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You Are My Sunshine: The Recorded Pedigree of an American Folk Song

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It is challenging to find a person who is not familiar with *You Are My Sunshine*. This song is known by individuals independent of their racial, socioeconomic, or geographic background. As one of the most recognized songs in the world, it has been officially translated into thirty different languages and is even said to be as recognizable as *Happy Birthday*.¹ Unlike the traditional accompaniment to mark the passing of another year, however, *You Are My Sunshine* has been a hit record, not just in one genre, but across the board. In 1940, Jimmie Davis, the supposed composer of the song, sold a million copies of his country record.² The following year Bing Crosby took his recording to #19 on the pop charts.³ For three straight weeks in 1962, Ray Charles held the #1 position on the R&B charts and at the same time reached #7 on the pop charts.⁴ That *You Are My*

Sunshine has demonstrated the ability to be successful as a country, pop, and R&B record is a direct result of its diverse and until now, little acknowledged origins.

Starting with a brief examination of the song's supposed composition in 1940 and working backwards, the present study assembles a series of related songs that form a recorded pedigree for *You Are My Sunshine*. Each of these earlier recordings contribute not only lyric and melodic elements to the standard version of the song, but also intrinsic *musical moments*. By moment, I mean specific elements of style, texture, and composition, which are introduced at a particular instant, or moment, in the recorded pedigree of the song. With Jimmie Davis's 1940 version, these moments become locked in a recorded model that provides a basis for all versions to follow.⁵ As will be shown, the accentuation of different specific musical moments allows for the variety of subsequent cover-recordings of *You Are My Sunshine*.

One reason *You Are My Sunshine* is so familiar is that it is highly accessible. It deals with commonly shared emotions of love and loss within simple melodic and harmonic structures making it easy to both remember and perform. As a strophic song, each of its three eight-bar verses as well as the familiar refrain employs the same musical material. With the exception of a single note its vocal line uses the pentatonic scale, a hallmark of the American folk song, which relies heavily on the chord tones of the underlying harmony. This harmonic motion alternates primarily between the tonic and the

¹ Richard Severo, "Jimmie Davis, Louisiana's Singing Governor, Is Dead," *The New York Times*, 6 November 2000, A37.

² This is according to the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame. A precise figure is not available due to the fact that Davis's recording was released before "hillbilly" record sales were officially tracked. From, *The Nashville Songwriters Foundation*, (Accessed: 3 May, 2003)
<<http://www.nashvillesongwritersfoundation.com/fame/davis.html>>

³ Joel Whitburn, *Pop Memories, 1890-1954: The History of American Popular Music* (Menomonee Falls: Record Research, 1986), 108.

⁴ Joel Whitburn, *The Billboard Book of Top 40 Hits* (New York: Billboard Books, 2000), 120.

⁵ For the purposes of this analysis the "document" for this song will be Jimmie Davis's 1940 Decca Recording, #67157.

subdominant, moving to the dominant only at the final cadence.

Just because *You Are My Sunshine* is simple, however, does not mean that it is simplistic. The vocal pickup line occurring with each verse/chorus is three eighth notes long and begins on the dominant. It then moves up through the tonic and the supertonic landing on the mediant at the downbeat. The melody does not settle on the tonic until the end of the first phrase. This unsettled vocal line reflects the unsettled tone of the lyrics. (See Example 1)

Example 1. Refrain from *You Are My Sunshine*, Decca #67157.

The image shows two staves of musical notation in 2/4 time. The first staff contains the melody with lyrics: "You are my sun-shine, my on-ly sun-shine. You make me hap-py when skies are". The second staff continues the melody with lyrics: "gray. You'll ne-ver know dear how much I love you. Please don't take my sun-shine a-way."

