
Origins of Two Songs That Americans Sing

To the Editor:

Florence Reece, writer and social activist, wrote the lyrics for the labor anthem "Which Side Are You On" (obituary, Aug. 6), but the music for this 1930's union song about the mine workers of Kentucky's Harlan County was not "a hymn." Many reference books and experts have repeated that. No, Mrs. Reece told me she had used the ancient ballad "Lay the Lily Low," which tells of a young lady who dresses in man's clothing so that she may join her true love in battle. It is also called "Jackaro," "Lily Munroe" or "Jackie Munroe."

Also, I must disagree with my old friend Gerald Marks ("Whistler's Choice," letter, July 20), composer of "All of Me" and "Is It True What They Say About Dixie?" He insists that "The Star-Spangled Banner" was not based on an old "drinking song." But it certainly was.

The song he cites, "To Anacreon in

Heaven," is dedicated to a poet who loved the god of wine, Bacchus, and died, appropriately enough, choking on a grape pit. And the last line of the song is very clear on the subject of wine, women and song: "So that, like me, you will learn to entwine the myrtle of Venus with Bacchus' vine."

When I wrote the Kennedy Center Bicentennial musical, "Sing America Sing," I had an 18th-century character tell the audience: "Those are great lyrics, but the melody'll never last. Nobody can sing it." Well, it's been sung for over 200 years, bearing on its bars a host of children's songs, campaign songs, bawdy songs and a few rock renditions. Don't weep for "The Star-Spangled Banner." It may outlast the Republic.

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