



**Winston
Smith
versus
Kate
Smith:**



Why her 'God Bless America' renditions remain on this history site.

In Advance of July 4th, 2020:

The short explanation:

Kate Smith's *God Bless America* renditions remain here because this is a **history** website and because its webmaster is **not Winston Smith**.

The not-so-short explanation:

George Orwell's prophetic novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published a generation ago. Even so, its central character Winston Smith is still modernity's iconic ironic embodiment of the ever-recurring tendency in human societies to attempt erasing or changing history out of favor with the latest party line or political fashion or current consensus of correctness.

His job in Big Brother's Ministry of Truth was to make unwanted history disappear through a variety of techniques. They included turning prior heroes or heroines into "unpersons," removing traces of them from public memory. John Hurt [image above left] performed the history vaporizer role in a film version of the book.

The Winston Smith approach to history is not fiction, but all too real. That became evident from the NY Yankees and Philadelphia Flyers a year ago ending Kate Smith's recorded renditions of *God Bless America* being played on their public address systems. The hockey team actually removed her statue from outside its arena.

Cited as warranting the removal of her huge likeness and her equally huge contralto voice was a discovery of two songs from the thousands she had recorded or publicly performed

in her career spanning five decades. The long-forgotten two tunes -- a 1931 stage show song and a 1933 film number -- were sung when in her 20s. They contained lyrics now viewed as racially insensitive or worse by today's standards, but -- regrettably -- widely regarded acceptable, even warmly folksy in America when she recorded them about 90 years ago.

Prayerful Reflection

Keep in mind that the patriotic hymn prays that “*God bless America, stand by her and guide her.*” Therefore, it behooves us *not* to weapon-ize this musical supplication in order to score partisan points, either way, in on-going cultural conflicts.

Since through this unofficial national anthem, we ask the Almighty to watch over us, care for us, and enlighten us, we ought to bring complete honesty and genuine humility to consideration of Kate Smith's recorded singing of this prayerful plea at public events. Or, in our case, on our website.

This webmaster believes Americans need to recognize and acknowledge that the patronizing, belittling, stereo-typifying condescension of those two 2019-unearthed songs from Kate Smith's distant past still echo today. They linger as part of the collective historical hurt felt by millions of African Americans aware of the violence, injustices and indignities inflicted on millions more ancestors in the past as well as such wrongs experienced in the present era.

But the Winston Smith impulse that would zap Kate Smith from American audio and visual memory also stereo-typifies, also objectifies, also dehumanizes. It too views its targets, not as individual human beings, but as things, as single dimensional entities, as the “other” defined by race or creed or national origin or political leaning, or cultural upbringing, etc. In sum: a non-person, an un-person, one of a mass to be blotted out, erased.

The Winston Smiths are not interested in looking at the total career, the full story, the whole person. They don't ask whether, as a performer and a person, did she stayed mired in *Why Darkies Were Born* and *Pickaninny Heaven* music? They are not interested that she grew in appreciation, outreach, and understanding of her fellow and sister countrymen and women. For the Winston Smiths, it is irrelevant that thusly Kate Smith -- by her warm, cherry, open welcoming “Hello, everyone” attitude, matching her signature greeting --- achieved fond regard and high standing in the pantheon of American entertainers.

Her fellow and sister Americans witnessed her translate that “Hello, Everyone” mantra into meaningful action. She repeatedly traversed this nation, entertaining and interacting with soldiers and sailors at military bases, and doing likewise with civilians at WWII bond rallies. It is reported she racked up almost as many travel miles with such home front gigs

as Bob Hope did overseas. It also appears undisputed she raised more millions in U.S. bond sales than any other celebrity.

The Winston Smiths do not take any of that into account. America at large failing to do so imperils its soul, witness 2020 anti-history iconoclasm targets: Lincoln, Grant and USCTs.

Examining More History, Not Erasing Parts

CorrectionHistory.Org, being pro-history, cannot and will not follow the Winston Smith anti-history example the Yankees and Flyers set by trying to cleanse Kate Smith so totally from their athletic arenas. A response was warranted; but erasing her from their history???

This history website chooses not to remove its original presentation which included her recorded *God Bless America* renditions. Instead, the webmaster drafted this essay to place alongside the original presentation to explain the researched reasons why we're keeping it.

It's important to affirm that those two early 1930s songs were offensive and belittling -- to acknowledge the stain of American racial insensitivity and thoughtlessness the lyrics reflected of that era. But we also provide additional context in which to evaluate that twosome among the estimated 3,000+ far different songs she sang throughout in her lifetime of 79 years.

