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[TITLE SLIDE]
Our Flag Was Still There: Critical Patriotism in "The Star-Spangled Banner" and "This Land Is Your Land"

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> This song was written as an angry song. — Bruce Springsteen
>
> Even the angry songs are love songs. — Pete Seeger

[SLIDE Play Guthrie "This Land Is Your Land" fade out]

[SLIDE Video Welcome]

Hi, I'm Michael J. Kramer, historian at the State University of New York's Brockport campus and a cultural and intellectual historian of American music, dance, and other topics. This talk is part of the Society for American Music's "Sounding the Nation at 250" project, available on the Society for American Music's website as well as my own website. It was originally delivered on October 17th, 2026 at the "Music America: The Sounds and Songs That Shaped Us" conference at the new Bruce Springsteen Center for American Music on the campus of Monmouth University in Long Branch, New Jersey and comes from a longer essay I wrote in July 2021 that you can find at the online publication *Clio and the Contemporary*. The talk is titled, "Our Flag Was Still There: Critical Patriotism in 'The Star-Spangled Banner' and 'This Land Is Your Land'." Let's begin.

[SLIDE WOODY]

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Written by Woody Guthrie in 1940, “This Land Is Your Land” has traveled that ribbon of highway far and wide through American culture.

[SLIDE Nora Guthrie]

As his daughter Nora wrote in the Foreword to a book about Guthrie’s composition, “It’s a song that seems to be open to all kinds of interpretations and manipulations.”

[SLIDE Santelli Book Cover This Land]

In that same book, museum curator, historian, and now head of the Bruce Springsteen Center, Robert Santelli, describes “This Land Is Your Land” as a “musical mixed message.” that’s not a bad thing.

Often (mis)understood as an easy-going, inclusive singalong celebrating the United States as a land of opportunity, Guthrie’s song is in fact a far more complex, multifacted entity.

[SLIDE Imagined Communities]

If, as anthropologist Benedict Anderson argued in his book *Imagined Communities*, national anthems help to consolidate a nation-state through what Anderson called “unisonance,” or the simultaneous singing by members of a polity across time and distance, then Guthrie’s version, we might say, is much more about something like *polyvalence*.

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So today, I am going to talk, very briefly, about a few versions of “This Land” as well as about "The Star-Spangled Banner." It's a way to consider what a “critical patriotism” might sound like, musically—and feel like, culturally. There’s so much more. Too much in fact. So, I also have provided you with an extensive Spotify playlist—over 80 versions of “This Land” if you are as sick and twisted as me! And also a selection of live clips relevant to my talk today on a YouTube playlist. I hope you will explore this possibly endless skyway of song if the spirit moves you.

[SLIDE Lyrics]

“This Land” began as a satire of Irving Berlin’s maudlin anthem “God Bless America.” It was an “answer song” that challenged Berlin’s implicit idea in his lyrics that God favored America over other places. Guthrie loathed the song’s clueless, exceptionalist, celebratory tone. To him, Berlin’s tune was, as he put it, “just another of those songs that told people not to worry, that God was in the driver’s seat.”[3] Guthrie’s answer was originally titled, sardonically, “God Blessed America for Me.”

[SLIDE Lyrics II]

It lampoons the easy patriotism of Berlin’s song, but Guthrie’s version, retitled “This Land Is Your Land” a few years after he wrote it in 1940, also has a religious aspect. It borrows its melody from a Baptist hymn, “Oh, My Loving Mother,” which then became a commercial country song, “When the World’s on Fire” by the Carter Family, recorded in 1930.

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[SLIDE McIntosh County Singers "Oh, My Loving Mother"]

Here are the McIntosh County Shouters performing a powerful version of "Oh, My Loving Mother" in 2016, released on the Smithsonian Folkways album *Spirituals & Shout Songs from the Georgia Coast* in 2017. Notice the melody.

[SLIDE McIntosh County Shouters, Play Oh, My Loving Mother]

[Slide Carter Family]

That was the McIntosh County Shouters performing a version of "Oh, My Loving Mother" in 2016. And here's the Carter Family version of the song from 1930. Of course, Woody Guthrie himself might have heard many versions of the song in his lifetime, but he did often turn to the Carters for inspiration in his own songwriting and borrowing. Let's give it a listen.

[SLIDE Play Carter Family, "When the World's On Fire"]

[SLIDE Lyrics III]

The simple melody and chords allow Guthrie to traverse rolling hills of notes, gently undulating up and down in steady motion, puttering along. And the use of the Carter Family's song is also a clever move for Guthrie. Their song is also about God, like Berlin's. "Don't you want to go to heaven / When the world's on fire? / Don't you want God's bosom / To be your pillow?" the Carters sing. The world certainly was on fire in 1940, as World War II erupted even as the Great Depression continued, but Guthrie seems to be criticizing both

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the smug turn to God and nation that Irving Berlin offers and the apocalyptic salvation that the Carter Family presents. Instead of seeking the reassurance of God's heavenly saving, Guthrie wants Americans to face the pressing problems of this life, in the here and now.

