

## My Old Kentucky Home

Famous 19<sup>th</sup> Century Songs for Fingerstyle Guitar

*Arranged and Performed by Glenn Weiser*

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### Album Notes

This CD features selections from my 2018 book, *Famous 19<sup>th</sup> Century American For Fingerstyle Guitar* (Centerstream Publications). I've recorded my solo arrangements of parlor songs, plantation melodies from the blackface minstrel era, African-American spirituals, Civil War anthems, 1890s hits, and even "The Star-Spangled Banner," which, as it turns out, marks the beginning of distinctly American music.

Before the War of 1812, popular taste in American theatre and music largely followed England's. Afterwards, demand arose for homegrown entertainment, leading to a divide between British 'highbrow,' and native 'lowbrow' culture. By the early 1830s, Thomas D. Rice started to perform his famous song "Jump Jim Crow" in blackface, and in early 1843 Billy Whitlock, a student of banjo pioneer Joel Walker Sweeney, teamed up with fiddler and songwriter Daniel Decatur Emmett, tambourine man Dick Pelham, and bones player Frank Brower to form the first blackface minstrel troupe, The Virginia Minstrels.

The quartet started out playing the theaters and saloons of New York City's Bowery, and after a banner performance in Boston went on to stardom. Even though they only stayed together for less than a year (Joe Sweeny replaced Whitlock for a couple of months at the end of their run in England), The Virginia Minstrels spawned numerous imitators. Minstrelsy was by 1848 the leading form of American theatrical entertainment and would remain so for nearly fifty years before vaudeville took over. Unfortunately, the shows usually indulged in demeaning caricatures of blacks and did much to spread the racist stereotypes that persist to this day.

Composers like Emmett and Stephen Foster began writing songs for the minstrel troupes, and also, with the growth of the piano and sheet music trades, the American parlor (the guitar was by then also a popular instrument). Many minstrel and parlor songs have become enduring treasures of our musical heritage. Several of these, including ten of Foster's finest songs, are included here.

At the same time that minstrels were entertaining Northern audiences with plantation songs that despite their musical appeal often whitewashed the brutality of slavery, abolitionists who knew better were operating the Underground Railroad to spirit slaves out of the South to freedom in the North. From this period emerged the spiritual, which often used religious themes to disguise coded messages to slaves on the run. You'll find six of these here.

Commenting on American songs, the Czech composer Antonin Dvorak, who visited America during the 1890s, wrote, "the most potent and beautiful among them, according to my estimation, are the so-called plantation melodies and slave songs, all of which are distinguished by unusual and subtle harmonies, the like of which I have found in no other songs but those of old Ireland and Scotland."

With the Civil War, American songwriters on both sides of the struggle wielded their pens in the service of their respective causes. Dan Emmett's "Dixie" was appropriated by the Confederacy, and other Northern composers including George F. Root and Henry Clay Work wrote stirring

songs for the Union, some of which became unofficial American anthems. “The Battle Cry of Freedom” in particular has been called the song that won the Civil War. Shortly after the conflict a Confederate major told some Union officers, “*Gentlemen, if we’d had your songs we’d have licked you out of your boots! Who couldn’t have marched or fought with such songs?*” I have arranged six Civil War tunes for this recording.

The final decades of the century saw the birth of Tin Pan Alley, the commercial songwriting district on 28<sup>th</sup> St. between Broadway and 6<sup>th</sup> Ave. in Manhattan, where the locals said the din of lyricists and composers pounding on typewriters and pianos in their offices sounded like tin pans banging together. You’ll find five famous songs of the era here, including “After the Ball,” which sold a million copies in sheet music in 1893 after John Philip Sousa made it famous.

As for how I came to make this CD, I took up fingerstyle guitar at 18 in 1970 after studying classical guitar throughout high school. I had always played folk and rock music on the side, but when I heard Mississippi John Hurt and John Fahey, I knew where I wanted to go musically. Despite three years of classical lessons, getting the hang of alternate thumb fingerpicking was still a challenge. Hanging out in the summertime with the hippies at Sproul Plaza in Berkeley CA and practicing on borrowed guitars, I learned to swing my thumb like a pendulum in between the bass strings of the chords while picking out the melody in the treble with three fingers as in classical guitar. After a couple of months, I could play “Camptown Races,” and “The Old Folks at Home,” two of the tunes included here.

