

“You Are My Sunshine”— Jimmie Davis (1940)

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Essay by Ronnie Pugh (guest post)*



Jimmie Davis

One of the classic country songs of all time, Jimmie Davis’ “You Are My Sunshine” burst the then-narrow bounds of that genre at a time (1940) when such crossover hits were virtually unprecedented, paving the way over the next few years for songs like “New San Antonio Rose,” “Pistol Packing Mama,” and “There’s A Star Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere.” But “You Are My Sunshine” has enjoyed a longevity, a perennial popularity denied to all of those. Eventually recorded by hundreds of artists across multiple generations and most all American musical styles, the song remains forever most closely associated with the version, the name and career of Jimmie Davis.

James Houston “Jimmie” Davis was born September 11, 1899 in Beech Springs, near Quitman and Jonesboro in north Louisiana, his life spanning the entire twentieth century (d. November 5, 2000). His parents, Sam Jones Davis and Sarah Elizabeth Works Davis, were sharecroppers from whom he learned the rudiments of homemade music that he practiced in fields, street corners, churches, glee clubs, or anywhere he could later find an audience. The oldest boy of 11 children, Jimmie worked his way out of the cotton fields as the first graduate of Beech Springs Consolidated School to seek higher education. He earned a B.A. at Louisiana College in Pineville and then an M.A. at LSU, which led to a teaching job at Shreveport’s Dodd College for Women. Not cut out for teaching, Davis took the job of docket clerk in Shreveport’s Criminal Court, one he held for over a decade as the Great Depression came and settled over the nation. There he was introduced to politics even before professional music beckoned, for Davis’ duties included campaigning for the re-election of the sitting judge, which sometimes meant mudslinging and character assassination. The mild-mannered Davis eschewed that style in his own later campaigns, made possible by his burgeoning success as a singer during those same Depression years.

His first professional work was on radio at Shreveport’s KWKH in 1927-1928, at which time he also made his first recordings for that station’s custom Doggone label. After a single failed session for Columbia Records in 1928 (the masters unreleased and lost),

Davis began a four-year association with Victor in 1929, specializing in raunchy blues numbers which were often accompanied by black musicians. After 64 releases for Victor and its affiliated budget label Bluebird, Davis was dropped in 1933, but got a chance the next year with Decca Records, then newcomers in the rural field. His very first Decca session (September 21, 1934) produced the smash hit “[N]obody’s Darling but Mine,” a love song Davis seems to have purchased from Shreveport musician Bill Nettles. That set his pattern of buying composer credit and publishing rights on songs he wanted to record--a practice not at all uncommon or unethical, done at one time or another by practically all recording artists of the day. “You Are My Sunshine” almost six years later would come to Davis that way, as would his biggest hit in the interim, “It Makes No Difference Now,” which he bought from young Floyd Tillman in 1938. Largely unable to tour and challenged to travel to sometimes distant recording sessions because of Shreveport work commitments, it is remarkable that Jimmie Davis reached the heights of his field alongside Gene Autry via recordings alone, while Autry enjoyed the greater exposure of movies, touring, and later a network radio show, “Melody Ranch.”

Two groups originally from the Atlanta area were the first to record “You Are My Sunshine,” both during the latter half of 1939. First of these was the Pine Ridge Boys, an old-time, close-harmony, two-guitars-with-yodels duo made up of Doug Spivey and Marvin Taylor; they recorded it for Bluebird (B-8263) on August 22. Almost a month later (September 13), a former Atlanta group by then based in Shreveport, the Rice Brothers Gang, cut “You Are My Sunshine” roughly in the middle of an 18-song marathon session for Decca (Jimmie’s label) in New York. There is no composer credit on the Pine Ridge Boys record, while “Paul Rice” is listed as such on the Rice Brothers cut (Decca 5763). In later years, Paul Rice and Doug Spivey separately told researchers very similar versions of finding the song--both admitting that the idea, at least, came from a young lady in South Carolina. Their song is classic country, its three 16-measure verses interspersed by a chorus of the same tune, and all in three chords. The prominent steel guitar instrumental breaks used on the Rice Brothers’ version and later by Davis make some believe that the tune is Hawaiian, but no particular antecedent has been identified.

