

All is told to us by drum and fife

The Importance of Music in the Civil War

by Timothy Walch

We all know these familiar words: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." That first line from the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" is almost as familiar today as it was when it was written more than 150 years ago. For most Americans, the song is forever linked with Union patriotism during the Civil War, just as the song "Dixie" is an equally powerful anthem of Confederate resolve to protect the Southern way of life. Indeed, both of these songs continue to be signature sounds of the crusade that divided this nation.

Music was integral to every aspect of the war, from recruitment to battle and later to bereavement and homecoming. It stirred patriotic spirits and it directed troops in

A bugle, fife, and handwritten book of bugle calls. These, as well as drums, set the pulse of army life.

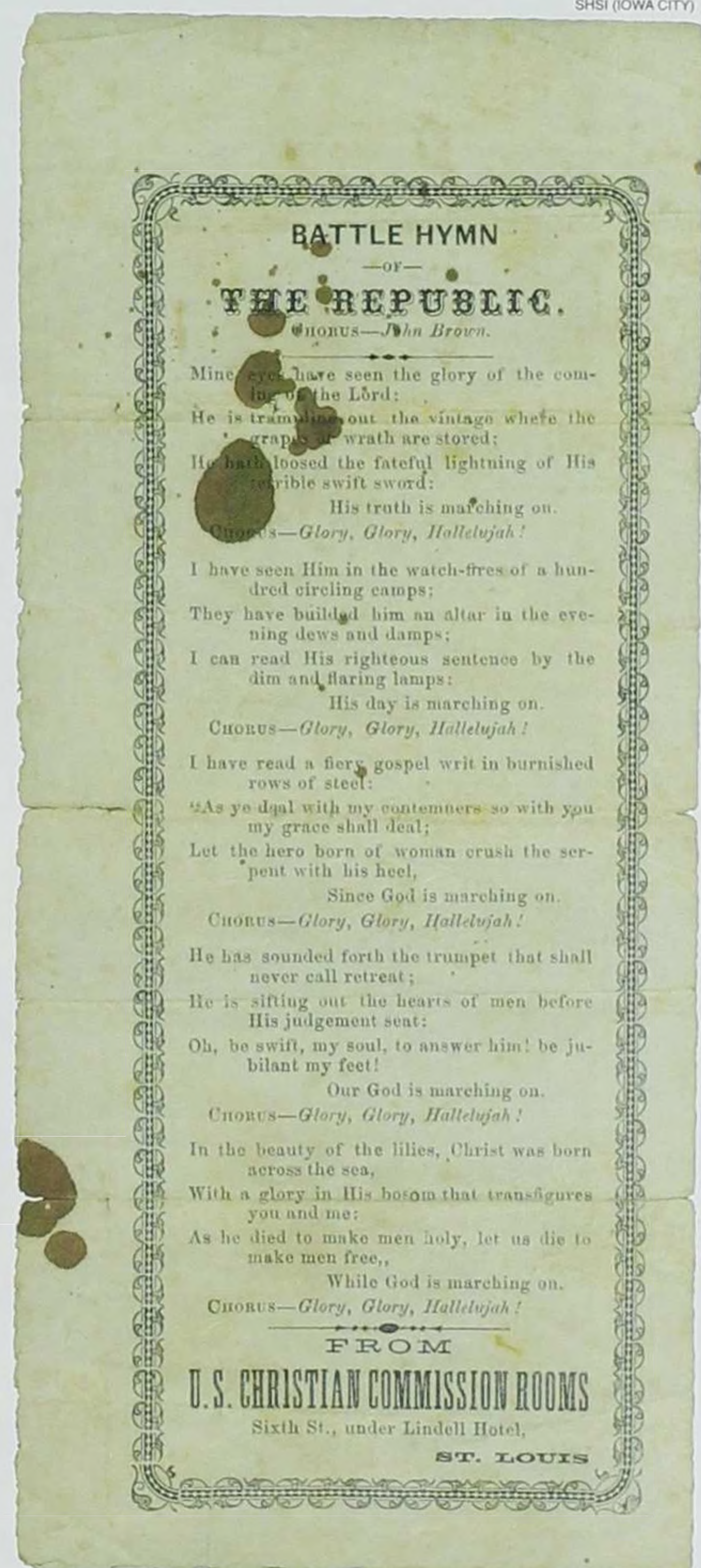


Below: The 2nd Iowa regimental band.



ARTIFACTS AND PHOTO OF MUSICIANS: SHSI (DES MOINES)

SHSI (IOWA CITY)



The stirring lyrics of "Battle Hymn of the Republic" first appeared in *Atlantic Monthly* in February 1862. They then began to appear in newspapers and on broadsides (above). The words were sung to the tune of "John Brown's Body."