In this sense "This Land" began its life most of all as a song of urgent religious and political doubt and questioning. The protagonist of "This Land" is searching for answers: about the politics of the United States, about a divine power (which appears in Guthrie's song too, but in more mystical and mysterious form than in Berlin's pompous protector or the Carter Family's savior). And most particularly, "This Land" wonders about whether a divine power was guiding the fate of the United States at all—and which part of its population this God was serving, exactly?

"This Land" has both a healthy skepticism to it, a fierce sense of independence, and a yearning, even sad quality, of hope. Whatever nation this song is about, it's not quite the unified, overconfident one of Berlin's tune, that's for sure.

[SLIDE Lyrics]

Guthrie famously penned a socialist-oriented verse, later dropped by adopters of the song but never entirely forgotten, about the flaws of private property and economic inequality in 1930s America.

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But the song took an anti-communist turn too. Just think of the version bratty kids have sung to each other for decades now: “I got a shotgun, and you don’t got one / If you don’t get off, I’ll blow your head off / This land was made for *only* me.” It’s as if without even knowing of the lost socialist verse, they knew that “This Land” needed to be defused ideologically. Folklore can be reactionary as well as radical.

[SLIDE TLIYL Sheet Music]

By the 1950s, however, as Guthrie grew more ill from Huntington’s Disease and the Red Scare raged, the song mostly became an anodyne singalong anthem for grade schools and summer camps, its more socialist dimensions removed to render it a liberal encomium.

[SLIDE Young Arlo Guthrie]

Woody’s son Arlo tells a humorous story of singing the song at assemblies while attending the Woodward School in Brooklyn, New York. None of his classmates knew his father had written it.

[SLIDE JibJab parody]

Guthrie’s composition spread far and wide, covered my many, many musicians, referenced in commercials, and used for politics on both the American left—*and* the right. Robert F. Kennedy used it in his ill-fated 1968 campaign, changing the lyrics to "This Man is Your Man." Fellow Democrat George McGovern used it four years later in 1972. And so too, in 1988 and 1992, did *Republican* George H.W. Bush.

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The comedy duo JibJab parodied Bush's son George W. and his opponent John Kerry in a silly 2004 video, and they were even sued by Ludlow Music Unit, owners of the copyright for the song. I guess it still was private property to the publishing company, but fortunately, evidence during the subsequent litigation between JibJab and Ludlow revealed that in fact Guthrie's song had passed into the public domain in 1973.

[SLIDE Bernie]

And it goes without saying that among the many amazing versions of the song, don't miss Bernie Sanders's remarkably weird and wonderful 1987 reggae version, recorded for the Vermont *We Shall Overcome* album, and available on the playlists.

[SLIDE Springsteen]

With such broad circulation over the years, "This Land Is Your Land" works at multiple, even contradictory, levels: focus on the chorus, and it's a simple celebration of the United States as a land of inclusion; include the so-called "lost verse" and the tune turns into a fierce lambasting of capitalism's exclusions; lean into the more mystical moments, and "This Land" gets more spiritual and enchanted than political and civic—remember, after all, there is a voice in the song speaking down to the singer from the sky as he roams sparkling sands and diamond deserts and wheat fields waving and golden valleys and endless skyways.

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[SLIDE Bruce performing 1985]

Since this talk took place at the Bruce Springsteen Center for American Music, it's worth highlighting that Springsteen himself began performing the song on tours during the 1980s. "This song was written as an angry song," Springsteen declares at the start of a live version recorded at Nassau Coliseum in December of 1980. In this version, Springsteen doesn't sing the lost verse about private property, but by ending the chorus's final words, "you and me," on a suspended chord, in a musical trick taken from gospel, he adds in a question mark rather than the affirmative, arena-rock roar you might typically hear from the Boss and the E Street Band. Is this land really made for you and me? What does it mean to be born in the USA? Harmonica adds to the small curl of skepticism at the end of the song.

Here is another performance of "This Land" by Bruce Springsteen, this time live at the Los Angeles Coliseum in September of 1985.

[SLIDE Play Bruce Springsteen, "This Land Is Your Land," Los Angeles Coliseum in 30 September 1985]

[SLIDE Pete and Bruce at Obama Inauguration 2009]

All hail the Boss, of course. He would return to the song again at Barack Obama's presidential inauguration in January 2009, singing it along with one of Woody's main

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running buddies, interpreters, and keepers of the flame, Pete Seeger, who used to remark that "we are all Woody's children."

