



The Life and Songs of Stephen Foster: A Revealing Portrait of the Forgotten Man Behind "Swanee River," "Beautiful Dreamer," and "My Old Kentucky Home"

JoAnne O'Connell

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The Life and Songs of Stephen Foster: A Revealing Portrait of the Forgotten Man Behind "Swanee River," "Beautiful Dreamer," and "My Old Kentucky Home" offers a critical reassessment of the life, politics, and legacy of America's misunderstood father of popular song. Once revered the world over, Foster's plantation songs fell from grace in the wake of the Civil Rights movement due to their controversial lyrics. Foster embraced the minstrel stage, but walked a fine line between the Democratic politics of his family and his own pro-Lincoln sentiments. The youngest child in a large family, he grew up in the shadows of a successful older brother and his president brother-in-law James Buchanan. Living most of his life just outside of industrial, smoke-filled Pittsburgh, Foster wrote songs about a pastoral South unsullied by the grime of industry but tarnished by the injustice of slavery.

Drawn to the popular music of minstrelsy, Foster merged the blackface minstrel's genre with more refined parlor songs to produce his most iconic plantation songs. As his music spread across the United States and the globe, his values were mistakenly conflated with Southern ideals and the activities of his Copperhead pro-slavery brother. Foster, however, defied his family's politics and established secret friendships with antislavery editors and poets, even while his public image appeared politically ambiguous.

Rather than defining Foster by his now-controversial minstrel songs, JoAnne O'Connell reveals a prolific composer who concealed his sympathies for slaves in his songs' lyrics and wrote in diverse styles to satisfy the changing tastes of his generation. In a trenchant reevaluation of Foster's New York Bowery years, O'Connell illustrates how Foster purposely abandoned the style for which he was famous to write lighthearted songs for newly popular variety stages and music halls. In the last years of his life, Foster's new direction in songwriting stood in the vanguard of vaudeville and musical comedy to pave the way for the future of American popular music. Foster's stylistic flexibility in the face of evolving audience preferences not only proves his versatility as a composer, but also reveals important changes in the American music and publishing industries.

As an intimate biography of a complex and controversial composer, *Stephen Foster* delivers to historians and music lovers of all generations an engaging story about this father of American music and an invaluable portrait of the political, economic, social, racial, and gender issues of Antebellum and Civil War America.



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