ABOVE: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS. BELOW: AMERICAN AGRICULTURIST, JANUARY 1865

Songs for Soldiers and Their Friends.

The Trumpet of Freedom. Containing, Soldier's Chorus; Viva la America; Mother when the war is over; Mount, Boys, Mount; Picket Guard; Not a Star from our Flag; Volunteer's Wife; Red, White and Blue; To Canaan; Do they pray for me at Home; How do you like it, Jefferson D; Battle Hymn of the Republic; Glory Hallelujah; Garibaldi Hymn, and other popular Songs, Duets, &c., will be sent, post-paid, for 40 cents. OLIVER DITSON & CO., Publishers, Boston.

Above: A rare photograph of troops on the march. Music helped direct soldiers through the daily camp routines, on marches, and in battle.

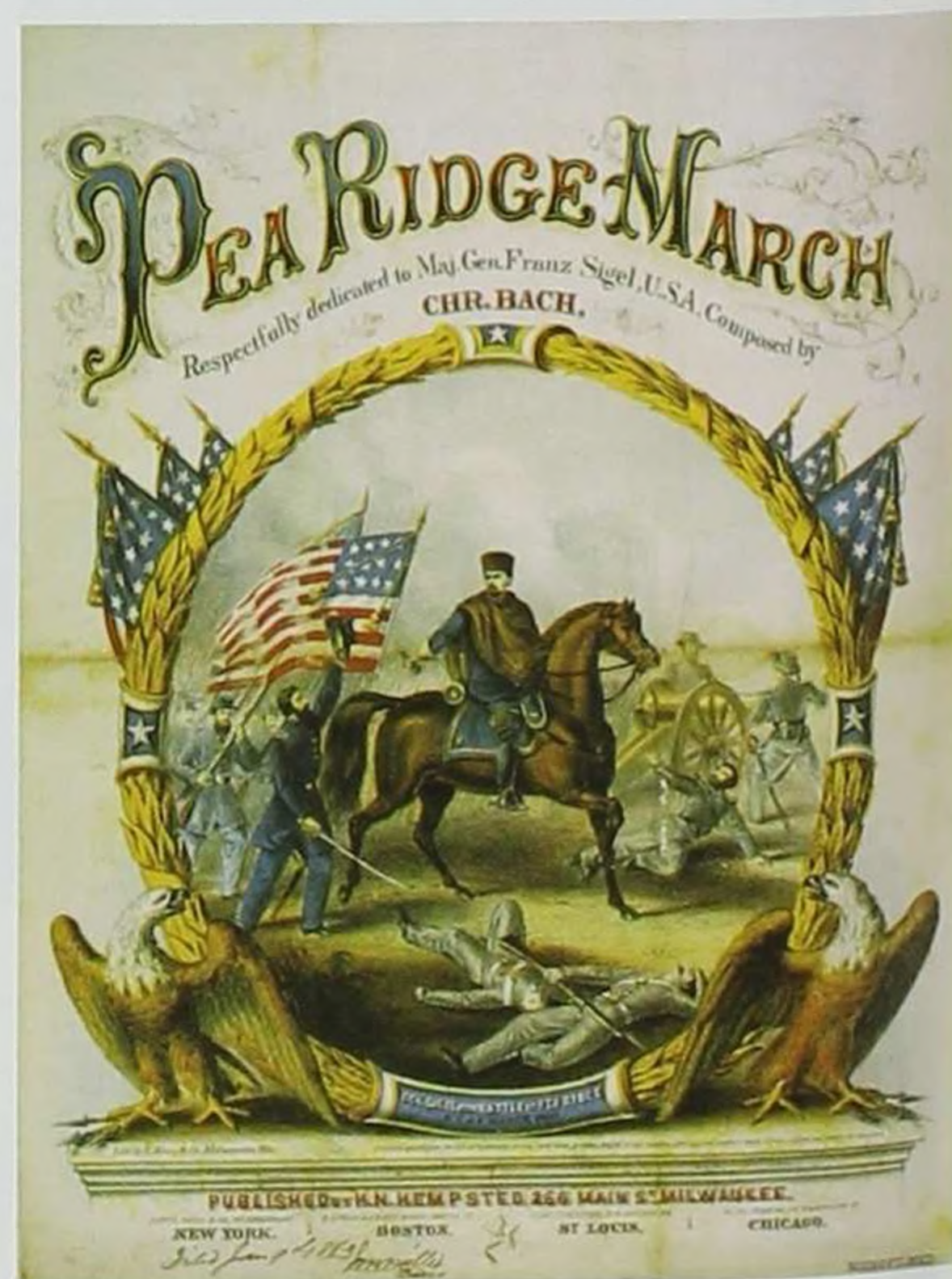
Left: Dozens of war-related songs found eager consumers in army camps and in parlors. Much of the music reflected themes of patriotism, sacrifice, and sentiment for home and family. "Home, Sweet Home" was one such song.