[SLIDE Jones Still]

For the purposes of this talk, however, I'd like to emphasize a 2005 cover of "This Land" by soul singer Sharon Jones and the band the Dap Kings before turning back to the official national anthem itself, "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Recorded in the midst of the George W. Bush era, Jones's version begins with mournful horns sounding like they are at a funeral parade. Over a slinky R&B re-arrangement, Jones adds numerous blues notes to her singing, bending around the song's iconic melody. She is the one traveling the land, noting (in a clever, soulful double entendre) how "on the backside" of the sign that says private property there she found a land truly made for you and me. A subaltern nation comes into view, a different America than the one the powerful portray. It shimmies loose. It doesn't stand still. It shakes its tail feather. As the drum shuffle intensifies toward the end of the song, Jones turns "This Land" into a "Dancing in the Streets" geographic call out. In various versions of the song performed over the years, she heralds Riverside, California, Philadelphia, PA, North Carolina, South Carolina, Houston, Los Angeles, and her own birthplace of Brooklyn, among other cities. This is an invitation across the nation.

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Let's give it a listen to Sharon Jones and the Dap Kings perform "This Land Is Your Land" on the Jimmy Kimmel Show, in the days before the 2012 Presidential election in the United States between Democrat Barack Obama, now running for reelection, and Republican Mitt Romney.

[SLIDE Play Sharon Jones and the Dap Kings, Jimmy Kimel Show, 30 October 2012]

[SLIDE Carter]

Jones and the Dap Kings take us on a journey as they offer an updated, alternative, unofficial national anthem for America with their version of “This Land is Your Land” from 2012, but where does this leave us if return to the official national anthem?

The trip took me to a version of "The Star-Spangled Banner” itself that also, cleverly, like Jones's version of “This Land is Your Land,” bends the patriotic into something both critical and inclusive. When Sailor Sabol sang "The Star-Spangled Banner” at the 2021 Conservative Political Action (CPAC) Conference, she seemed to circle through keys and tonalities randomly, earning a thorough roasting on social media for her strange rendition of the song. One pianist, however, Kevon Carter, took a different approach. He posted a YouTube video in which he accompanied Sabol on keyboards, following her every modulation, no matter how odd, with beautiful gospel and church-inflected accompaniment. He chased her seemingly random key changes with dexterity, finding chordal flourishes and filigrees to make it all fit musically.

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As background for the story, Sabol is white; Carter is Black. As he cheered her on with "c'mon" and "sing your song," he was at once poking fun at her musically and, just as crucially, keeping up with every weird musical twist and turn she made. Wherever the singer went in her bizarro version of the national anthem at the world's leading conservative political conference during the era of Black Lives Matter, he could go with her too, drawing upon his knowledge of African American church keyboard approaches to vocal accompaniment. One might even say that Carter channeled the ethos of what is sometimes known as the African American national anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," into Sabol's CPAC version of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Let's give a listen and take a look at the YouTube video.

[SLIDE Play Kevon Carter Video]

[SLIDE Hendrix Woodstock]

Lift *every* voice and sing, indeed.

Another way to think about the video could be by way of Jimi Hendrix's iconic version of "The Star-Spangled Banner," captured at the famous 1969 Woodstock concert in Upstate New York, and released in the film documentary about the event one year later. Hendrix used the electric guitar as a kind of incendiary weapon. We might hear the guitarist using

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his instrument to “kill facists,” as Woody Guthrie himself famously wrote on his acoustic guitar in the early 1940s, when the antifacist fight of World War II intensified. At the very least, as Hendrix remarked in one interview at the time, he played his feedback-filled version of "The Star-Spangled Banner" to register what he called the "static in the air" during the late 1960s in America and the world, as the Vietnam War raged and Civil Rights protests turned violent in the US itself.

[SLIDE Seeger Banjo Add]

Carter's video seems a bit different than Hendrix's energy, however. It brings to mind what Pete Seeger inscribed on his banjo. Seeger was inspired by his friend Woody's slogan, to be sure, but he changed the phrase from “This machine kills fascists” to “This machine surrounds hate and forces it to surrender.” This is just what Carter seems to be doing. In his virtuosic handling, he does not erase Sabol or the intolerant politics CPAC embodies; rather…

[SLIDE Carter 03]

he includes and adjusts. He wrests the national anthem away from her and the conservative politics she represents even as he also accompanies her and lets her sing. As with Jones (and others) singing Woody’s “This Land Is Your Land,” so too here with Carter’s version of "The Star-Spangled Banner”: the fog is lifting for a moment, and a voice is chanting, and the many contradictions of the United States—contradictions that Guthrie

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himself tried to confront—burst into air as music fosters a transformed state of sovereignty.

[SLIDE Woody's Dream]

It’s a widening of belonging, and maybe, just maybe, in dark times, we can hear a voice sounding and glimpse a freedom highway stretching out before us.

[SLIDE Title]

[SLIDE Play Guthrie "This Land Is Your Land" fade in]