

“Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?”—Bing Crosby (1932)

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Essay by Bobby Woods (guest post)*



Bing Crosby and the American Dream

In 1932 things were going pretty good for Bing Crosby. He had, for the most part, moved on from his time as the star singer of the great Paul Whiteman Orchestra and also gone solo from his own group, The Rhythm Boys. With several hits already under his belt, Bing Crosby was fast-becoming one of the most popular singers of all time.

Bing was still ten years away from “White Christmas,” the highest selling single of more than 50 years, and almost certainly the song he is best known for. In his musical career, he would have more #1 records than Elvis Presley or The Beatles. His Hollywood movie stardom was just beginning, too, an Academy Award was still ahead. Yes, things were going pretty good for Bing Crosby.

Things were also going pretty well for Edgar Yipal “Yip” Harburg. Within the year he would have a huge hit with his song about dreams, romance, cardboard seas and cotton skies, “Paper Moon,” performed by The Paul Whiteman Orchestra and featuring Peggy Healy. Yip would then follow that up a few short years later with a Grand Slam. Knocking it out of the park, bases loaded, a young Judy Garland, her dog at her side, a tornado fast on the way, sang probably the most famous line Yip ever wrote: “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.”

And all of that was yet to come in the hopeful, bright tomorrow.

Yes, back in 1932, the future was looking pretty good for both Bing and Yip.

In late October of that year, in New York City, Bing went into the recording studio with Lennie Hayton and his orchestra. Hayton had an amazing future ahead of him as well. In his lifetime, he would be nominated for the Academy Award six times, and win twice. He would also marry the well-known singer and actress Lena Horne.

Hayton had worked with Bing before, and the song they were to record this day was one Yip had written for “Americana,” a Broadway musical that had pretty much come and gone.

The music was written by Jay Gorney, the man credited for introducing the world to Shirley Temple. Gorney based the music on a lullaby he remembered from his childhood in Russia. (The brightness of Gorney’s future, at least in the short term, was darkened somewhat when the Harburg/Gorney collaboration ended and Yip took off soon after with Gorney’s wife.)

In Bing’s remarkable, crystal, baritone voice--Louis Armstrong described it as “Gold being poured from a cup”--he sings a tale told by a forgotten man, one out of the millions, hit head-on, in a state of shock, who never saw it coming as banks failed and the economic structure of the United States collapsed. Rich men became poor men. And the average man lost everything, especially any hope for the future.

October 24, 1929. They called it Black Friday. But it lasted a lot longer than that one day. And so began The Great Depression.

Gorney’s music and Hayton’s orchestra’s brass and strings swell up in a minor key. Sad. Dramatic. Uncertain. Threatening.

His face likely careworn, his clothes probably threadbare, the forgotten man, standing, when we meet him, in a breadline, begins to tell his sorrowful tale:

*They used to tell me I was building a dream...
And so I followed the mob
When there was earth to plow or guns to bear
I was always there
Right on the job*

This is an autobiography of the American Dream. He is talking about strength in numbers. The rewards of hard work. The price of freedom at the risk of death. Responsibility. Doing one’s part.

The forgotten man goes on:

*They used to tell me I was building a dream
With Peace and Glory ahead
Why should I be standing in line
Just waiting for bread?*

Back then, before the Crash, in the good old days, there was a goal: Peace and Glory.

But our man was blindsided by a catastrophe he could not comprehend--the causes of The Crash of ’29 remain highly debated to this very day. And despite the years of toil, with an eye towards progress, for reasons far beyond his understanding, he now finds himself in line at a soup kitchen.

And he was far from alone in that breadline. Unemployment, just in the United States, reached 25%. Construction, mining, and even farming had come to an almost complete standstill.

Now, Hayton and his orchestra start up, and the rhythm section kicks in. Our forgotten man presents his resume of great accomplishment:

*Once I built a railroad, made it run
Made it race against time*

Once I built a railroad, now it's done

And now, a brutally humiliating request:

BROTHER CAN YOU SPARE A DIME?

He continues with the list of proud achievements:

*Once I built a tower, up to the sun
Brick, and rivet, and lime
Once I built a tower
Now it's done*

And, again, the shame of having to ask:

BROTHER CAN YOU SPARE A DIME?