A 1956 article in the “Shreveport Times” quotes Paul Rice and his one-time bass player Reggie Ward saying that Rice sold all rights to “You Are My Sunshine” to Jimmie Davis and Charles Mitchell for the total sum of \$35, which Rice says he needed to pay his wife’s hospital bill. Davis and Mitchell liked the song from one or both of the prior records and, planning to record it themselves, wanted to secure its future income. Davis also may have been drawn to a song that echoed the theme of his earlier (1936) hit, “I Wish I Had Never Seen Sunshine”--Davis had already cut three separate “answer songs” to his first hit, “Nobody’s Darling but Mine.” The Davis-Mitchell copyright was entered by its publisher Southern Music (part of the Peer empire) on January 30, 1940, five days before their recording but curiously two weeks *after* a third pre-Davis recording of the song was made by Bob Atcher and Bonnie Blue Eyes (Vocalion/Okeh 05370), whose label credits Davis & Mitchell as composers.

Jimmie Davis with “Charles Mitchell’s Orchestra” (actually Mitchell on steel, Leon Chappellear on guitar, and unknown studio musicians on string bass, muted trumpet, clarinet and piano) cut the classic record of “You Are My Sunshine” in Decca’s New York studios February 5, 1940 (released as Decca 5813). Barry Mazor, in his wonderful biography of Davis’s publisher, “Ralph Peer and the Making of Popular Roots Music,” sums up the context and importance of Davis’ recording:

Jimmie Davis put an exclamation point on this transitional period when “hillbilly music” evolved into an increasingly gone-to-town flavor of country with the song forever most associated with him, that sweet standard of all country songs, “You Are My Sunshine.” ... It would prove a phenomenon, a hit also for Gene Autry, and sung by everyone from Bing Crosby to the Carter Family.

Iconic artists across the musical spectrum later recorded the song--Johnny Cash, Nat King Cole, Bob Dylan, Mississippi John Hurt, and Aretha Franklin, among artists numbering more than two hundred. Peer-Southern Music, famous for its worldwide reach and far-flung offices, saw to it that overseas recordings were made. In war-torn England it became an instant classic: depending on which source you read, it was a favorite of King George VI and/or of his famous Prime Minister, Winston Churchill.

The success of “You Are My Sunshine” propelled the handsome and personable Jimmie Davis into a short-lived film career, and from Shreveport into statewide politics (winning a seat on the Public Service Commission before running for Governor). He continued to make records for most of his 101 years, with several more 1940s hits – “Sweethearts or Strangers,” “There’s A New Moon Over My Shoulder,” “I Hung My Head and Cried” – and evincing a turn toward gospel music after cutting the classic “Supper Time” in 1953.

The broad public’s knowledge of “You Are My Sunshine” after nearly eight decades is limited to the song’s chorus and its memorable comparison of the beloved to sunshine on a cloudy day. The verses and their story-line are forgotten--which is curious, but not unprecedented. No one remembers the verses of “Over There,” “Let Me Call You Sweetheart,” or “My Wild Irish Rose” either. And like those other partly forgotten or selectively remembered songs, “You Are My Sunshine” also seems to be morphing into a children’s song. I know I “learned” that older threesome in elementary school music class a half-century ago and may not have heard them since. Lord help us, there is even a children’s book of “You Are My Sunshine,” author Jimmie Davis. (Thirty-five dollars back in 1940 sure went a long way!) Well, anyone who still remembers the verses is struck by the irony in this. Verse one describes painful separation; verse one threatens dire consequences to the beloved if he/she leaves (“*YOU’LL regret it all someday*”); while verse three tells us the beloved left anyway, shattering all the dreams of the lover. It is a classic tale of love-gone-wrong--in fact, one of the songs that moved country music so strongly in that direction.

Perhaps the wider public’s limited awareness of the full song will be jarred back to completeness by its recent inclusion in a horror film. The full song is on the soundtrack of 2017’s “Annabelle—Creation,” sung apparently from the bloody lips of Annabelle

herself, one of those murderous little devil dolls you wouldn't want in your house. The soundtrack recording is sung by Charles McDonald using a throwback orchestra in a near-perfect copy of Jimmie Davis's 1940 version. All of the verses and all of the same instrumental breaks are there, at least in the soundtrack. The whole sad story is somehow more appropriate in that setting--or at least less inappropriate than finding it the subject of a children's book.

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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.