

Oh! Susanna

A popular song in the 1850's, *Oh! Susanna* was composed by songwriter Stephen Foster in 1847. The song is occasionally (and incorrectly) called "Banjo on My Knee".

Quite often in traditional American folk music, a song is around long enough to change its meaning by the addition and removal of verses. *Oh! Susanna* is a great example of this.

Now seen as an incredibly racist form of entertainment, *Oh! Susanna* was written in the minstrel/blackface tradition. Blackface groups wore theatrical makeup to make them look like African slaves, mocking them as uneducated and low-class individuals.

When originally written, the song had a verse that talked about killing black slaves. Typically, this verse is no longer sung, due to its use of racial slurs and violence.

The song tells a story about a man going to New Orleans to see his beloved Susanna. It's full of longing and desire, and the narrator dreams of Susanna at night and talks about falling on the ground when he first sees his love.

By eliminating the violent racist verse, and singing it without the mock accent, it's a fairly tame love song that has worked its way into the hearts and history of American folk music.

LYRICS

The original lyrics:

I come from Alabama
With my banjo on my knee
I'm going to Louisiana,
My true love for to see

It rained all night
The day I left
The weather it was dry
The sun so hot,
I froze to death
Susanna, don't you cry

Oh, Susanna,
Oh don't you cry for me
For I come from Alabama
With my banjo on my knee

I had a dream the other night
When everything was still
I thought I saw Susanna
A-coming down the hill

The buckwheat cake
Was in her mouth
The tear was
In her eye
Says I, I'm coming from the south
Susanna, don't you cry

Oh, Susanna,
Oh don't you cry for me
For I come from Alabama
With my banjo on my knee

Oh Susannah was set with new lyrics and became known as the "forty-niners" theme song. This version was sung by miners during the California Gold Rush

I came from Salem City
with my washpan on my knee
I'm going to California,
the gold dust for to see.

It rained all night the day I left,
the weather it was dry
The sun so hot I froze to death,
Oh, brothers don't you cry.

Oh, Susannah, Oh, don't you cry for me
I'm going to California with my washpan on my knee.

I soon shall be in Frisco
and there I'll look around.
And when I see the gold lumps there,
I'll pick them off the ground.

I'll scrape the mountains clean, my boys,
I'll drain the rivers dry.
A pocketful of rocks bring home,
So, brothers don't you cry.

Related Research Topics:

Stephen Foster, Composer <http://www.pdmusic.org/foster.html>

Minstrel Shows
Blackface Performers
Banjo
Forty-Niners
California Gold Rush
Guitar
Harmonica
Piano

Listen: http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/music/titles_noncopyright.cfm