Below: Music like "Pea Ridge March" had a valiant, martial quality.



OUR ABSENT SONS AND BROTHERS—"HOME, SWEET HOME."—Sketch and engraving for the American Agriculturist.

Above: "The sick and wounded," wrote an Iowa soldier, "will probably all be sent home on furloughs, and I expect to start as soon as I can . . . for with a sick or wounded man, 'there is no place like Home.'"



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battle. It solemnized burial of the dead and celebrated victories.

It's hard to overestimate the importance of military music. "We have music for everything," wrote one New York officer to his father, "music telling us when to get up, music telling us when to go to bed, when to get breakfast, when to eat dinner, when to clean streets, when to drill, when to stop drilling, when to go to church on Sabbath, and when to come back. All is told to us by drum and fife."

The most elemental Civil War music was on the field of battle. Cutting through the din, smoke, and confusion, musicians' drumbeats and bugle calls instructed the troops to advance, retreat, or take other actions. The sounds carried farther than an officer's voice and faster than a man on horseback. They provided direction and focus and motivated men in the midst of battle. At the Battle of Gettysburg, for example, Major General George Pickett and his men made their historic charge to "Bonnie Blue Flag." Waiting for them on Seminary Ridge were Union troops listening to "The Star-Spangled Banner."

These sounds were enhanced by unit flags that gave visual direction to the troops. To bear the flag through a battle was a great honor, and to capture an enemy battle flag was a consummate, iconic achievement of victory. Such flags were highly prized and later were displayed in public places as evidence of the bravery of state regiments.

Beyond military operations, music figured in camp life and back home. The musicians within a regiment or brigade, for example, performed in parades, at concerts, and for other patriotic events. It is believed that there were more than

400 musical bands in the Union army and another 125 bands among the Confederate forces. Iowa soldier Henry Clay McArthur wrote, "The sound of Brass Bands can be heard through camp playing beautiful pieces making us forget almost that we are here for the purpose of battling with our fellow countryman."

It is not surprising, therefore, that composers wrote numerous songs to inspire patriotic and sentimental feelings and remind soldiers and their families of the reasons for their sacrifice. Northerners were regaled with "The Battle Cry of Freedom" and "John Brown's Body," and Southerners favored "Bonnie Blue Flag" and "Lorena," among other songs.

Iowan George Bradway described how music was part of an impromptu celebration on July 4, 1864: "Nothing new was going on till night when the Lieu Col said we would have a candle light procesion so every fellow got a piece of candle put it in his bayonet and fell into ranks we marched about half way to Memphis shouting yelling and singing patriotic songs such as the stars spangled banner rally round the flag and John Brown they fairly made things shake when they was singing the latter." A few days later he added: "We hurrahed and sang so much the eavening of the 4th that our throats was so sore we could hardly eat hardtack."

Even in prison, music played a role. One captive wrote, "Our men sing all the national songs again, and again, with spirit and fervor, and as there are many excellent and trained voices, the effect is fine. The Star Spangled Banner is a prime favorite, and among others, Homeward Bound is heard."

In the early years of the war, patriotic music was a robust form of home entertainment and many

evenings were spent gathered around the piano in the parlor. But as the war dragged on, patriotic music was replaced with sentimental songs that focused on themes of separation and loss. "'Just Before the Battle Mother,'" notes historian Christian McWhirter, "exemplified this trend by portraying soldiers coping with the hardships and brutality of war by thinking of their mothers."

As the war's outcome seemed assured, there were more songs about the impending Union victory. "Sherman's March to the Sea," for example, was written as a poem by Samuel H. M. Byers of the 5th Iowa Infantry. Byers had been a prisoner in Confederate camps for 16 months when he wrote the poem. The words were put to music by another prisoner, and the song was smuggled north, where it became a huge hit with both families and the troops. It remained popular long after the war and was played repeatedly for General Sherman, who, it is said, came to dread hearing it over and over again.

"The war catapulted music to a new level of importance," McWhirter stresses. "More than mere entertainment, it provided a valuable way for Americans to express their thoughts and feelings about the conflict. Conversely, songs influenced thoughts and feelings of civilians, soldiers, and slaves—shaping how they viewed the war." ♦

Timothy Walch writes frequently for this magazine.

NOTE ON SOURCES

For a fine overview, see Christian McWhirter, *Battle Hymns: The Power and Popularity of Music in the Civil War*. Quotations related to Henry Clay McArthur and George Bradway are from materials in Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa.