

A Letter to the New York Yankees
Regarding Kate Smith

From Jay Etzel

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Background

I am a lifelong Yankee fan, one who has a deep appreciation and love for the entire history of the organization. I was raised in New York and have followed the Yankees since childhood beginning with the Munson-Mercer era. The team has brought me enormous amounts of pleasure and inspiration over the years, and I would do anything to protect the treasure that they are to me and to millions of others. I am a creative consultant by trade and a political independent. My sole motivation in this is to promote what is essential for your good, the good of the Yankees, the fans, major league baseball, and the country itself.

Reason for the letter

By banning Kate Smith in the way that you did, and for the reasons offered, you have unintentionally done a great disservice to the Yankees, Kate Smith, and the country. I am writing this letter in response to your recent decision to no longer play Kate Smith's rendition of "God Bless America." That decision may have seemed simple enough, but it was in fact a tremendous mistake that has multiple layers to it and that will carry far reaching consequences if it is not reversed. If on the other hand it is reversed, the Yankees will have averted the criticism that history's truer perspective on this matter will surely evoke. Therefore, I want to be as clear and straightforward as possible in providing a detailed rationale as to why this ban should, by all reasoning in goodness and truth, be lifted. I want to do everything in my power to make sure the Yankees are not on the wrong side of history, not only on this particular issue - which is in reality a non-issue - but for others that will bear a similar unreasonableness and unsoundness, and that are sure to come against your organization because of our society's current state of extreme imbalance in these politically correct matters.

My response as a true fan

I remember how thankful I was during the last two baseball seasons (during the ongoing national anthem protest in the NFL) that major league baseball had remained pure in its form, and that certain politically correct elements had not made incursions into the game and also malformed it, like they do with everything else they touch. I also remember how proud I was of both the Yankees and major league baseball for not following after the same weakness that the NFL had followed by pandering to the misguided and inaccurate aspects of the national anthem protest. Sadly that changed on April 19th of this year, and now the Yankees find themselves in a situation somewhat analogous to the NFL, in terms of how they have awkwardly positioned themselves in these cultural matters.

As far as the NFL, just prior to the start of the 2017 football season I sent a letter to the league warning them of the devastating consequences that siding with the false narratives represented in the protest would bring. Had they responded accordingly, they never would have gone through what they did over

that next year. After a year of watching things deteriorate, I sent a more detailed letter to every team owner in which I explained why the national anthem protest was ill-advised, illogical, and entirely incongruent with the desired objective of efficiently addressing social problems. I did this so that they would be better equipped to comprehensively address the protest and put an end to it. The NFL only recovered - to the degree that it has - when the protesting ended; the protest simply went away and nothing more has been heard of it. As long as the national anthem was protested, fans were walking away; when the protesting ended, fans began to return. While the same dynamic is clearly not at work with the Yankees and "God Bless America," a tainting effect has nevertheless occurred.

When I heard that the Yankees had dropped Kate Smith's rendition of "God Bless America" because lyrics that were thought to be racist were found in two of her songs from the early 1930s, my heart sank. I instinctively knew from the innumerable examples of fake or exaggerated claims of other "victim-related" offenses that have been floated in our society over the past number of years, that in all likelihood this was just another overreaction to one of these claims. I feared that the New York Yankees - my New York Yankees - of all the great organizations in the world, the one that seemed so solid, so patriotic, and so strong toward our values, had been compromised.

As soon as I began to look into the matter, my fear was confirmed - I knew that the Yankees had fallen into a trap, and that Kate Smith had been used as bait. I immediately resolved to go to bat for both. I had watched the NFL all but ruin itself over the national anthem controversy, and there was no way I was going to let this happen to major league baseball, and especially not to the Yankees. The last thing I wanted was to lose esteem for the team that I loved, and thereby lose the real pleasure in watching them.

In order to fight for the Yankees, as well as to clear Kate Smith's name, I was compelled to thoroughly submerge myself into all related information regarding the essentials of Kate Smith's life and her supposed involvement in singing racist songs. My intention is to help you see the situation from a comprehensive standpoint of truth, and to encourage you and equip you to respond to that truth in all goodness, wisdom, and courage. In this, I want to be a valuable resource to you.

