

“You’re a Grand Old Rag [Flag]”—Billy Murray (1906)

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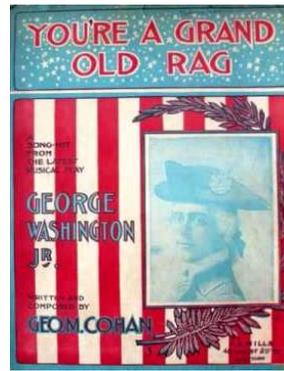
Essay by Ryan Barna (guest essay)*



Billy Murray



Early label



Early sheet music

A song that has become so embedded in the fabric of American pride was initially waved by a more-or-less forgotten early recording artist, who also met with criticism when it was first inked. One can find “You’re a Grand Old Flag” interwoven in a program with other patriotic standards, and hear many recordings of it ranging from Bing Crosby to the United States Marine Band. Yet, when it comes to original period recordings, Billy Murray (1877-1954) was found to be the more suitable choice than most other singers, including its author, George M. Cohan himself. While Cohan received the Congressional Gold Medal in part for the song, it was Billy Murray who kept the “Grand Old Flag” in memory before “Yankee Doodle Dandy” and “George M!” solidified its posterity, thanks to his large and enduring record sales.

The song began life as “You’re a Grand Old Rag.” Cohan got the idea for it in early 1905 while on tour with “Little Johnny Jones,” the same show in which he introduced “The Yankee Doodle Boy.” During a stop at a Grand Army of the Republic home in Dayton, Ohio, he met a disabled Union Civil War veteran. The man said he had been the color-bearer of his regiment during Pickett’s Charge at Gettysburg, and asked Cohan to help him lift his flag out of a long, wooden box, so he could show him “what a great country we fought for.” It was tattered, and full of bullet holes. The soldier remarked, “The flag and me got hit a bit. That’s why me and this—this grand old rag—live at the home now.”

Inspired, he began drafting the song along with a new musical. On January 19, 1906, “You’re a Grand Old Rag” was copyrighted by his publisher and former songwriting partner, Frederick Allen “Kerry” Mills (1869-1948). The first line of the chorus went:

“You’re a grand old rag, you’re a high fly-ing flag...”

Days later, on January 23, 1906, Cohan gave the song its first public bow in the show “George Washington, Jr.” at the Court Square Theatre in Springfield, Massachusetts. Reviews of the show were favorable, and with a reported advanced sale of 200,000 sheet music copies, “You’re

a Grand Old Rag” was destined to become a success. Since Cohan would have been too busy to record it (as well as being away from New York, where most of the studios were), the honor was given to Billy Murray.

Murray—being well-affiliated with the phonograph companies as well as Mills—already had a reputation of making outstanding sellers of Cohan’s earlier songs, thanks largely to his clear-cut voice for the early acoustic technology. He may have started cutting the masters of “You’re a Grand Old Rag” for the various phonograph laboratories beginning in late January, before the show came to Broadway. He sang it for all three major labels (Victor, Edison, and Columbia) and most minor ones. Coincidentally, Murray recorded the song in Victor’s Philadelphia studio the same day “George Washington, Jr.” was playing at the Chestnut Street Theatre in that city, on February 6th. Did Murray stay late to catch a showing?

On February 12, 1906, Cohan took “George Washington, Jr.” to the Herald Square Theater in New York. After many favorable reviews playing in Springfield, New Haven, and Philadelphia, controversy aroused. Three days later, an anonymous disgruntled spectator wrote to the editor of the “New York Times”:

I want to protest through your columns against a song entitled “The Grand Old Rag,” now being sung at one of the theatres.

I think a protest should be honored against such an inapt and offensive designation of the “Stars and Stripes.”

This was likely the first of an eventual domino effect Cohan would receive for calling Old Glory a “rag.” Despite that, the phonograph companies allowed the song to be unchanged, and put their masters into production. In April, Murray’s records began circulating to the public (first on Edison, Victor, Zon-o-phone, and International, then Columbia and American in May). The Leeds and Catlin Company had baritone Arthur Collins record it for their Imperial label, which sold nowhere near as well as Murray’s versions, and is quite hard to find today.

Cohan closed “George Washington, Jr.” on April 21st after a ten-week run. He temporarily retired the show to work on his summer revival of his earlier work, “The Governor’s Son.” Within two months of the Victor release, labeled “The Grand Old Rag,” the Victor Talking Machine hailed in its June 1906 record supplement:

Murray’s fine record of this Cohan hit has out sold every selection in the Victor Catalogue and that is saying quite a good deal. It is certainly a fine specimen of song writing, singing and recording and we congratulate Mr. Cohan, Mr. Murray, the Victor Laboratory and the public!

By this time, the sheet music was reported to have sold half a million copies. Despite its success for Victor, Cohan claimed that he still received criticism for calling the flag a “rag,” enough to revise the title and chorus. On June 2, 1906, his publisher, Mills, copyrighted a new version, retitled “You’re a Grand Old Flag,” with the first chorus line weakened to:

“You’re a grand old flag tho’ you’re torn to a rag...”

While Cohan no longer performed the song on stage at the time, the outrage of the flag being called a “rag” continued long afterward, thanks in part to Murray’s records. In July, an unidentified “sufferer” wrote to the editor of the “New York Times” seeking advice on shielding himself from his neighbor’s phonograph:

The nasal tones are heard of a brutal creature who sings in disgusting doggerel about “the grand old rag,” meaning the august flag of our Union, or else asks to be “remembered to Herald Square” with a sneaky sentiment that is nauseating.

On July 7, 1906, the “Washington Evening Star” reported a story at a seaside resort in Virginia, where around 50 school teachers were staying until they heard trouble on the phonograph:

They all stopped at the big hotel, and while they were eating their first dinner at the hotel, a huge phonograph ground out the words and music of the grand old rag song. It was the first time they had heard it, and when they made out the words they swooped upon the hotel manager in a body, and requested—demanded for that matter—that that particular phonograph record should not be poked into the talking machine again while they remained at the hotel. They told the hotel man that the words of the song and even the title thereof were shockingly disrespectful to the National emblem, and the hotel proprietor promptly complied with their wishes.

Edison was the only company to have Murray make a recording of the newly revised “You’re a Grand Old Flag.” It was listed in the April 1907 catalog and remained available until September 1911, about a year before the end of wax cylinder production. Victor did not have Murray remake the song (despite having him remake several older numbers), but instead, beginning in the September 1908 catalog, relabeled the song to “The Grand Old *Flag*.” All other labels including Columbia left the title unaltered. Sales eventually slowed down enough that Columbia withdrew the disc in late 1914, but Murray’s Victor remained steady.

In 1915, music publisher Maurice Richmond purchased the rights to “You’re a Grand Old Flag” from Kerry Mills, along with other Cohan compositions, “for sentimental reasons” as Richmond stated. While Victor still had “You’re a Grand Old Rag” available, the song got an additional boost at the onset of World War I. The first line of the chorus was revised for a third and final time:

“You’re a grand old flag[,] you’re a high fly-ing flag...”

This is the most commonly-heard version today. Victor did not replace their original 1906 version, but instead, selected Murray to sing the third version as the lead of the American Quartet (the other members being Albert Campbell, John H. Meyer, and William F. Hooley), and list it in the catalog along with the old. Several years later, “You’re a Grand Old Rag” was finally deleted from the 1923 catalog, and the American Quartet’s “You’re a Grand Old Flag” remained as late as 1927, well into the microphone era. James Cagney eventually propelled the song into immortality in the film “Yankee Doodle Dandy,” but a few months after the film’s release, on

August 22, 1942, Murray was invited to reprise the song at the Wisconsin State Fair where the “National Barn Dance” radio program was being broadcast coast-to-coast over WEA. (A transcription of the broadcast still exists.) Murray’s recordings of both “Rag” and “Flag” are not only significant in hearing an artist sing a future standard when it was new, but also in hearing the vocal mastery that kept it alive for so long.

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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.