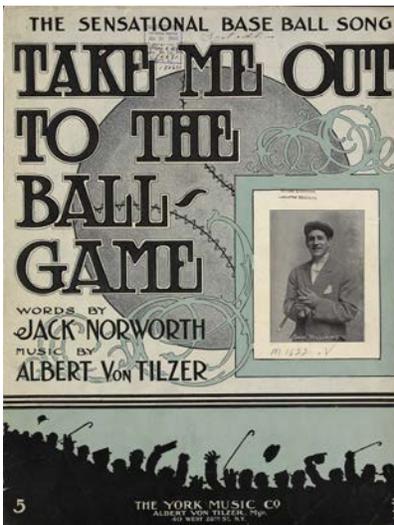


# “Take Me Out to the Ball Game”—Edward Meeker (1908)

Added to the National Registry: 2010

Essay by Amy Whorf McGuiggan (guest post)\*



*Early sheet music*

## *The Story of the Sensational Baseball Song*

When the 1908 home baseball season began for the New York Giants on April 22 at the Polo Grounds, no one could have predicted how riveting and sensational a season it would be for manager John McGraw and his team. That summer, New Yorkers, it's fair to say, were baseball mad. Vast crowds that included celebrities, politicians and stars of the Broadway theatre routinely packed the wooden grandstands to watch their “nine” led by ace Christy Mathewson. The Giants juggernaut rolled into September vying neck and neck with the Chicago Cubs for the National League pennant.

The agonies and the ecstasies of the 1908 season home stretch were still months away when, in April, vaudevillian Jack Norworth was riding the New York subway and saw a lithographed poster of a silk-hosed baseball player standing with a bat on his shoulder. Vaudevillians had a knack for turning current events into appealing songs and though Norworth had never been to a baseball game, he began writing lyrics for a baseball song. By the time he reached his destination, he had penned a song about a spunky, baseball-mad girl named Katie Casey.

Conceived as a romantic ballad, “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” tells the story of how, when Katie’s beau asks her to go to a show (vaudeville, no doubt) she, in her Gibson girl manner, asks instead to be taken out to the ball game. Because the two verses are little known and never sung at the ballpark, few realize that the familiar chorus is in response to the beau’s invitation. That’s why we sing “take me out to the ball game” when we’re already there!

For the music, Norworth collaborated with Tin Pan Alley composer Albert von Tilzer, the younger brother of famed hit-maker, Harry von Tilzer (“Wait ‘Til The Sun Shines Nellie” and “I Want a Girl”). Years after writing the song, Norworth was asked why he decided to write it. “It was simply time for a baseball song,” he replied. And, indeed it was.

Beginning in the post-Civil War era when brass bands performed in ballparks, music had always been a part of baseball. Many of the earliest published baseball songs were instrumental pieces dedicated to local teams and written for the new dance crazes: “Live Oak Polka,” “Home Run Quick Step” and “Home Run Galop.” Other songs celebrated the game itself, “Catch It on the Fly” and “Tally One For Me,” and its legendary players, “Slide, Kelly, Slide” (Mike “King” Kelly), “Husky Hans” (Honus Wagner) and “Cubs on Parade” (Frank Chance).

In addition to “Take Me Out to the Ball Game,” at least eight other baseball songs, all now largely forgotten, were written in 1908, including “Take Your Girl to the Ball Game,” written by one of Broadway’s most prolific song and dance men--“the man who owned Broadway”--George M. Cohan. His name on sheet music, it was said, would sell it anywhere. Despite an avalanche of advertising for his song and what amounted to a marketing war between Norworth and Cohan in the pages of the vaudeville trade magazine, “Variety,” Cohan’s song could not supplant “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” in the hearts of baseball fans.

Written in the key of D major as a waltz, the two verses and chorus of “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” is typical of those songs that made vaudeville and Tin Pan Alley a phenomenon: simple, catchy, forward-moving phrases and repetition. Unlike many songs of the era, it was written as a stand-alone novelty song and not as part of a musical production or revue. Published by Albert von Tilzer’s York Music Company and copyrighted on May 2, 1908, the song was an instant hit, nudged along by Von Tilzer adding “The Sensational Base Ball Song” to the title on the published sheet music, at least 12 versions of which were published in 1908, including one with a picture of Jack Norworth gracing the cover.

The question of when “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” was first introduced by Norworth on the vaudeville stage remains unsettled, though circumstantial evidence helps to make a very sound case for a late April Brooklyn debut at the Grand Opera House, a long-time vaudeville house. So many other vaudevillians began incorporating the song into their acts that Jack Norworth eventually abandoned it in his own act. By May 23, illustrated song slides that plugged the song between film reels at the nickelodeon were being advertised by lantern slide maker DeWitt C. Wheeler.

