Oh! Susanna

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"**Oh! Susanna**" is a minstrel song by Stephen Foster (1826–1864), first published in 1848. Incorporating European, European American and African-American musical traditions, it is among the most popular American songs ever written.

"Oh! Susanna"

Original sheet music

Music by	Stephen Foster
Lyrics by	Stephen Foster
Published	Cincinnati: W. E. Peters & Co. (1848)
Language	English
Form	Strophic with chorus

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Background

In 1846, Stephen Foster moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, and became a bookkeeper with his brother's steamship company. While in Cincinnati, Foster wrote "Oh! Susanna", possibly for his men's social club.[1][2] The song was first performed by a local quintet at a concert in Andrews' Eagle Ice Cream Saloon in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on September 11, 1847.[3] It was first published by W. C. Peters & Co. in Cincinnati in 1848.[4] Other minstrel troupes performed the work, and, as was common at the time, many registered the song for copyright under their own names. As a result, it was copyrighted and published at least 21 times[5] from February 25, 1848, through February 14, 1851.[2] Foster earned just $100 ($2,653 in 2012 dollars[6]) for the song,[7] but its popularity led the publishing firm Firth, Pond & Company to offer him a royalty rate of two cents per copy of sheet music sold,[2] convincing him to become America's first fully professional songwriter.[8][9]

The name Susannah may refer to Foster's deceased sister Charlotte, whose middle name was Susannah.[10]

Song

The song blends together a variety of musical traditions. The opening line refers to "a banjo on my knee", referring to a musical instrument with African origins, but the song takes its beat from the polka, which had just reached America from Europe.[3][11] Glenn Weiser suggests the song was influenced by an existing work, "Rose of Alabama" (1846), with which it shares some similarities in lyrical theme and musical structure.[12]

The first two phrases of the melody are based on the major pentatonic scale[13] Play

The lyrics are largely nonsense,[2][14] as characterized by lines such as "It rain'd all night the day I left, The weather it was dry, The sun so hot I froze to death..." (first verse) and "I shut my eyes to hold my breath..." (second verse). It is one of the few songs by Foster that use the word "nigger" (others are "Old Uncle Ned" and "Oh! Lemuel", both also among Foster's early works), which appears in the second verse ("De lectric fluid magnified, And killed five hundred nigger.").

Popularity and adaptations

The song is not only one of Stephen Foster's best-known songs,[15] but also one of the best-known American songs.[16] No American song had sold more than 5,000 copies before; "Oh! Susanna" sold over 100,000.[17] After its publication, it quickly became known as an "unofficial theme of the Forty-Niners",[15] with new lyrics about traveling to California with a "washpan on my knee".[5] A traditional Pennsylvania Dutch version uses Foster's melody but replaces the lyrics entirely.[18]

Lyrics themselves: 1. I come from Alabama with my Banjo on my knee—I’se gwine to Lou’siana my true lub for to see. It rain’d all night de day I left, de wedder it was dry; The sun so hot I froze to def—Susanna, dont you cry. Chorus: Oh! Susanna, do not cry for me; I come from Alabama, wid my Banjo on my knee.

2. I jump’d aboard the telegraph and trabbeled down de ribber, De lectrie fluid magnified, and kill’d five hundred Nigger. De bullgine bust, de hoss ran off, I really thought I’d die; I shut my eyes to hold my bref—Susanna, dont you cry. Chorus:

3. I had a dream de udder night, when ebry ting was still; I thought I saw Susanna dear, a coming down de hill. De buckweat cake was in her mouf, de tear was in her eye, I says, I’se coming from de souf, --Susanna, dont you cry. Chorus:

An unauthorized fourth verse was added:[citation needed]

4. I soon will be in New Orleans, and den I’ll look all round, And when I find Susanna, I' fall upon the ground. But if I do not find her, dis darkie 'I surely die, And when I'm dead and buried, Susanna, dont you cry.

Notable recordings

A 1955 novelty recording of the song by The Singing Dogs reached #22 on the US Billboard Pop Singles chart.[19] A humorous recording of "Oh! Susanna" was the last track on the second album by The Byrds, *Turn! Turn! Turn!*, in 1965.[20][21] James Taylor also included a version of the song on his second album, Sweet Baby James, in 1970.[22] A recording of the song is also featured as the first track on *Americana*, an album by Neil Young and Crazy Horse released in June, 2012.[23]

In 1963, The Big Three recorded Tim Rose's new arrangement of the song as "The Banjo Song".[24] The Dutch band Shocking Blue, in turn, used the new arrangement with completely different lyrics for their 1969 hit "Venus",[*citation needed*] which has subsequently been covered by many other musicians.

The website JibJab used the tune to create a song called "Big Box Mart", about big box stores.

References

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merged them into a single music. And I think he merged them in way that appeals to the multicultural mongrel experience of America in its history and culture."(subscription required)
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External links

- "Oh! Susanna" on Grey Gull record 4125 c.1923 sung by Arthur Fields - Original lyrics (http://New090908:654321@cdbpdx.com/78records/list/OHSUSANNA_ArthurFields_GREYGUI
- Artist Nikki Hornsby's grandfather "Cheerful" Dan Hornsby recorded this song for Columbia Records #1268-D 1929 (http://www.patswayne.com/nikki/dan.htm)

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