

The Anthems of America

By ReadWorks

On July 4th, families all over the United States pull out their red, white, and blue clothing, dust off the grill, and haul their lawn chairs to their town’s main street to watch its Independence Day parade. As people in America congregate to admire the parade floats and wave to the marchers, bands play traditional American songs—“The Star-Spangled Banner,” “America the Beautiful,” the upbeat “You’re a Grand Old Flag.” These anthems aim to instill a feeling of nationalism in their listeners. Parade-goers are likely to feel a sense of pride in America as they listen to the patriotic tunes.

But where did these anthems first originate? “The Star-Spangled Banner,” the official national anthem of the United States, tells of America’s triumph over Great Britain during the War of 1812. Although America declared its independence in 1776, Britain still interfered in America’s international trade with other countries and forced American sailors to join British navy troops. America thus declared war on the country in 1812, and the war lasted until 1815. In June of 1813, Major George Armistead was stationed at Fort McHenry in Baltimore, Maryland, to protect the city from enemy invasions. He commissioned Mary Pickersgill, a local flag-maker, to make two flags that would mark the fort as American territory. The larger one became the “Star-Spangled Banner” of the American national anthem. During one of the final battles of the war, in 1814, the British attacked Fort McHenry from their ships, but the American troops refused to surrender and forced their enemies to flee after twenty-five hours of battle. As the British ships finally sailed away, Major Armistead had his men raise the larger American flag high above the fort to mark their victory. The flag could be seen from miles away.

Francis Scott Key, an American lawyer, was located on a ship eight miles from the fort during this battle. When he saw the flag waving above the fort in the morning, he knew it had

not surrendered, and he was inspired to compose a poem about the victory, titled “The Defence of Fort McHenry.” Eventually, the poem was set to music and the song gained popularity. It was sung whenever one lowered or raised the flag. Now, it is sung before sporting events, political events, and, of course, during American national holidays.

But not all of America’s patriotic songs came out of war. Pikes Peak, a mountain in Pike National Forest in Colorado, helped to inspire the song “America the Beautiful.” When Katharine Lee Bates, an English literature professor at Wellesley College, Massachusetts, climbed to the top of the mountain in 1893, she was so moved by the view that she wrote a poem that would eventually be set to the tune we know today. It begins: “O beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain, for purple mountain majesties, above the fruited plain!”

“You’re a Grand Old Flag,” on the other hand, came out of the entertainment industry. The catchy beat and easy-to-memorize lyrics made this song extremely popular in households across America. The Broadway star George M. Cohan originally wrote the tune in the early 1900s for his musical *George Washington, Jr.* (It began as “You’re a Grand Old Rag,” but “Rag” was later changed to “Flag.”) At this time, though the record player had already been invented, not many families had one. The best way to hear a song was to buy the sheet music and play it on a piano or sing it at home. “You’re a Grand Old Flag” was the first song from a musical to sell over a million copies of sheet music.

No matter where these songs had their start, they are all now used to bring together Americans and to evoke the same feelings of patriotism that originally inspired these songs.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. According to the author, what are parade-goers likely to feel as they listen to patriotic tunes?

2. The article describes the origins of what three traditional American songs?

3. Francis Scott Key was proud of the American army's victory at Fort McHenry. What evidence from the article supports this conclusion?

4. Read this quote from "America the Beautiful."

"O beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain, for purple mountain majesties, above the fruited plain!"

What feeling about America does this quote convey?

5. What is this text mostly about?

6. Read the sentences and answer the question.

"As people in America congregate to admire the parade floats and wave to the marchers, bands play traditional American songs—'The Star-Spangled Banner,' 'America the Beautiful,' the upbeat 'You're a Grand Old Flag.' These anthems aim to instill a feeling of nationalism in their listeners. Parade-goers are likely to feel a sense of pride in America as they listen to the patriotic tunes."

What does the word "patriotic" mean as used in this text?

7. What word or phrase best completes the sentence?

Katharine Lee Bates was moved by the view from Pikes Peak. _____, she wrote a poem that would become the song "America the Beautiful."

8. What do traditional patriotic songs aim to do?

9. How does "The Star-Spangled Banner" make Americans feel proud of their country?

10. Explain why patriotic songs inspire feelings of national pride in listeners. Support your answer using evidence from the text.