No sooner had “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” become a vaudeville sensation than the major phonograph companies began recording the song. Thirty years earlier, in 1877, Thomas Edison had invented the tin foil “phonograph,” his trade name for a machine that recorded and produced sound. The first recordings were made by a vibrating stylus that incised the voice in vertical grooves on strips of tin foil wrapped around a four-inch-

diameter cylinder. By 1888, cylinders were smaller, two inches in diameter and made of a soft, fragile brownish wax material. Until 1894 all recordings had been made on cylinders; by 1912 discs--imprinted grooves on flat zinc--had replaced cylinders.

It was on a two-minute Edison wax cylinder that one of the earliest known recordings of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" was made in September 1908 by vaudevillian Edward Meeker, a baritone and one of Edison's studio singers. According to the Columbia discography, tenor Harvey Hindermeyer, another session singer, recorded the song with an orchestra on a single-faced Columbia Phonograph Company record (disc) in August 1908, and in September, the Haydn Quartet, a popular harmony quartet, recorded the song for the Victor Talking Machine Company. In the years following the first recordings, a number of well-known performers, including the Andrews Sisters, Bing Crosby and the Boston Pops Orchestra recorded the song and it was featured in the Marx Brothers' "A Night at the Opera" (1935) and in the Gene Kelly and Frank Sinatra musical, "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" (1949). Though Jack Norworth never recorded the song, in 1940, a recording by Albert von Tilzer was made at a live concert celebrating the conclusion of the Golden Gate International Exposition.

When the song's copyright was renewed in 1936, its subtitle was changed from "The Sensational Base Ball Song" to "The Famous Baseball Song." In 1949, it was changed again to "The Official Baseball Song." If baseball had long since been recognized as the national pastime, it now finally had an official song to reflect that status.

There was still one chapter to be written in the story of the sensational baseball song and that came against the backdrop of Chicago's Comiskey Park in 1976, the year of the nation's bicentennial, when White Sox owner and marketing genius, Bill Veeck, Jr., teamed up with legendary broadcaster Harry Caray to make the song an anthem and the singing of it during the seventh-inning stretch a time-honored baseball tradition.

To pass the time during commercial breaks, Harry Caray routinely stood up in the booth and sang "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," the only song, he was fond of saying, to which he knew the words. One day in 1976, Veeck heard Caray singing and convinced him that if they opened the microphone in the broadcast booth, the fans would be able to hear Caray and would spontaneously sing along.

The prevailing notion that Veeck secretly installed a microphone in the booth and recorded Caray without his knowledge is, said Veeck's son Mike, "preposterous." Although he was reluctant to sing publicly, for fear that fans might make fun of his voice, Caray was eventually convinced by Veeck that his singing would make everyone else brave and that fans would join in. "That was the great allure," said Mike Veeck. "My father knew that the guy sitting in left field would think that he could sing it just as well."

Caray's son, the late Atlanta Braves broadcaster Skip Carey, tells the same story. "Dad always felt (and I agree) that the reason the whole thing was successful was because he had such a lousy voice that the fans had nothing to lose by singing along. They couldn't have sung it any worse."

Harry Caray, the “people’s announcer,” began leading the crowd—“Let me hear you good and loud, a-one, a-two, a-three”--in the singing of “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” during every seventh-inning stretch. In 1981, when Caray left the White Sox, he took the seventh-inning stretch tradition of singing “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” with him across town to Wrigley Field and the Chicago Cubs. Coincidentally, 1908, the year of the song, was the last year the Cubs won the World Series until a 108-year drought was ended in 2016. When the regular 1908 season finished in a tie for first place between the New York Giants and the Chicago Cubs, a disputed game that had been played on September 23 was replayed on October 8. The Cubs, who won that decisive playoff game and the National League pennant, secured a World Series berth against the Tigers and, ultimately, won the World Series title.

In the years after “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” was written, Jack Norworth (1879-1959) and Albert von Tilzer (1878-1956) had the pleasure of knowing that their sunny, singable song with its simple, single syllables that captured so perfectly the experience of going to the ballpark had remained in the popular repertoire. In 1955, “Variety” magazine named the song one of the ten greatest popular songs of the previous half-century.

In 2001, the Recording Industry Association of America and the National Endowment for the Arts ranked “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” number eight (“Over the Rainbow” was number one) out of 365 songs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with historical significance. Along with “Happy Birthday” and “The Star-Spangled Banner,” “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” is one of the most recognized and most performed songs in America.

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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.