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Songs unify South, reflect changing ideas

SINGING THE NEW NATION: HOW MUSIC SHAPED THE CONFEDERACY 1861-65
By E. Lawrence Abel
Stackpole Books
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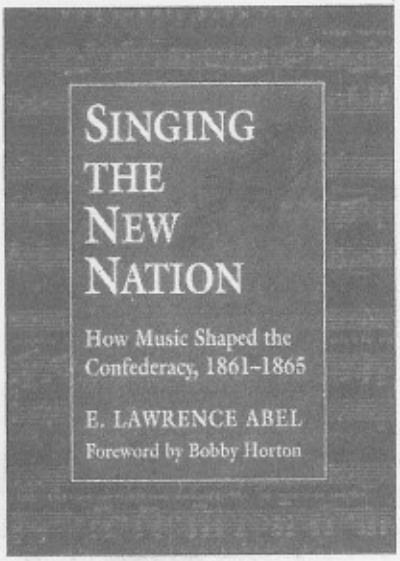
REVIEWED BY SEAN SCULLY



Most Americans probably can sing the opening verse of "Dixie," and more than a few can reel off parts of "The Bonnie Blue Flag" or "The Yellow Rose of Texas" from memory. Yet most people have no idea how these standards of the Civil War era came to be and how they were seared into the national consciousness.

Into that considerable gap steps Lawrence Abel, a psychology professor at Wayne State University in Michigan, with his new book, "Singing the New Nation: How Music Shaped the Confederacy 1861-65." Mr. Abel's readable history tells an important story that largely has been ignored by historians.

He shows how songs filled an important need in the new Confederate States of America — to bind disparate states into a single political entity and create a unified Southern identity. The songs in some cases were deliberate propaganda. In others, they were heartfelt cries of patriotism. As the war wore on and the Confederacy began to fall apart, the songs became an outlet for homesick soldiers and desperate civilians to vent frustrations they otherwise could not express.

Mr. Abel's most important contribution to the literature of the Civil War is in giving modern readers a sense of how the people of the South reacted to music. It is almost impossible for us, awash in electronic media, to understand how important sheet music and concert performances were to the people of the 19th century.

Parlor songs were integral to the popular culture of the time, the main vehicle for communicating ideas and information. Mr. Abel skillfully transports us back to those times, giving us a glimpse of how deeply our ancestors felt the music of the era.

He also uses the songs to give us a rare glimpse into their minds. Unlike postwar memoirs and histories, which were colored by the passage of time, the songs give an instant snapshot of the Confederate mind and mood. Mr. Abel follows, for example, the rise and fall of various Southern heroes by their appearance in popular music.

President Jefferson Davis, whose reputation suffered as the Confederacy collapsed, clearly is shown as a hero in early songs. Confederate songsmiths depicted him in 1861 as a Washington-like figure, father of a new nation. By 1865, his name had dropped out of the musical language.

Likewise, Gen. P.T.G. Beauregard began as a leading hero in song but ended up in musical — and historical — obscurity.

Interestingly, the South's leading military icon, Gen. Robert E. Lee, appears hardly at all in Confederate music. Mr. Abel's book is a sobering reminder that Lee's legend and his elevation to near sainthood are largely phenomenons of the late war years and immediate postwar era.

The book's most interesting and successful section is its first part, which traces the history of the three leading songs of the South — "Dixie," "The Bonnie Blue Flag" and "Maryland, My Maryland."

Mr. Abel takes these familiar songs and traces their largely unfamiliar histories. It is well-known, for example, that "Dixie" began as a minstrel-show song by a Northern author. What is less well known is the fascinating story of how the North and South struggled for its legacy, with Northerners pushing the peculiar notion that "Dixie" referred not to the South, but to a plantation on New York's Long Island owned by a man named Dixie.

Also little known are the battles in the South over the song's lyrics. Catchy as the tune is, the words border on nonsensical. They were, in fact, offensive even by the politically incorrect standards of the 19th century.

Even during the war, many Confederates were offended by having their cause identified so closely with such a lowbrow music-hall piece. Efforts to change the words to "Dixie" lasted into the 20th century and provoked endless, but now largely forgotten, schisms among war veterans.

Mr. Abel resurrects these musical tales from contemporary material, unclouded by romantic and revisionist sentiments.

His history drags a bit, however, when he veers into psychology, slinging around arcane jargon such as "eidolons" — a mighty-sounding word for heroic or iconic figures in popular culture.

His story also drags a bit in later chapters as he delves into endless and often tedious detail about the leading music publishers and music halls of the Confederacy.

On balance, however, "Singing the New Nation" is a rewarding book for anyone seeking a better appreciation of the culture of the South and the enduring power of the songs the war produced.

Sean Scully is a national reporter for The Washington Times.