The refrain is the part of the song that people know best. When taken on its own or paired with only the first verse, as is commonly done in recordings, it comes across as a song of endearment. On the other hand, when the refrain is coupled with the second verse a more threatening scenario arises. By the time the third and final verse occurs, it is clear that love has departed and the singer's world has been shattered. In the end, the refrain can be read as an expression of desperation: "Please don't take my sunshine away." (See Example 2)

Given this ultimate interpretation, the moderato tempo of the song seems to be at odds with the overall tone of the lyrics. Such a contradiction

commonly appears in popular music, and here the faster tempo convincingly brightens the inherent darkness of the lyric, providing solace for what is otherwise a gloomy future: if you look on the sunny side, always on the sunny side, things will be better.

Example 2. Lyrics from the Jimmie Davis 1940 Recording of *You Are My Sunshine*, Decca #67157.

The other night, dear, as I lay sleeping,
I dreamed I held you in my arms.
But when I woke, dear, I was mistaken,
And I hung my head and cried.

You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.
You make me happy when skies are gray.
You'll never know dear how much I love you.
Please don't take my sunshine away.

I'll always love you and make you happy,
If you will only say the same.
But if you leave me to love another,
You'll regret it all some day.

Refrain

You told me once dear you really love me,
That no one else could come between.
But now you've left me and love another,
You have shattered all my dreams

Refrain

It is interesting to note that Jimmie Davis, who was the first to popularize *You Are My Sunshine*,

used the song in much the same way the lyrics use the music: as a distraction. The song was an indispensable component of his two successful bids for governor of Louisiana in 1944 and 1960. According to his obituary in *The New York Times*, “during the campaign, if anybody asked Mr. Davis where he stood on a particularly contentious issue, he would sing one of his songs.”⁶ *You Are My Sunshine* was a regular favourite, which frequently had the audiences quite literally singing Davis’s praises. This behaviour was recently satirized in the popular motion picture *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*⁷

The fictional gubernatorial candidate in the movie, however, did not claim to have written the song, Jimmie Davis did. The true origins of *You Are My Sunshine* have long lay obscured by the legend that Davis and others built around it. There are a multitude of stories and they are full of contradictions.⁸ A typical account exists in the narrative introduction that Davis lends his 1998 remake of the song. (See Example 3)

Davis earned a master's degree in education and psychology from Louisiana State University. In the dozen years following this and his recording of

⁶ Severo, A37.

⁷ Norman Blake recorded a version of *You Are My Sunshine* much in the style of Jimmie Davis’s 1940 recording. The collection of “roots music” found on the *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou* soundtrack won five Grammys in 2002 and has sold more than five million copies.

⁸ Jimmie Davis was a renowned storyteller. For a study regarding the dubious composition of *You Are My Sunshine*, comparing several of Jimmie Davis’s recollections, see Toru Mitsui, “*You Are My Sunshine*: A Question of Authorship,” *Tradition Magazine* (November-December 1999): 43-46.

the song, he worked as a professor and then began his career as a public servant.⁹ He remained an active musician during this time but no evidence exists that he was drudgingly touring the country. Additionally, the “little ditty” that Davis refers to was actually recorded in New York City on February 5, 1940 and features six musicians other than Davis.¹⁰

Example 3. Narrative introduction from the Jimmie Davis 1998 recording of *You Are My Sunshine*, PeerMusic/Digitalpressure.

It was with three other country musicians
quite a few years ago.
We were barnstorming the country trying
to make a little dough.
We made all the chili joints, eating hot
dogs and steamers.
And at night time, three deep in a four-bit
bed.

All singin' the hard time blues.

Hoping that someday we'd record a hit
and things would be sweet,
Then we'd settle down on that place
called easy street.
It so happened that on one July the sixth,
We recorded a little ditty, it went something
like this...

⁹ Severo, A37.

¹⁰ Cary Ginell, *The Decca Hillbilly Discography, 1927-1945* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 238.

The 1998 remake of *You Are My Sunshine* this fictional narrative account introduces has a distinct country sound to it; Davis's original 1940 recording, however, does not.

