



The story behind the song

This simple song, **“God Bless America,”** became an overnight hit in 1938, although it was first penned by Irving Berlin in 1918. In an interview in 1940 he remarked, ***“It is not a patriotic song, but an expression of gratitude for what this country has done for its citizens, of what home really means.”*** It is a prayer of gratitude.

To fully understand the heart of the song as he penned it, you need to understand his story. In 1893, at age 5 Irving Berlin was one of the many families who escaped the hardships and oppression in Russia after their home was completely destroyed. They came to America in hopes of a good life and settled in the Lower East Side of New York City.



When he was about 8 his father died and his mother sold newspapers to support her family. Irving Berlin pitched in and began singing in saloons and taught himself to play the piano. He played the popular tunes that people like to sing along. In 1911, age 23, he had his first hit - a dance song - “Alexander’s Ragtime Band.” His career took off and he wrote song after song. He said his goal was ***“to reach the heart of the average American...the real soul of the country....the real people.”*** Today we still sing many of his songs that touch our hearts – “White Christmas,” “Blue Skies,” “Always”.....and **“God Bless America,”** has become the “Unofficial National Anthem of America.”

This song, tucked away, was pulled out and revised when Kate Smith, one of the greatest singers of the time needed a song for her radio show to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the end of the Great War, not knowing it would be called World War I. Irving Berlin had just returned from Europe and could feel the power of Adolf Hitler. He was getting more aggressive and Irving Berlin felt a war was brewing. He didn’t want to write a “get-America-ready-for-war” song. America was a special place to him. It was then he remembered the song he had tucked away 20 years before. He pulled it out and knew it needed some revision.

He changed the lines in the song he felt could be deemed a military conquest or political.

*To the right with the light from above
Make her victorious on land and foam*

His goal was peace and gratitude – what he felt American had given him – a real home.

So when Kate Smith called again the song he gave her was:

God Bless America, land that I love,
Stand beside her and guide her
Through the night with a light from above.
From the mountains, to the prairies,
To the oceans, white with foam.
God Bless America, my home sweet home.



It was an instant hit, but storm clouds were gathering over Europe. By 1940 Germany rolled into Poland and World War II was ignited. The United States did not officially join the war until Pearl Harbor was attacked on Dec 7, 1941. But **“God Bless American”** was the song that everyone one was singing. Every school kid knew it by heart.

Other wartime songs would remind Americans what they were fighting against. Berlin’s **“God Bless America”** reminded Americans, then and now, what we are fighting for.



“HANDS IN PRAISE” is an American Sign Language (ASL) Christian choir sponsored by Bethel Lutheran Church, Windsor, Colorado.

For information, go to www.HandsInPraiseASL.com or HandsInPraiseInfo@gmail.com

You are invited to join and no experience needed as sign language is learned one song at a time.

Please feel free to take this praise sheet home with you to read later or share with others who need the good news.