

“God Bless America”—Kate Smith (Radio broadcast premiere) (November 11, 1938)

Added to the National Registry: 2002

Essay by Cary O’Dell



Kate Smith



Original label



Irving Berlin

Perhaps no song (not even our national anthem) is more associated with America, and perhaps no song is more associated with a singer, than “God Bless America” as sung by Kate Smith. Considering their profound and indivisible nature, it is not surprising that Smith’s timeless recording of Irving Berlin’s patriotic theme was among the first songs named to the Library of Congress’ National Recorded Sound Registry.

Appointed to the Registry in the Registry’s inaugural year of 2002, the song “God Bless America,” has its origins in a composition Berlin originally wrote for an army camp show to take place at Camp Yaphank, Long Island, in 1918. Rejected from that performance, Berlin later tucked the song away and largely forgot about it. Until, that is, Kate Smith’s long-time manager, Ted Collins, approached Berlin (the composer of “White Christmas” and “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” among other classics) for a song for his client to sing on her radio show to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Armistice. Remembering his earlier work, Berlin retrieved it and tweaked its lyrics, removing from them anything that could be interrupted as partisan. For example, his earlier innocuous use of the phrase “To the right,” was replaced with “Through the night,” to remove any conservative connotation. It was this revised version that was delivered to Smith in 1938.

As is befitting, the first time “God Bless America” was ever heard nationally it was sung by Smith. This occurred on November 11, 1938 over Kate Smith’s CBS radio show, “The Kate Smith Hour.” From that first occurrence, Smith seemed to know that this tune was special. She said on the air just before singing it: “[It’s] a song that’s never been sung before by anybody.... It’s something more than a song.... I feel it’s one of the most beautiful compositions that was ever written.... A song that will never die....”

Along with her prophetic introduction, this rendition of “God Bless America,” also included the song’s often omitted opening verse:

*While the storm clouds gather far across the sea,
Let us swear allegiance to a land that's free,
Let us all be grateful that we are far from there,
As we raise our voices in a solemn prayer.*

From this first performance, Smith showed a command of the song and a surprising amount of restraint, sensitivity and use of her upper range—something that would often be lacking in her and others' later bombastic renditions. Having begun her number small but robust and then gradually building both in volume and power, by the time Smith concludes—with a full choir behind her--her “God Bless” has already become a classic and its conclusion is met with a thundering ovation from her studio audience.

As good as “God Bless” is on its own, it can be argued that it benefited more from Kate Smith than perhaps Kate Smith benefited from it. Smith was already a major celebrity by the time she debuted the song. She had already been coined the “First Lady of Radio” and possessed a stardom dating back to the mid 1920s which included, besides radio, appearances on Broadway and in film. By the late 1930's, few radio programs rated more popular better than hers. At the time, only she and Jack Benny possessed radio contracts that were completely non-cancellable; only war could take them off the air. To have a singer the magnitude of Smith introduce the short but highly patriotic song to a rapt and vast radio audience, complete with her effusive preamble, no doubt helped propel it to a quick and unprecedented level of fame.

The power of “God Bless America,” and the feelings of national pride it engendered, took hold quickly, no doubt aided by growing concerns over the war in Europe and further aided by Smith's warm personality, delivery and strong maternal image. Soon after its first airing, Smith, CBS and Berlin's office began fielding requests for the tune. So popular was “God Bless America” that Smith would sing it on every episode of her radio show through December 1940. Smith's first pressing of it, on RCA Victor, was recorded on March 21, 1939 and released shortly thereafter. She performed it on film for the 1943 movie “This Is the Army” and she would go on to reprise it in all of her concerts and on her later TV endeavors. It would replace her theme “When the Moon Comes Over the Mountain” as the song most associated with her.

Smith and Berlin both used the song for the war effort and for American charities; both would forgo their rights and royalties, instead donating their earnings to good causes. During the war, propelled by “God Bless America,” Smith would become one of the nation's top sellers of war bonds, once selling \$600 million's worth in two around-the-clock radio marathons.

Over the years, “God Bless America” has become, in everything but name, the United States' national anthem. It often occupies the same spaces as “The Star-Spangled Banner,” getting played at sporting events and concluding broadcast days. Its lyrics have been entered into the Congressional Record. And its longevity only further solidified Irving Berlin's standing as America's first man of music.

Meanwhile, though others have gone on to cover it, including Bing Crosby, Gene Autry, Whitney Houston, Celine Dion, Martina McBride, and Beyonce, Smith's version remains the definitive incarnation. In 1982, after a long, distinguished, and acclaimed career—including over 1,000 radio appearances--Smith was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. She died in 1986.

The song's heart-felt sentiments and its original stoic delivery, now 80 some years after its debut, continues to affect and strengthen people. It is replayed and re-sung every 4th of July and at times of great national triumph, tragedy, and remembrance, most notably during the days immediately after 9/11.

Ironically, for a recording as important to the national patrimony as Kate Smith's original “God Bless America,” it is only through an interesting fluke that Smith's inaugural performance of her trademark song survives at all. Though Smith often saved recordings of her radio show, she and manager Collins destroyed huge quantities of their radio transcriptions sometime in the early 1950s, perhaps around the time of the dawn of television. Chucked out as part of this purging

was the November 11, 1938 broadcast of “The Kate Smith Hour,” where the song made its debut. Thankfully, a second recording of the program was also made as a courtesy to Irving Berlin. He retained his copy and it was part of the collection his estate donated to the New York Public Library after his death. The original recording now resides there with a copy also at the Library of Congress.

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