By the time I began studying ragtime guitar late in the following year with fingerstyle master Eric Schoenberg, my knowledge of the guitar neck from my classical lessons along with my newly acquired right picking chops had given me enough technique to tackle his arrangements of Scott Joplin’s works. After learning several rags with Eric, his parting advice to me was to arrange my own material, and I’ve been doing just that ever since with Celtic music, ragtime, country blues, Tin Pan Alley tunes, and 19<sup>th</sup> century Americana.

Some of the arrangements here, like “Home Sweet Home,” “My Grandfather’s Clock,” and “My Old Kentucky Home,” are in the syncopated, country blues-based style of John Fahey, while others, like “The Star-Spangled Banner,” “Old Black Joe,” and “When You and I Were Young, Maggie,” are more like classical guitar, especially with their use of traditional harmony. I have recorded these pieces on exquisite sounding Martin 0-21 guitars from 1926 and 1928.

Fifteen of the twenty-four recordings here also feature my harmonica playing, which you’ll hear in four distinct styles: tremolo style, which is how it is played on the soundtracks of old westerns, tongue blocking style, where a single note melody is accompanied by a chord line played by the tongue, fiddle style, which uses rapid eighth-note melodies, and the Chicago blues style, which is used in some of the spirituals. I also play clawhammer banjo on Track 3.

Lastly, if you play guitar and would like to study the arrangements in my book with me, I offer private guitar lessons on Skype/Facetime, as well as lessons on banjo, mandolin, harmonica, fiddle, and ukulele. Email me for further details at [banjoandguitar100@yahoo.com](mailto:banjoandguitar100@yahoo.com). Visit my website is at [www.celticguitarmusic.com](http://www.celticguitarmusic.com) to find out about my other books and CDs.

## **The Songs**

### The Beginnings-God and Country

#### 1. The Star-Spangled Banner (Francis Scott Key, 1814, and John Stafford Smith, 1780)

During the War of 1812, Francis Scott Key, a 35-year old American lawyer, was aboard a British warship in Baltimore Harbor to negotiate a prisoner exchange. The captain, though, courteously informed him that the British were about to bombard Fort McHenry, and that Key, who had by then learned of the impending assault, would be detained until the action was over.

Watching from the deck through the night, Key saw that the Stars and Stripes remained aloft as the fort withstood the cannonade. Over the next few days he wrote a poem about the attack, "The Defence of Fort McHenry." Key's brother-in-law set the poem to the tune of "To Anacreon in Heaven," which was the theme song of a London gentlemen's club. "The Star-Spangled Banner" marks the beginning of a distinctly American culture and became our national anthem in 1931.

#### 2. Wayfaring Stranger (Traditional)

The origins of this old Appalachian hymn are uncertain, with dates of composition ranging from 1780 to 1816. Some researchers believe the song came from the Melungeons, a mixed-race group of Portuguese and black descent. This version is based on the singing of Emmylou Harris, who recorded it on her 1980 album *Roses in the Snow*.

### The Rise of American Culture-Parlor and Minstrel Songs

#### 3. Oh! Susanna / Camptown Races (Stephen Foster, 1848 and 1850)

With the 1847 premiere of Stephen Foster's song "Oh! Susanna" in a Pittsburgh ice cream parlor, American pop music was born. Published the following year and popularized by minstrel troupes, the song swept the nation and became the anthem of the 1849 California Gold Rush before achieving international renown. Although Foster probably earned nothing from his composition, its success led him to become America's first professional songwriter. Susanna was the middle name of his sister Charlotte Foster, who had died before Stephen wrote the song.

It appears that "Oh Susanna" incorporates elements of two previous compositions, both published in 1846: "Mary Blane," by Billy Whitlock, and "The Rose of Alabama," by Silas S. Steele. The melody of the verse of "Oh! Susanna" resembles that of "Mary Blane," and the opening of the chorus of "Oh! Susanna" is almost identical to that of "The Rose of Alabama." Moreover, the story lines of both "Oh! Susanna" and "The Rose of Alabama" involve a lover going from one Deep Southern state to another with his banjo in search of his sweetheart, which suggests that Foster got the idea for his lyrics from Steele's song. Still, "Oh Susanna" became something much more than the sum of its derivative parts-a genuine sensation.

"Camptown Races" describes a comedy of errors at a racetrack in Camptown, a village in Bradford Co., PA, which did have a 5-mile racetrack. Foster's biographer Ken Emerson has theorized that "doo-dah" could have the siren song of prostitutes working the crowds at illegal nighttime races.

#### 4. Old Uncle Ned (Stephen Foster, 1848)

Historians have called Stephen Collins Foster (1826-1864) "the father of American music," a destiny perhaps foretold by his birthday, July 4, 1826, which was 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing

of the Declaration of Independence and also the day both Thomas Jefferson and John Adams died. Foster's songs were first popularized by Edwin P. Christy's wildly successful blackface minstrel troupe in New York City, who had a 10-year run on Broadway.

This early song of Foster's expresses heartfelt sympathy for a beloved slave who dies and is mourned by his benevolent owners (ironically, slaveowners sometimes attended and even preached at their slaves' funerals). In spite of its rosy depiction of the cruel institution of slavery, it nonetheless represents Foster's efforts to humanize the slave and is one of his loveliest compositions. This arrangement is based on the 1916 Columbia recording by baritone Graham Marr.

#### 5. Ring De Banjo (Stephen Foster, 1951)

In "Ring De Banjo," a wry, festive minstrel song, Stephen Foster takes a jab at slavery. First, the slave returns to his master after being freed. But after serenading Massa with his banjo, he murders him in his sleep. He then promises his sweetheart he'll return for her after he's earned some money.

#### 6. Hard Times, Come Again No More (Stephen Foster, 1854)

This parlor song by Stephen Foster is nowadays perhaps his most often performed composition. Cholera and unemployment were rampant in Foster's native Pittsburgh and Allegheny County in 1854 when he wrote this song. The Dickensian lyrics ask the well-off to take pity on the poor, who are portrayed in heart-rending images. Of all the songs Foster wrote, he only knew all the lyrics to this one, and one occasion he sang it for an audience in a New York City theatre, reducing them all to tears.

#### 7. Darling Nellie Gray (Benjamin Hanby, 1856) / Home, Sweet Home (John Howard Payne and Sir Henry Bishop, 1823)

Benjamin Hanby, a college student in Ohio, wrote "Darling Nellie Gray" to publicize the plight of a runaway slave named Joseph Selby, or Shelby, whose sweetheart in Kentucky had been sold away to a man in Georgia. With its plaintive portrayal of the brokenhearted lover, the song helped fuel abolitionist sentiment in the North.

"Home, Sweet Home" was originally featured in the 1823 opera *Clari, or the Maid of Milan*, with lyrics by the American actor John Howard Payne and music by an Englishman, Sir Henry Bishop. Turning to the universal theme of the warmth and comfort of hearth and home, Payne wrote the lyrics during a time of great personal unhappiness. In 1852 Bishop republished it as a parlor song, and it was widely played in America during the Civil War. Like "Lorena," (Track 12) the song was banned by wartime commanders because soldiers often deserted after hearing it.

#### 8. Jeanie With the Light Brown Hair (Stephen Foster, 1854)

Stephen Foster wrote this heart-melting parlor song about his estranged wife, Jane McDowell, whose nickname was "Jennie." It remained obscure during his lifetime but is now one of his most loved works.

#### 9. The Old Folks at Home (Stephen Foster, 1851)

This beloved work of Stephen Foster is about a grieving slave who has been sold away from his

family to another plantation, a practice much disapproved of in the North at the time. The most famous American song of the 1800s, it sold some 20 million copies of sheet music during the latter half of the century, and was arranged by Antonin Dvorak for baritone, chorus, and orchestra. Because it mentions the Suwanee River in Florida, it is that state's official song.

