

Happy Birthday to Famous Song

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“Happy Birthday to You” is one of the most frequently sung songs in the English language, according to the *Guinness Book of World Records*. This year, the copyright to the song is on the Illinois Library Association’s listing of notable anniversaries. An arrangement of it was copyrighted in 1935, making 2010 the 75th anniversary of the copyright.

The melody to “Happy Birthday to You” was first copyrighted in 1893 as “Good Morning to All,” a song by sisters Mildred J. Hill and Patty S. Hill, according to George Washington University Law School professor Robert Brauneis, writing in the winter-spring 2009 issue of the *Journal of the Copyright Society of the USA*. Mildred was a composer and an expert on African American music; Patty was an early childhood educator who later became a full professor at the Teachers College of Columbia University.

Mildred composed the melody for “Good Morning to All,” and Patty wrote the words when she was principal of the Louisville, Kentucky, Training School for Kindergarteners. The sisters set out to develop a song that was “extremely simple to sing, yet musically interesting and emotionally expressive,” writes Brauneis. The song, meant as a classroom greeting, was included in a collection by the Hill sisters, *Song Stories for the Kindergarten*. The Clayton F. Summy Company, a Chicago-based music firm, published the collection in 1894.

If the melody had never been used with different lyrics, it probably would not be known today, writes Brauneis. But starting in the second decade of the 1900s, as birthday celebrations became more popular, the melody was published in multiple songbooks with the now-familiar lyrics to “Happy Birthday to You.” By 1935, it was well known as the standard birthday song, according to Brauneis.

That year, the Clayton F. Summy Company published and copyrighted an arrangement that paired the “Good Morning to All” melody with



Vinson Walsh McLean, child of a prominent Washington, D.C., family, in 1898 in front of a birthday cake in the shape of a battleship.

the lyrics to “Happy Birthday to You.” In doing so, it received authorization from Jessica Hill, sister of Mildred and Patty, in her capacity as a copyright owner of *Song Stories for Children*, whose copyright she had renewed.

It is to the 1935 arrangement that the current copyright owner of “Happy Birthday to You” traces ownership. In 1988 Warner-Chappell Music, the publishing arm of Warner Music Group, bought the successor to the Clayton F. Summy Company. Today, Warner states that its subsidiary, Summy-Birchard, is the current sole owner of “Happy Birthday to You” and that the copyright will not expire until 2030 because of extensions in the renewal copyright term over the years. It is estimated that the song brings in more than \$2 million a year in licensing fees. ©