The diversity of sound present in the 1940 recording rings through immediately – this is not a standard “hillbilly” record. The instrumental introduction presents the song's melody on a trumpet above the expected foundation of a country string band. Added to this pairing is a clarinet, which weaves improvised, Dixieland-jazz inspired lines through the introduction and the first verse. The twang heard in Davis's voice is mild in comparison to contemporaries like Jimmie Rodgers and Gene Autry. The melody is even and flows smoothly from note to note with close attention given to the pitches.

One way to account for the stylistic incongruities found in this recording of *You Are My Sunshine* is to think of it as the resultant combination of a variety of musical moments. An examination of the recorded roots of *You Are My Sunshine* demonstrates how and when such stylistic, textural, and compositional elements present in Davis's recording entered the lineage of the song. First, however, it is time to debase a longstanding belief about this song: Jimmie Davis did not write *You Are My Sunshine*.

Davis claimed compositional credit for the song up until his death in November of 2000, yet the recorded roots of *You Are My Sunshine* can be traced back at least twelve years before he originally recorded it.¹¹ One of the many claims that Davis

¹¹ Regardless of authorship, the copyright remains in Davis's name and millions of southerners will forever connect the song

made regarding *You Are My Sunshine* was that he wrote the song just prior to the recording session.¹² This statement would be more accurate, however, if he had said that he had *acquired* the song just prior to recording it. The *Shreveport Times* documents that Davis and his writing partner Charles Mitchell purchased the rights to this song from musician Paul Rice of the Rice Brothers Gang for the sum of thirty-five dollars.¹³ It is unclear exactly when Davis and Mitchell purchased this song, but it likely occurred in 1939. During that year, the Rice Brothers Gang relocated to Shreveport, Louisiana, where Davis was living and working as the commissioner of public safety.¹⁴ Paul Rice needed money and Jimmie Davis needed a song.

Further countering Davis's claim of authorship is a recording of *You Are My Sunshine* by the Rice Brothers Gang on July 13, 1939, a full seven months before the one by Jimmie Davis.¹⁵ The Rice Brothers Gang were also Decca Hillbilly Recording Artists and their recording had an obvious influence on Davis. Their version begins with the sounds of a traditional string band with an amplified steel guitar playing the melody. A clarinet and harmonica work their way through the piece improvising lines against the vocals and lead guitar. As the recording

with their beloved singing governor. In 1977, *You Are My Sunshine* was made the second official state song of Louisiana.

¹² Severo, A37.

¹³ Louise Hewitt, “Background of a \$17.50 Song and the ‘Sunshine’ it Spread,” *Shreveport Times*, September 16, 1956: 3-F.

¹⁴ Severo, A37. Wayne W. Daniel, “The Rice Brothers,” *The Journal of the American Academy for the Preservation of Old-Time Country Music* (October 1996): 19.

¹⁵ Decca #66432. Ginell, 238-239.

progresses, it clearly demonstrates the group's expressed desire to remain hillbillies, but not sound like them.¹⁶ For example, Hoke Rice's jazzy guitar solo, following the first chorus, sounds like it might be more at home in the dance halls of New York City.

Like Jimmie Davis, Paul Rice also told a number of stories regarding the inspiration for and composition of this song. According to Rice, *You Are My Sunshine* came about when "a girl over in South Carolina wrote me this long letter, about seventeen pages. And she was talking about I was her sunshine, and I got the idea for the song and put a tune to it."¹⁷ This is another nice story of origin for the song, but it too is doubtful. An earlier recorded model exists which is the more likely source of inspiration for *You Are My Sunshine*.

The Carter Family, one of the most famous country groups of all time, recorded a song titled *Little Darlin' Pal of Mine*. It reached the #14 position on the pop charts shortly after it was released at the end of 1928.¹⁸ As one of the group's "tried-and-true" hits, it was re-recorded in 1935, just two years before Paul Rice "wrote" *You Are My Sunshine*.¹⁹ The tune and the accompaniment of this song are remarkably similar to that of *You Are My Sunshine*. (See Example 4) Equally striking is the clear topical relation found in a comparison of the two song's lyrics. Compare the

¹⁶ Daniel, 19.

¹⁷ Daniel, 19.

¹⁸ Victor #21638. Whitburn, *Memories*, 78.

¹⁹ Mark Zwonitzer, *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone? The Carter Family and Their Legacy in American Music* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 177.

identical placement of the words "night" and "sleeping" in the first line of each song, or the concurrent expression of happiness paired with departure found in the second verse. (See Example 5) Such musical and lyrical parallels form a convincing argument for this genealogical step.

Example 4. Refrain from *Little Darlin' Pal of Mine*, Victor #21638.

The image shows two staves of musical notation in G major, 2/4 time. The first staff contains the melody for the first line of the refrain, with lyrics: "My lit - tle dar - lin', oh how, I love you. How I love you, none can". The second staff contains the melody for the second line, with lyrics: "tell. In your heart you love a - noth - er. Lit - tle dar - lin', pal of mine." The melody is simple and characteristic of early 20th-century country music.

Going back even further, the musical inspiration for *Little Darlin' Pal of Mine* may well have been another song floating around the South during that time: *Rock of Ages*, as recorded by Blind Willie Davis.²⁰ This is not to be confused with the nineteenth-century hymn set by Thomas Hastings, although the two share the lyric "Rock of Ages, cleft for me." Davis accompanies himself on a solo guitar, complementing his vocal line with improvised, bottleneck-slide-guitar riffs. His lyrics are spiritual in theme and may have roots in the Baptist hymnal tradition. It has been documented that the Carter Family was familiar with the music of Blind Willie Davis, a black Mississippi blues singer. Lesley "Else" Riddle, a friend of A.P. Carter, collected

²⁰ Herwin #93003. Recorded May 1928. Robert M.W. Dixon. *Blues and Gospel Records: 1890-1943* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), 209.

African-American music for the group.²¹ He brought a “cleaned up” version of Blind Willie Davis’s *Rock of Ages* to the Carter Family which they subsequently recorded under the title *When the World’s on Fire*.

Example 5. Comparison of lyrics from *You Are My Sunshine*, Decca #67157 and *Little Darlin’ Pal of Mine*, Victor #21638.

“You Are My Sunshine”

Verse 1

The other night, dear, as I lay sleeping,
I dreamed I held you in my arms.
But when I woke, dear, I was mistaken,
And I hung my head and cried.

Refrain

You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.
You make me happy when skies are gray.
You’ll never know dear how much I love you.
Please don’t take my sunshine away.

Verse 2

I’ll always love you and make you happy,
If you will only say the same.
But if you leave me to love another,
You’ll regret it all some day.

Refrain

Verse 3

You told me once dear you really love me,
That no one else could come between.
But now you’ve left me and love another,
You have shattered all my dreams.

Refrain

“Little Darlin’ Pal Of Mine”

Verse 1

Many a night, while you lay sleeping,
Dreaming of your amber skies,
Was a poor boy broken hearted,
Listening to the winds that sigh.

Refrain

My little Darlin’, oh how, I love you.
How I love you, none can tell .
In your heart you love another,
Little Darlin’, pal of mine.

Verse 2

Many a day, with you I’ve rambled,
Happiest hours, with you I’ve spent .
For I had your heart forever,
But I find it’s only lent.

Refrain

Verse 3

There is just three things I wish for.
That’s my casket, shroud and grave.
When I’m dead, don’t keep for me,
Just kiss those lips that you betrayed.

While the lyrical content is different, the tone, melody, and accompaniment of *When the World’s on Fire* are nearly identical to *Little Darlin’ Pal of Mine*. (See Example 6) In fact, when the Carter Family rerecorded *Little Darlin’ Pal of Mine* in both 1935 and 1936, they significantly decreased the tempo, setting the two songs further apart. The influence of Blind Willie Davis, who accompanied himself with a bottleneck slide guitar, can be heard in Maybelle Carter’s effort to play in a similar fashion on these recordings.

Example 6. Refrain from *When the World’s On Fire*, Herwin #93003.

The image shows two staves of musical notation in G major, 2/4 time. The first staff contains the melody for the first line of the refrain: "My lov - in' moth - er When the world's on fi - re Don't you want God's bos - om to be your". The second staff contains the melody for the second line: "all - low? Oh tide me o - ver, in the Rock of A - ges. Rock of A - ges stay for me." The notes are mostly quarter and eighth notes, with some triplet-like rhythms.

In all likelihood, Blind Willie Davis did not write *Rock of Ages*. Further excavation would produce additional levels to the musical makeup of *You Are My Sunshine*. The information presented, however, is sufficient for the purposes of the present discussion. It is clear that rhythmic, melodic, and lyrical connections exist between these recordings. Along with such surface elements, these recordings also introduce individual *musical moments*. A number of these moments are present in Jimmie Davis’s 1940 version of the song, each of which can be located on the branches of *You Are My Sunshine’s* family tree: The guitar based, country string band component comes

²¹ Zwonitzer, 137.

out of the Carter Family recordings. A constant presence of a through improvised instrumental line is present as far back as Blind Willie Davis's record. The desire to preserve a sense of heritage while making a concerted effort to move musically beyond it, as heard in Jimmie Davis's attempt to sing in a more refined style, comes from the Rice Brother's Gang.

It is tempting to say the various recordings that contribute musical moments to the compositional fabric of *You Are My Sunshine* are connected only so far as the music and lyrics and that locating individual musical moments within this heritage demonstrates nothing more than shared points of style. However, musical moments form the genetic makeup this song. To this end, it only makes sense that subsequent versions of *You Are My Sunshine* would inherit this full potential. I would like to recall my initial observation regarding the later popular successes of this song in recorded form. *You Are My Sunshine* has successfully navigated diverse musical paths due to the presence of musical moments. Individual performers accentuate the specific combination of moments natural to their musical style. When such an interpretation comes across convincingly, the song can achieve popular success.

In October 1962, Ray Charles released his second foray into country music: *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music Volume 2*. One month later, his recording of the "country" song *You Are My Sunshine* was released as a single and quickly ran up both the pop and R&B charts.²² Interestingly enough,

²² ABC-Paramount #10375.

given the title of the album it came from, his rendition made no appearance on the country charts.

Unlike previous versions of *You Are My Sunshine* that offer an instrumental lead in, Charles gives the listener no preparation for what is to come. The only introduction is a IV-I, plagal cadence from the saxophone section. As he begins the first verse it is immediately clear that this is not going to be a standard performance. Charles allows the lyrics to take his voice where they see fit in his rendition and alters the vocal line with blue notes and the occasional "whoa!" Supporting him is a rhythm section playing a laidback, Latin-inspired groove that is lightly punctuated by the horn section. At the refrain, Charles continues to sing in the same manner and is echoed by his back-up singers, the Raeletts. Following this, as traditionally dictated, is the instrumental section. Instead of continuing with the established groove, the formerly reserved big band launches full tilt into a straight ahead swing.

As the accompaniment settles back into the original feel, we expect Charles's voice to return for the second verse. Instead, we hear the voice of Margie Hendrix, one of Charles's Raeletts. For the first time the vocals of *You Are My Sunshine* are split between a man and a woman adding an intriguing new level to the interpretation of the song. When put into the context of a male/female relationship, Charles has set it up such that the listener is sympathetic to his situation. In the second verse,

Hendrix turns the table on Charles, causing the listener to wonder who in fact betrayed who first.²³

