

Irving Berlin Gives “God Bless America” Royalties to Scouting

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Irving Berlin (1888–1989), the famed American songwriter and composer, held numerous copyrights in his 900 songs, 19 musicals, and 18 movie scores. Berlin immigrated from Russia to America with his parents at the age of five to escape pogroms. Helping to support his family from the age of eight, Berlin grew up poor, but he learned music. Berlin, who was a prolific author, sometimes stashed his work for years until he finished it or needed it for a project.

Such it was with “God Bless America,” called by the Library of Congress the “unofficial national anthem” of America. Berlin was serving in the U.S. Army in 1918 at Camp Upton in Yaphank, New York, when he penned the words to the song. Not quite satisfied, Berlin put the song away for decades.

In 1938, Kate Smith, a well-known singer and host of a popular CBS radio program, was looking for a song to sing for Armistice Day. Berlin remembered his work of 20 years before and got out his song. The original words were written in response to an ongoing war. In 1938 with

a new world political situation and war again menacing Europe, Berlin altered a few of his original words. Smith performed the song on November 10, 1938, and the response was immediate. America loved it.

The Rodgers & Hammerstein Organization states that Berlin decided to give away all royalties from, and control of, perhaps his most famous song. A generous and patriotic man who knew the opportunities afforded him in America, Berlin did not wish to receive any profit from “God Bless America.” When his publisher disagreed, Berlin set up the Irving Berlin Music Company to control the use of his songs. And he established the God Bless America Fund with three trustees to control the use of the song for which the trust was named, receive royalties from the song, and distribute funds to the Boy Scouts and the Girl Scouts. So far, the contribution to scouting has amounted to \$10 million. The song will not enter the public domain until 2034.

America continues its affection for “God Bless America.” Berlin himself sang it to former Vietnam prisoners of war in the White House in 1973. When members of Congress assembled on the steps of the U.S. Capitol after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York, what else would they sing? ©



WORLD TELEGRAM PHOTO BY AL AUMULLER

Richard Rodgers, Irving Berlin, and Oscar Hammerstein II. Seated in back is Helen Tamiris. They are watching hopefuls who are being auditioned on stage of the St. James Theatre.

Read more!

Listen to “God Bless America” here: www.loc.gov/item/ihas.100010431/

To see Irving Berlin’s copyrights that are administered by the trust, search the *Copyright Office public catalog* on “God Bless America Fund.” “God Bless America” is listed in document number V1771Po85.

For further information on Irving Berlin, go here:

- www.arcamax.com/knowledge/trivia/s-175319-659638
- www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trmo19.html
- www.cnn.com/2011/12/11/opinion/greene-berlin/
- <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2011/01/american-tune/>
- <http://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/2000-/The-singing-of-“God-Bless-America”-on-September-11,-2001/>



Irving Berlin and wife, Dorothy Goetz, who died six months after their marriage in 1912. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION