

“Sweet Caroline”—Neil Diamond (1969)

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Essay by Jon Bream (guest post)*



“Sweet Caroline” 45 sleeve

Neil Diamond was never considered hip or cool--or even influential.

Maybe that's why the powers that be at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame hesitated to put him on the ballot. When he was finally nominated--19 years after he was first eligible--he immediately won induction.

Why?

Because Diamond is the master of the earworm, those catchy little melodies that enter your ears and never leave.

“Song Sung Blue.” “Forever in Blue Jeans.” “Holly Holy.” “Cracklin’ Rosie.” “Play Me.” “Desiree.” “America.” “I’m a Believer.”

Of course, none more catchy, more memorable, more you-gotta-sing-along than “Sweet Caroline.” *Bom, bom, bom.*

It's one of the most popular tunes at karaoke bars. It's played at sporting events around the world. It's shown up in movies and TV shows.

It's been recorded by dozens of disparate artists including Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, the Drifters, Waylon Jennings, Dave Matthews Band, Bobby Womack, Julio Iglesias, Ferrante & Teicher, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, the Ventures, Hugo Montenegro, Ray Conniff, Chet Atkins, DJ Otzi, and the punk-rock supergroup, Me First and the Gimme Gimmes.

It's not just its catchiness or sing-alongness that sets “Sweet Caroline” apart. It's that Diamond's signature has had one of the most extraordinary after-lives of any song in popular music history.

But let's look at its first life.

Released in June 1969, Diamond's “Sweet Caroline” was recorded at American Sound Studio in Memphis with producer Chips Moman. The singer wrote it in his hotel room the night before his recording date. In those days, an artist would typically cut three tunes in a three-hour session--and Diamond needed one more for the next morning.

“That song was like a lucky gift that I got,” the singer-songwriter told “Billboard” in 2018. “It came to me when I needed it desperately. I was about to go hungry, I had a new baby, all kinds of things that had counted on this record... I had an empty space on my dance card and ‘Sweet

Caroline' came up, and saved me from a fate worse than death, which would've been working as a civilian somewhere." Of course, he exaggerates, but the Brooklyn brooder has always been insecure.

Though often willing to talk about himself and his career, Diamond has long been reluctant to disclose the inspiration for and meaning of his songs. He finally fessed up about "Sweet Caroline" in 2007 after he performed it via satellite at Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg's 50th birthday party.

"I've never discussed it with anybody before--intentionally," he told the Associated Press. "I thought maybe I would tell it to Caroline when I met her someday. I'm happy to have gotten it off my chest and to have expressed it to Caroline. I thought she might be embarrassed, but she seemed to be struck by it and really, really happy."

Diamond went on to explain that he recalled a photo he'd seen in a magazine of a then nine-year-old Kennedy. It was a picture of a little girl dressed to the nines in her riding gear, next to her pony, he remembered. It was such an innocent, wonderful picture, I immediately felt there was a song in there.

However, Diamond changed his song, er story, in a 2014 interview on NBC's "Today Show." "I needed a three-syllable name," he explained. "The song was about my wife at the time--her name was Marcia [Murphey]--and I couldn't get a Marcia rhyme."

That may--or may not--be revisionist history because Diamond didn't marry Murphey until December 5, 1969, ten days after his divorce from the former Jaye Posner was finalized and 13 months after his second daughter was born.

In any case, "Sweet Caroline" peaked at No. 4 in "Billboard" in August '69--Diamond's biggest hit to date. Then, in the next 18 months, he went on a roll with "Holly Holy," "Soolaimón," "Cracklin' Rosie" and "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother."

Even though he wound up singing "Sweet Caroline" at probably every one of his concerts for nearly 50 years (he abruptly retired in 2018, at age 77, due to Parkinson's disease), it didn't really become his signature until later in his career.

The resurrection of "Sweet Caroline" began innocently in 1997 when the Boston Red Sox began broadcasting the song at Fenway Park in the late innings, if the team was ahead.

"I actually considered it like a good luck charm," Amy Tobey, who was in charge of music at Fenway from 1998-2004, told the "Boston Globe" in 2005. When new management took over Fenway in 2002, they asked Tobey to play "Sweet Caroline" in the middle of the eighth inning because the tune may have "transformative powers," according to a then Red Sox VP.

And since the Red Sox won the World Series that year--breaking a staggering 86-year jinx--the "Sweet Caroline" tradition not only continued, but the song became a theme of the entire city of Boston.

In April 2013, after a terrorist bombing at the finish line of the Boston Marathon, ballparks around the country played "Sweet Caroline" as a tribute and sign of solidarity. At the first Red Sox home game after the tragedy, Diamond himself--who grew up in Dodgers territory in Brooklyn and has long lived in Los Angeles--showed up unannounced to belt his signature song during the eighth inning in a Red Sox ballcap. Moreover, he announced that he's donating all future royalties from the song to the One Fund Boston, a charity benefiting victims of the marathon bombing.

The Red Sox aren't the only team to embrace "Sweet Caroline." The NFL's Carolina Panthers--get it, Caroline--ah--blast it after every home win. Ditto for the Iowa State University football Cyclones. And various soccer teams in the United Kingdom and even the Swiss club FC Aarau have adopted it as a fight song.

It's not just sports. "Sweet Caroline" has cropped up in popular culture. The Fenway Park ritual is depicted in the 2005 baseball romantic comedy "Fever Pitch" starring Jimmy Fallon and Drew Barrymore. In the 2015 movie "Ted 2," Ted—the foul-mouthed stuffed bear voiced by Seth MacFarlane--sings along to "Sweet Caroline."

In a 2018 TV commercial for Hyundai automobiles, various drivers in a traffic jam do in-car karaoke to the infectious ditty. And on the smash CBS sitcom "The Big Bang Theory" in 2013, the first time super nerds Amy and Howard are alone together, the only thing they find in common is their love of Neil Diamond; so they spontaneously burst into "Sweet Caroline" during their awkward car ride.

Once you get to the chorus, everyone seems to know the lyrics even if your generation sees the hammy Diamond as middle-of-the-road kitsch or the tune as a sing-songy slice of Velveeta cheese. You get caught up in the communal spirit and sing along:

*Sweet Caroline, bom bom bom
Good times never seemed so good.
So good, so good, so good.*

Like Diamond himself, "Sweet Caroline" may not be hip or cool. But it has become a timeless sing-along anthem of Americana that still sounds so good, so good, so good in so many places and so many contexts.

Jon Bream, music critic at the "Minneapolis Star Tribune" since 1975, is the author of "Neil Diamond Is Forever: The Illustrated Story of the Man and His Music" (2009) as well as "Prince: Inside the Purple Reign" (1984); "Whole Lotta Led Zeppelin: The Illustrated History of the Heaviest Band of All Time" (2008, 2015), and "Dylan: Disc by Disc" (2015). His website is www.jonbream.com.

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