Rather than foster forgetting, we would promote pondering that even so outstanding and embracing a talent and persona as she eventually became, had been given at her career start such racially negative musical material. That those in charge at the time apparently thought so little of it is among the saddest reflections of all on American narrowmindedness prevalent then.

But precisely because she did emerge from that constrictive background and did progress to an open-arms embrace of all America, her career bio tracks well with America's own conflicted emergence from past constrictive attitudes. However, our nation is still far from totally free from them. To her credit, she significantly contributed professionally to much of the progress as the country's entertainment industry has made in this regard.

The Yankees – the MLB team which didn't integrate its roster until 1955 -- so severely faulting Kate Smith on racial grounds lacks the grace one expects from the pinstripe team. This is especially so given that her lineups were integrated from the early 1940s. They regularly included African American entertainers, first on radio (more than 40, according to one count) and later on TV. Among them: Count Basie, Ink Spots, King Cole Trio, Duke Ellington and Ethel Waters.

Singer, dancer and highly-decorated Nazi resister Josephine Baker was well known and controversial both nationally and internationally for her activist civil rights stands, including refusal to perform in racially discriminatory venues. In 1951 she accepted the invitation from the Kate Smith show that it host her American TV debut. That the

invitation to Baker was extended, accepted and implemented speaks volumes to the issue of Kate's inclusiveness toward others and how others regarded her as being open and welcoming.

No Klan Favorite

Also speaking volumes is that KKK-ers and American Bund-ers pioneered the bit about turning off Kate singing "God Bless America" long before the Yankees and Flyers thought to silence her recorded rendition, albeit for far different motivation.

Klansmen and their Nazi-sympathizing brethren so loathed hearing the song -- written by a Jewish cantor's son, Irving Berlin, and made famous by Kate Smith's radio show introduction and theme -- that these organizations boycotted it to have it banned from being broadcast.

It is said that some individual KKK-types actually wondered whether Kate Smith had some "black blood" in her. This speculation apparently arose with some because of the racial and ethnic diversity on her radio show as reflected by her choice of guest artists and show regulars, by her eclectic selection of music from the American songbook (including spirituals) and by her identification with "God Bless America" and her collaborative association with its Russian Jewish immigrant composer.

Kate Calls 'Race Hate' a 'Disease'

Also speaking volumes were remarks Miss Smith delivered on a CBS radio series called *We, the People* in January 1945, months before Germany's surrender. She opened by narrating how a Belgium family of Christians risked their own lives to hide three Jews from the Nazis. Kate then drew this moral from the story:

It seems to me that faith in the decency of human beings is what we must have more of, if there is to be a future for all of us in this world . . . I don't pretend to know all the complex things that will have to be done for a lasting peace. . . . [But] I know that our statesmen — our armies of occupation — our military strategists — may all fail if the peoples of the world don't learn to understand and tolerate each other.

Race hatreds — social prejudices — religious bigotry — they are the diseases that eat away the fibers of peace. Unless they are exterminated it's inevitable that we will have another war.

You and I must do it — every father and mother in the world, every teacher, everyone who can rightfully call himself a human being. Yes, it seems to me that the one thing the peoples of the world have got to learn if we are ever to have a lasting peace, is — tolerance. Of what use will it be if the lights go on again all over the world — if they don't go on ... in our hearts.

Miss Smith's Message: Actively Reject 'Intolerance'

Because language changes over time, words in later generations often take on meanings different than their meanings with prior generations. Once again, context is crucial to understanding history. That is true with language as well as with actions. Clearly in her *We, the People* address, Kate referred to “tolerance” understood as active rejection of “intolerance.” She began by citing with approval the Norwegian family, at the risk of their lives, actively rejecting Nazi intolerance. Miss Smith’s remarks called for actively rejecting “racial hatreds – social prejudices – religious bigotry” which she labeled “diseases.” She warned they must be “exterminated,” declaring “you and I must do it everyone.”

Hers was not call for tolerance as passive acquiescence in racial hatred and other bigotries but the exact opposite: an appeal for active rejection of such intolerance. She advocated “extermination” of these malignant ills “that eat away the fibers of peace.” She pleaded for unified effort among peoples and individuals to learn to understand each other, for all of us to have more faith in the common decency of our fellow and sister human beings, if we are to have any hope of winning the peace after winning the war.

