it, are northern. Racial appropriation and switching—the love and theft, as in the title of Eric Lott’s scholarly work on minstrelsy, copped by Bob Dylan for an album title—crosshatches bizarrely with regional switching and appropriation, and with class switching and appropriation, and I’ll be posting more about those various musical strands, now and then, in coming months.

Like: Confederate soldiers *stole* “Dixie,” originally a theft and parody of southern black music and black life, from the white North, and weaponized it for the white South as if it were

actually southern, in a sense *making* it actually white and southern, an anthem of the Confederacy itself.

And like: the Carter Family didn't sing traditional Anglo songs preserved in the folk traditions of the upland South; they sang pop songs commercially published in the urban North, as well as blues and ragtime. . . .

To bring this particular post back around to the subject of recent music cancelations, I'll note that the *New Yorker* article's reference to Irving Berlin also seems kind of oblivious. The historian Karen L. Cox is quoted: "Irving Berlin even wrote" a "Dixie" song of nostalgia for the South, she says. That word "even" is odd. It leaps us right over the nature of Tin Pan Alley as sheer outgrowth of minstrelsy. Why *wouldn't* Berlin have written one, or more than one? That's what they did. He wasn't alone in writing not one but a number of songs in what was then called Negro dialect, and such songs don't have to use the word "Dixie" to exist well within the later development of what began in blackface. Berlin was also one among many who wrote songs in the mode typified by the famous "Are You from Dixie," which became a country standard, but was composed by Jack Yellen and George Cobb, published in New York, and first recorded by Irving Kaufman and Billy Murray in 1916. Here we find apparently displaced white southerners kvelling about the joys of the old South. And these songs too were written and sung almost exclusively by northern city-dwellers, often first-generation immigrants, with no southern backgrounds at all.

The whole world in which Berlin operated traded constantly in racial, ethnic, and regional stereotypes, and nobody switched and appropriated fantasy better than he. "White Christmas," "Yiddisha Nightingale," "Alexander's Ragtime Band": now, *that's* show business.

In 2019—a year before the Chicks' and Lady A's name changes—the New York Yankees stopped playing Kate Smith's recording of Berlin's "God Bless America," which they'd been using during the seventh-inning stretch since baseball resumed after the terrorist attacks of 2001; and the Philadelphia Flyers, at whose games Smith had sung the song live in the '70's, removed her statue. It had come to light—and here I wince: this stuff shouldn't have to "come to light," having been enthusiastically embraced for so many generations as inherent to our pop culture—that Smith had sung racist songs in vaudeville. Those who don't know the history of vaudeville, which emerges from and overlaps, naturally, with that of minstrelsy, were shocked and disappointed, or at least embarrassed, and while "God Bless America" isn't even one of those songs, obviously, the association was too strong to let Smith's recording and statue stand. Such is the price of repression.



Irving Berlin and Kate Smith

I find “God Bless America” hard to like, just as a song—Berlin wasn’t *always* great—and Smith’s singing never did anything for me, and I can do without enforced jingoism at sporting events. So no more Kate Smith. That works for me.

But she’s been scapegoated, nearly literally. A multitude of sins that people don’t want to hear of, and which are baked into our most classic and most beloved popular music, were piled onto Kate Smith and ritually driven, on her back, into the outer darkness. No need to dig any deeper, or know any more: that might only get more embarrassing! Thank God that awful Kate Smith is gone!

The scapegoating of Kate Smith differs from the Chicks’ dropping their Dixie, or people no longer wanting to hear “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down” or wanting to sing “Dixie.” It’s not like the Yankees (ha) decided, at long last, to drop some racist vaudeville song from their seventh-inning stretch, the way some teams are finally dropping their fake Native names and mascots. The song the Yankees dropped was abruptly linked to the racist repertoire, by somebody suffering from the dangers of a little knowledge, via some degrees of separation in the career of a singer. I guess you could say that by going so far as to cut even Smith’s “God

Bless America” from the playlist, we’ve gotten a good, big margin, severing any potentially malignant connections to racism in pop, but that won’t work. Any list of great American vernacular art created by white people will be packed with examples of the racist and racist-adjacent, because it all comes out of the modern commercial entertainment phenomenon of the 19th-century industrial North: blackface.

That list includes Berlin. He’s got links at least as tight as Smith’s to the racist songwriting world, but so far nobody’s canceled “Cheek to Cheek,” and that may be thanks to Smith’s and “God Bless America”’s taking on all the sins of the world on behalf of everybody else. Berlin should be glad he decided to give her that second-rate song to sing.

Happy holiday listening! Though I do recommend steering around “Christmas in Dixie” with the degree of commitment normally given to steering around Hartford.

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### Further Reading

NOTE: I usually do “further reading” only in posts for paying subscribers.

ALSO NOTE: Some of these links will take you deeper into the more offensive underpinnings of American popular music, including the use of certain racist terms once embraced by singers and songwriters and the music business generally and jarring—I’d hope—to most readers today.

[Come All You Blackface Freaks and Hillwilliams.](#) This is the first nonfiction I ever published. It’s personal, in a painfully embarrassing way, and it also gets deeper into Stephen Foster, and the strange history of blackface’s effect on pop, and even on folk revival and roots music, than I could here today.

[The New Yorker article I criticized.](#)

Jack Hamilton, in *Slate*, [on the Band and racism.](#)

[Joan Baez singing “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down”](#) on the TV show “The Midnight Special.”

[Ta-Nehisi Coates on “The Night They Drove,”](#) which I found in the article by Hamilton, above.

OK, here it is (if you want it): Dylan singing “Dixie” in the movie “Masked and Anonymous.” That’s Larry Campbell, I think, on guitar, and Garnier looking amused, maybe even somewhat embarrassed by the seemingly impromptu, under-rehearsed vibe. I like the vocal delivery. But then I would.

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