Ray Charles delivers a presentation of *You Are My Sunshine* that is new and unexpected through the accentuation of musical moments. This includes previously established moments as well as moments which have not been discussed, yet are still fully present in Jimmie Davis's 1940 recording. Perhaps the most obvious and important element that Charles relies on is the harmonic progression of the song. *You Are My Sunshine* alternates between the tonic and subdominant harmonies, moving to the dominant only at the end of each section. Since this is the same basic motion of the 12-bar blues progression, it is a natural moment for Charles, working primarily in the R&B genre, to accent. Additionally, the instrumental "amen" cadence at the introduction, is a moment that runs all the way back to the sacred performance tradition of *Rock of Ages* and here helps to play up the theme of betrayal.²⁴ Preceding successful versions of this song, including Bing Crosby's in 1941, hold very much to the composed melody. Instead, Charles's vocal style echoes that of Blind Willie Davis. The blue notes he employs are based on a moment inherent in *You Are My Sunshine's* original melody: a chromatic neighbour-tone attached to the first syllable of the word "only" in the refrain. (See Example 1)

²³ Charles and Hendrix were involved in a long-term affair, the tumultuous undercurrents of which can be heard in both this recording and *Hit the Road Jack* from 1961.

²⁴ It may in fact be this specific moment that Aretha Franklin picks up on in her 1967 recording of *You Are My Sunshine*. Instead of a simple two-chord invocation, the "Queen of Soul" testifies for nearly two minutes before beginning the first verse.

Picking up on these specific moments, Charles brings the song into his own musical world and scores a hit record in the process.

Such recordings document the diverse musical possibilities bound to *You Are My Sunshine*. It is ultimately not a big deal that Jimmie Davis did not write *You Are My Sunshine*. When he made his recording in 1940, he locked moments into a standard (and copyrighted) model that allow the song to remain an active part of popular music.²⁵ Whether conscious of it or not, all subsequent popular recordings stem from this version.

Forming a pedigree for *You Are My Sunshine* is one way to demonstrate the path of musical influence in the reinterpreted versions that follow. The lineage of recordings presented is just one part of a family tree with roots extending before Blind Willie Davis and branches that continue to grow today.²⁶ By linking songs together through the use of musical moments, lines of influence can be established. This allows popular music studies as a whole to more precisely trace the development of different genres and styles. They are all related and we have the records to prove it.

²⁵ This past fall, Brian Wilson released a new and complete recording of his long lost masterpiece *Smile*. Towards the end of the first suite, following a cello solo called "Old Master Painter" is an appearance of *You Are My Sunshine*. Accompanied by a string quartet, Wilson casts the familiar refrain in both past tense and a minor key conceding, "How could you take my sunshine away?"

²⁶ The only other published study of *You Are My Sunshine* by Mistui offers a different genealogical branch that suggests among other things, Hawaiian origins.

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Abstract

Just about everyone knows the song *You Are My Sunshine* in one form or another. For many it was first heard during childhood as a lullaby or campfire sing-along. Beyond such oral transmission, this song's presence is also maintained in our culture through recorded form. With a release rate of more than five new recordings per year, artists have created their own renditions ranging from folk to funk to reggae to punk. Of these, Jimmie Davis sold a million copies of the song as a country record, Bing Crosby took his recording to #20 on the pop charts, and Ray Charles hit #1 on the R&B charts. The various recordings of *You Are My Sunshine* demonstrate not only the commercial viability of the song, but also its widespread appeal to both artists and their listeners regardless of racial, sociological, or geographic background.

What is it about *You Are My Sunshine* that allows it to successfully navigate such diverse musical paths? The answer lies in the compositional makeup of its diverse and little acknowledged origins. Starting with its supposed composition in the 1940s and working backwards, this paper examines a series of songs that form a recorded pedigree for *You Are My Sunshine*. Each song contributes musical components, or moments, from various folk traditions to what becomes the standard (and copyrighted) version of *You Are My Sunshine*. This paper will then demonstrate how the accentuation of different key musical moments allows an artist to create a popular version of *You Are My Sunshine* through the examination of Ray Charles's charting rendition.