10. Oh! Dem Golden Slippers (James A. Bland, 1879) / Listen to the Mockingbird (Septimus Winner and Richard Milburn, 1855)

After the Civil War, blacks became established as minstrel performers and composers. James A. Bland, a New Yorker, was the leading black postbellum minstrel songwriter. He wrote the minstrel song "Oh! Dem Golden Slippers" as a satire of a now-forgotten spiritual by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, "Golden Slippers." Bland's song far outstripped the original in popularity and is now a fiddlers' favorite.

The lyrics to "Listen to the Mockingbird", written by Septimus Winner under the pen name of Alice Hawthorne, tell of a mockingbird singing over the grave of a lover's departed sweetheart. The composer, Richard Milburn, was a black street guitarist who would whistle the tune as he strummed the chords, making this perhaps the first interracial co-written American song. It was a favorite of Abraham Lincoln, who said of it, "It is as sincere as the laughter of a little girl at play." A huge success, it sold 15 million copies of sheet music in America alone.

11. Gentle Annie (Stephen Foster, 1856)

Stephen Foster probably wrote "Gentle Annie," a tender parlor song, in memory of his cousin Annie Evans, who died shortly before he composed it. Foster, who was influenced by the Anglo-Irish songs of Thomas Moore, based the music on the traditional Irish air, "I Won't See You Anymore, My Dear."

12. My Old Kentucky Home (Stephen Foster, 1853)

Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* ignited an uproar in the North over slavery. Stephen Foster had originally entitled this song "Poor Uncle Tom, Good Night," but fearful of alienating Southerners, he changed the title before the song's publication. Frederick Douglass wrote of Foster songs, "They [My Old Kentucky Home, Good-Night!, etc.] are heart songs, and the finest feelings of human nature are expressed in them. They can make the heart sad as well as merry, and can call forth a tear as well as a smile. They awaken the sympathies for the slave", he stated, "in which anti-slavery principles take root and flourish". (The high esteem in which Foster's music was held by leading black intellectuals like Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois is important to remember in appraising his work. Like Mark Twain's "Huckleberry Finn," Foster's blackface compositions can only be rightly judged in the context of his times, and not ours.) "My Old Kentucky Home" is the state song of Kentucky.

13. When You and I Were Young, Maggie (George W. Johnson, 1864 and James A. Butterfield, 1866) / Lorena (Henry L. Webster, Joseph Philbrick Webster, 1857)

George Johnson, a Canadian schoolteacher, wrote the lyrics to the famous parlor song "When You and I Were Young, Maggie" for a student of his whom he later married (she soon died, though). The American composer James Butterfield set it to music two years later.

The lyrics to the parlor song "Lorena" were written in 1856 by Rev. Henry D. L. Webster after a broken engagement. "Lorena" was an alteration of "Lenore" from Edgar Allan Poe's poem, "The

Raven." During the Civil War, some soldiers got homesick after hearing the song and deserted, leading commanders to forbid that it be sung.

#### 14. Old Black Joe (Stephen Foster, 1860)

This plaintive minstrel song of Stephen Foster's describes an elderly slave mourning for his departed friends and family and expresses the grief Foster felt at the loss of his own family members. W. E. B. Du Bois held it in high regard and compared it to a spiritual. The character is based on a servant of Foster's father-in-law, Dr. Andrew McDowell of Pittsburgh. Foster told the man, whose name was Joe, "Someday I am going to put you in a song."

#### 15. Carry Me Back to Old Virginny (James A. Bland, 1878) / My Grandfather's Clock (Henry Clay Work, 1876)

"Carry Me Back to Old Virginny" was the state song of Virginia from 1940-97, when its familiar and odious theme of the Old Ducky fondly recalling his youth on the plantation ran afoul of the changing times. Still, Bland's music is quite beautiful. When Clifton A. Woodrum, a Democrat from Roanoke with a fine baritone singing voice, was in Congress (1923-1945), the House of Representatives couldn't adjourn until he had led the body in a rendition of "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny."

Henry Clay Work based "My Grandfather's Clock" on the true story of a hotel owner in England who died just as his tall clock, which is what we now call a grandfather's clock, stopped. The fame of this song renamed the timepiece forever. John Fahey played a version of it on his 1967 LP *Days Have Gone By*.

### The Escape to Freedom-African -American Spirituals

#### 17. Follow the Drinking Gourd (African – American spiritual) / Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho (African – American spiritual)

Like many spirituals, "Follow the Drinking Gourd" is about the Underground Railroad and the slave's flight to freedom. Here the drinking gourd is code for the Big Dipper and the North Star, which would guide the escape party northwards by night. The song was popularized during the folk revival by Pete Seeger with The Weavers.

"Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho" is thought to have been composed by slaves during the antebellum period. The stepwise melodic descent from the fifth to the tonic at the end the verse and chorus produces a dramatic effect. Archeologists have discovered that the fortified city of Jericho was indeed destroyed around 1400 BC.

#### 18. Go Down, Moses (African – American spiritual) / Swing Low, Sweet Chariot (African – American spiritual)

The chorus of "Go Down Moses" cites Exodus 8:1-"Thus saith the Lord, let my people go, that they might serve me."

The song, which draws the obvious parallel between Israel in Egypt and the slaves of the South, was used as code by Harriet Tubman when she helped slaves in Maryland escape to the North.

In 1865, Alexander Reid, a minister in what is now Oklahoma, transcribed this famous spiritual "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" from the singing of Wallis Willis, a former slave. The Fisk Jubilee Singers made it popular, and Harriet Tubman sang it on her deathbed. The chariot was code for

the covered wagons that the drivers of the Underground Railroad used to spirit slaves to freedom. This arrangement is intended to recall the style of the blues guitarist Rev. Gary Davis.

#### 19. Deep River (African – American spiritual)

The musicologist Alan Lomax considered the Negro spirituals to be America's greatest folk music, and this is among the loveliest. The song's reference to the River Jordan is code for the Ohio River, and escape from slavery to freedom in the North. Like so many spirituals, it was made famous by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, who collected and popularized them. This version is based on the 1917 art song arrangement by H. T. Burleigh.

#### 20. Keep Your Hand on the Plow (African – American spiritual)

The title of this spiritual comes from Luke 9:26 - "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." Like "The Drinking Gourd," 'the plow' was code for the Big Dipper and hence the way towards the slave's freedom in the North. The song was first collected by Cecil Sharpe in 1917 and was reworked during the civil rights movement as "Keep Your Eyes on The Prize."

### A Nation Divided- Civil War Anthems

#### 21. Battle Cry of Freedom (George Frederick Root, 1862) / Marching Through Georgia (Henry Clay Work, 1865)

"The Battle Cry of Freedom" has been called the song that won the Civil War. It became so popular that composer H. L. Schreiner and lyricist W. H. Barnes created a Confederate version, and it was also adapted as a campaign song for President Abraham Lincoln's 1864 reelection run. This arrangement is the first of several here in the syncopated Travis picking style of fingerstylist John Fahey and others.

Henry Clay Work wrote "Marching Through Georgia" in 1865 to celebrate General William T. Sherman's March to the Sea the year before. However, the opera singer Clara Louise Kellogg, a friend of Sherman, said that the general had always hated it "above all songs"- he once had to endure hearing it played 250 times by marching bands at a Grand Army of the Republic reunion. Of course, the tune Sherman so detested was played at his funeral.

#### 22. Kingdom Coming Henry Clay Work, 1862 / Dixie (Daniel Decatur Emmett, 1859)

Also called "The Year of Jubilo," "Kingdom Coming" is a Civil War song by the abolitionist Henry Clay Work that describes slaves taking over a plantation house after their master flees advancing Federal troops. It was inspired by the fall of Port Royal, South Carolina, to Union forces in November of 1861. The term "jubilo" in the chorus refers to the custom in ancient Israel of freeing all slaves every fifty years. This was known as a jubilee year.

In 1843, an Ohioan, Dan Emmett (1815-1904), founded The Virginia Minstrels, the first blackface minstrel troupe. "Dixie," which he premiered with Bryant's Minstrels on April 4, 1859 in New York City, became one of the greatest American song successes of the nineteenth century. When the Civil War broke out, it was adopted by the Confederacy as its unofficial anthem, leading Emmett to remark, "If I had known to what use they were going to put my song, I will be damned if I'd have written it."

But in their 1993 book, *Way Up North in Dixie: A Black Family's Claim to the Confederate Anthem*, Howard L. Sacks and Judith Rose Sacks argue that "Dixie" came from the Snowden family of Knox County, Ohio, who were free blacks. They contend that Emmett, whose grandparents lived next to the Snowdens, got the song from the Snowden family band. But the Sacks' case rests on circumstantial evidence only, and their claim remains unproven. Also, the musicologist Hans Nathan has pointed out similarities between "Dixie" and other songs by Emmett.

Speaking at the White House on April 10, 1865, the day after Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Abraham Lincoln ordered the Marine Band to strike up "Dixie" and said, "I have always thought 'Dixie' one of the best tunes I have ever heard. Our adversaries over the way attempted to appropriate it, but I insisted yesterday that we fairly captured it." He added, "It is good to show the rebels that with us they will be free to hear it again." Five days later Lincoln was dead, assassinated by John Wilkes Booth at Ford's Theater in Washington D.C.

23. Tramp! Tramp! Tramp! (George Frederick Root, 1864) / The Battle Hymn of the Republic (Julia Ward Howe, 1861 and James Steffe, 1856)

Subtitled "The Prisoner's Hope," "Tram! Tramp! Tramp!" was one of the most popular songs of the Civil War. The lyrics describe a Union prisoner cheering up his fellow inmates with the prospect of advancing federal troops soon freeing them. The tune reminds me of an Irish hornpipe.

Julia Ward Howe wrote the lyrics to "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," the grandest of the Civil War marches, to the tune of "John Brown's Body." When it was first played for President Abraham Lincoln, he wept and asked to hear it again.

### The Birth of Popular Music – Songs of The Gilded Age

23. Daisy Bell (Harry Dacre, 1892) / After the Ball (Charles K. Harris, 1892) / The Sidewalks of New York (James W. Blake and Charles B. Lawlor, 1894) / The Band Played On (John F. Palmer and Charles B. Ward, 1895)

When the composer, an Englishman named Harry Dacre, arrived in America in 1892 for a visit, US Customs charged him a duty by on a bicycle he had brought with him. Later, bemoaning the expense to fellow songwriter William Jerome, Jerome remarked it was fortunate that Dacre hadn't brought a "bicycle built for two" as he'd have been charged double. Dacre then wrote the song. "Daisy" is a sly reference to Daisy Greville, one of the many mistresses of Edward VII.

"After the Ball" ushered in the era of commercial popular music, 'Tin Pan Alley,' and was the biggest hit of the 1890s. The lyrics describe an older man telling his niece why he had never married-after seeing his sweetheart kiss another man at a ball he refused to listen to her explanation, only to learn long after her death that the man was her brother. When John Philip Sousa performed it at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair it became a success.

While walking home after singing at a New York party, the composer, Charles Lawlor, reflected that instead of performing only covers, he should write a song of his own. That night, the tune of "The Sidewalks of New York and a theme-the walk itself- came to him, and a haberdasher friend of his wrote the lyrics. The many New Yorkers such as Mamie Rourke named in this hit song were all real people.



I learned "The Band Played On" in 1961 on a family vacation in Kentucky when I was 9 and never forgot it. The song can be heard in several movies, including Raoul Walsh's "The Strawberry Blonde" (1941), the title of which was inspired by the lyrics, and Alfred Hitchcock's "Strangers on a Train" (1951).

24. Aloha Oe (Queen Liliuokalani, 1878) / There is a Tavern in the Town (Traditional, pub.1883)

This fondest of all farewell songs was composed by the Queen of Hawaii after she received a "notable" parting embrace from Col. John Boyd of the US Army. Sadly, after she sought in 1893 to change Hawaii's constitution

The traditional English folk song "There is a Tavern in the Town" is a variant of "The Butcher Boy." It first appeared in *William H. Hill's Student Songs* and became a barbershop quartet favorite in America. I learned it from the singing of my father.

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