Her January 1945 message may strike many today as naive and Pollyanna. But it expressed a wide-spread spirit of cautious concern as WWII drew to end that armies and international institutions such as the UN, then being publicly planned, may prove insufficient *by themselves* to maintain world peace. She spoke to the need also for human hearts in our country and around the globe to be open to others. Her “Hello, everyone” applied universally!

Were her words an oversimplification of the problems involved in preserving peace in the soon-to-be post-war world? Perhaps, yet so simple as maybe also profoundly true.

Quite aside from whether her simple message showed proper sophistication or grasp of geo-political complexities, her address clearly evidences her growth in appreciation of diversity, in recognizing the need to respect others, to value the otherness of others, the importance of learning and understanding differences, while affirming faith in common human decency. She, like the country, had come long way from the “Darkies” and “Pickaninny” lyrics era ethos. She and America would keep moving beyond that. The journey forward of this land for you and me continues, but with miles and miles still to go.

Why Kate Smith on this website originally?

A half-dozen years ago, around the 4th of July, this CorrectionHistory.Org webmaster began putting together a presentation which he unveiled 10 days later with a question title, *Why a Correction History website link to Kate Smith singing ‘God Bless America’?*

The presentation told how the patriotic hymn which came to be identified with Kate Smith -- who introduced it on her radio show Nov. 10, 1938 -- had originally been written by Irving Berlin for a WWI Army camp show entitled *Yip Yip Yaphank*. The website presentation was the webmaster's convoluted way of backing into reporting that the Suffolk County jail complex at Yaphank had begun admitting hundreds of inmates to its \$180 million expanded facilities during the spring and summer of 2013. [A link to that 2013 presentation appears at the bottom of this essay.]

In light of 2019 developments, the webmaster drafted this explanatory essay to answer a different but no less valid question: *Why her 'God Bless America' renditions remain on this history site?*

In response, this perpetual student of history hearkens to the words of President Franklin D. Roosevelt when he introduced her to King George VI of England. He said, "This is Kate Smith. Miss Smith is America."

To which, this writer adds: Yes, *she* was flawed: she the singer, and she the country. Each flawed. Each great.

FDR was flawed. But he was a great President. His uncle, Teddy, was also flawed. But he too was a great President. Greatness does not consist in being flawless but in rising above and going beyond the flaws to accomplish significant achievements.

The Yankees, for all their flaws, are among the greatest franchises in sports history. They can do better by *the fat lady who sings* (an alleged Yogi-ism) than to drop entirely her recorded rendition of the patriot hymn. After all, she introduced it to America and became identified with it as she tirelessly criss-crossed the country entertaining GIs and raising funds to defeat the Nazis. Rising above and moving beyond the stain of those two 1930s songs, Kate Smith did great things for America, not the least of which was, by word and deed, her rejection of racial intolerance.

The Yanks should consider placing her rendition into a rotation of recorded versions by various notable vocalists, a lineup reflecting the diversities of the team, its fans, New York and America. One singer whose



recorded voice ought to be in such a rotation belongs to retired [Navy Petty Officer Generald Wilson](#) Singing before audiences since age 5, Wilson has rendered GBA and other patriotic anthems in huge arenas and stadiums at major sporting events including World Series, Super Bowls, and Hockey Championships. Retired from the Navy after 21 years of service, he serves as Praise Team Leader at the Faith Church in Earth City, Mo., performs at gospel music events and has won honors with his album "I Live to Praise – I live to Worship." Ctrl-click his image on the previous page to access a YouTube sample of his singing *God Bless America* a cappella. Wow!



Since the original *CorrectionHistory.Org* presentation in 2013 about expansion of the Suffolk County, NY, correctional facility at the WWI Army camp site where the *Yip Yip Yaphank* GBA song was born, that jail and other Suffolk County Sheriff facilities and operations have undergone a change of command worth noting in an update.

Veteran NYC DOCer Errol D. Toulon Jr. was elected Suffolk County Sheriff in 1917 and took office Jan. 1, 1918. Prior to his current position, he served 22 years with NYC Department of Correction in various posts, the last as Deputy Commissioner of Operations. [For more bio details, visit <https://www.suffolkcountysheriffsoffice.com/sheriff-errol-d-toulon-jr>]

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Link to Correction History web presentation about Kate Smith singing God Bless America posted on the site around July4th, 2013, and still there at a Ctrl-click:

<http://www.correctionhistory.org/God-Bless-America-&-Kate-Smith/God-Bless-America.h>