



God Bless America: The Surprising History of an Iconic Song

Sheryl Kaskowitz

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"God Bless America" is a song most Americans know well. It is taught in American schools and regularly performed at sporting events. After the attacks on September 11th, it was sung on the steps of the Capitol, at spontaneous memorial sites, and during the seventh inning stretch at baseball games, becoming even more deeply embedded in America's collective consciousness.

In *God Bless America*, Sheryl Kaskowitz tells the fascinating story behind America's other national anthem. It begins with the song's composition by Irving Berlin in 1918 and first performance by Kate Smith in 1938, revealing an early struggle for control between composer and performer as well as the hidden economics behind the song's royalties. Kaskowitz shows how the early popularity of "God Bless America" reflected the anxiety of the pre-war period and sparked a surprising anti-Semitic and xenophobic backlash. She follows the song's rightward ideological trajectory from early associations with religious and ethnic tolerance to increasing uses as an anthem for the Christian Right, and considers the song's popularity directly after the September 11th attacks. The book concludes with a portrait of the song's post-9/11 function within professional baseball, illuminating the power of the song - and of communal singing itself - as a vehicle for both commemoration and coercion. A companion website offers streaming audio of recordings referenced in the book, links to videos of relevant performances, appendices of information, and an opportunity for readers to participate in the author's survey.

Based on extensive archival research and fieldwork, *God Bless America* sheds new light on cultural tensions within the U.S., past and present, and offers a historical chronicle that is full of surprises and that will both edify and delight readers from all walks of life.

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