(The forgotten man is not asking for much. As of this writing, today, a dime wouldn't even buy a cup of coffee. But, in 2019 money, it's around a buck and a half.)

Next, Hayton's drummer adds a military snare, as we march with the boys onto the bridge of the song and into a flashback.

Much more powerful than that railroad, far taller and much more awesome than that tower, stand the unforgettable memories of war. The American Dream has often come at this terrible price. The Dream started with a revolution. And the American Dream gets particularly brutal when it splits in half and turns against itself, and when sides are chosen. Not long after the revolution, it tore the country in half, pitting brother against brother in the Civil War. Then, incredibly, it grew much bigger and became part of a struggle so incomprehensibly massive they had to name It--*World War I*.

Back then they called it "The War to End All Wars."

At each of these events, there was, at the outset, a tremendous sense of purpose and pride. And so, our song now switches to a happier, major key.

The forgotten man takes us back in time and overseas, far away from the breadline, with a happier memory, onto foreign soil--likely to a place he had never been before.

*Once in khaki suits,
Ah gee we looked swell
Full of that Yankee Doodly Dum*

Bing was the crooner of all crooners. And his delivery of the line "Yankee Doodly Dum" is a perfect example of his style and virtuosity. With a quick swing in the melody, for a moment, it seems as if our man, even here in the breadline, at the rock bottom of his life, with no future in sight, can find a few seconds of respite in the happy memory of being a young man in uniform, surrounded by like-minded others filled to the brim with boundless, shared patriotism.

But the relief of the happy memory doesn't last long. Right away we're taken back to the reality of the horrors of war, impossible to understand for those who have never been there....

Half a million boots went sloggin' through hell.

It is likely that “hell” was our man’s way of putting it mildly. Perhaps he doesn’t want to frighten us, perhaps he doesn’t want to hurt our feelings. Or, perhaps, maybe more likely, it is too painful for him to remember.

Curiously, Yip mentions the figure of “half a million boots.” It is estimated that almost five million American men and women served in World War I, and it’s estimated that three million or so served overseas. That’s more or less six to ten million boots. Far more than Yip describes.

More accurately described by the phrase “half a million boots” is the estimated 120,000 Americans who never came back.

It is very likely our forgotten man is quite familiar with the feeling of being lucky to be alive. And yet, despite all this, when the going got tough, our man delivered. He was at the front, and leading the charge.

And I was the kid with the drum!

The music builds.

The war ended in 1918. The crash happened in 1929. There were more than ten optimistic years between the Victory celebrations and the breadline. The forgotten man was not always a man in crisis. Since coming back from “The War to End All Wars,” for over a decade, he managed to take care of himself and his family.

The Crash changed everything overnight.

We, the listeners, are then hit with what may be the saddest line in the song. Yip and Bing are no lightweights and when they throw the final punches, they land.

Say, don’t you remember? They called me Al!

We know this fellow! His name is Al. We used to be on a first name basis. Now, we don’t even recognize him. Or, worse, maybe we do.

*It was Al all the time
Why, don’t you remember?
I’m your pal!*

And then, Al asks one more, heartbreaking, desperate time:

Say, BROTHER CAN YOU SPARE A DIME?

Al and the music fade away.

Al’s question remains unanswered.

The song became extremely popular and a big hit for Bing Crosby, and it became the anthem of the Great Depression. It is always difficult to say why a particular song catches the ear of the public, but in this case it might be because there is perhaps a lesson or a moral in it somewhere. Or perhaps it is a warning to take heed that it doesn’t happen again. A warning we recognize, even today.

You know, there is another very well-known American song--one written years earlier--which also ends ambiguously, with a question which goes unanswered....

We have all heard many people sing it over the years. Here are the final lyrics:

*Oh say, does that Star-Spangled Banner yet wave,
O'er the Land of the Free,
And the home of the brave?*

Please join us, as we remember and celebrate Al, not as the forgotten man, but as our pal, and welcome Bing Crosby's 1932 recording of "Brother Can You Spare A Dime?" into the Library of Congress's National Registry.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.