To this end, I have reached out to people around the country who were either affiliated with her or knowledgeable of the subject matter in question, spoken with her family, carefully reviewed the lyrics in question, read and studied both her autobiography and biography, read articles, listened to her archived radio programs, sifted through old transcripts, reviewed awards that she received, studied cultural attitudes and musical genres of the related time period (including the resurgence of Negro spirituals, and the origins of certain songs), reviewed and learned about the writers and composers who were associated with her, and read many current articles to assess people's opinions to see what has been covered and what has not, as well as to glean the general public opinion on this matter. I already had a strong background in American history, including cultural history, but I decided to study more intently the history of the Yankees and the period between World War I and World War II, including the greatest generation, because the grandeur of the Yankees and the related period in history is emblematic of the greatness of the country.

Context of banning Kate Smith's rendition of "God Bless America"

To understand what happened to Kate Smith is to first understand the context in which it happened. This ban is not an isolated event within our society, nor did it happen within a cultural vacuum. It happened as part of a chain of misguided reactions in a whole series of bizarre events that could never have occurred at any other time in our history - until now. This is because political correctness and illiberal

agendas have never been the dominant driving force in either determining our social perspective or constructing our way of life the way it is today.

There is a battle going on for the heart and soul of America that is so monumental and that is beyond the reach of human understanding to fully grasp its significance, though each one of us can sense it and is increasingly affected by it. Spurred on by forces coming primarily from certain unhealthy elements on the left, a cultural environment has been created that is hostile to almost everything that is traditional to America, and that is becoming increasingly warped, irrational, intolerant, unenlightened, and soon to be down right dangerous. For some time now, but especially in the last few years, there has been an incessant attack on the very foundations of our society, and especially on our Judeo-Christian heritage. It is not just one thing being called into question, it is seemingly everything at all times, and for any pretense. Events of this nature are so replete that it is impossible to keep up with them.

Leaders must be prepared

Extreme pressure is being placed on society in general, and leaders of influential American institutions in particular, to adhere to and agree with various harmful pseudo-liberal agendas that have managed to be insinuated into every sector of society. And as the culture goes, so does the country. This politically correct tyranny is having the effect of turning America into a country that is fast becoming unrecognizable from what has set it apart as the greatest nation in history. This is why it is essential for every cultural leader to be aware of this dynamic and to be on guard, because each one of them will be tested in this realm as to whether or not he will stand strong. Unfortunately, the resistance to these pervasive pressures has been so weak and anemic on the part of leaders, that not only have they failed to blunt the attacks, but they have actually encouraged more of the same by emboldening those who would perpetrate them.

Tactics used

Since those who promote false agendas cannot use strength of reason to do so, they must resort to various tactics and schemes. These tactics are well known and well practiced. In fact, they are so predictable and hackneyed that it is remarkable that they are still attempted, let alone that they are still effective. They are fear-based and centered on intimidation, propaganda, mob rule, bait and switch, irrationality, language manipulation, and the silencing - by any means - of anyone or anything that opposes them. And most deceptively, they create the illusion of having superior numbers, a majority of public opinion, and the moral upper hand.

Whatever support they do have is generally gained by deceiving the public through the distorted use of concepts such as inclusivity, fairness, diversity, equality, etc. Every concept used in the politically correct arsenal has a proper form that, when used in truth, is of great value to society - especially to the poor, marginalized, helpless, oppressed, and those facing real discrimination based on legitimate natural rights. But these words also have a counterfeit form that can be weaponized by those who will stop at nothing to gain power or fulfill their agendas, even if it means causing destruction and doing great harm to good people.

Failure to discern the difference between these two uses leads to a failure in using wise judgment and administering true justice, or in determining true civil rights from faux civil rights. The reason why the emphasis on victimization is so great is because its ability to be manipulated is endless in our over reactive culture. The pretenses of victimhood have been used as cover for outrageous amounts of false

accusations of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and on and on. Worse still, it has been used to chill both religious freedom and freedom of speech.

As far as racism specifically, it is a form of evil in any capacity. But it is also a form of evil to exploit racism by exaggerating or falsifying claims of it, which now has become more of the norm in our society, having the effect of setting racial progress back decades. The racism that has been propagandized lately to the public is a racism that is non-specific, amorphous, and that is ever-present and never-ending. In other words, it is a racism that has no functional way to deal with it, and therefore no real way to eliminate the effects of it. As such, it can forever goad the country. Real instances of racism and injustice should be dealt with swiftly, specifically, and decisively, when and where they show up. However, this can only be efficiently done when they have been minimized to their actual limited reality, as opposed to their mythical proportion.

When it comes to what happens when an organization is targeted by a political or social agenda, the same script is played out time and again: some fabricated or exaggerated claim of an offense or wrong doing is brought against a person of reputation or influence who is often connected to an organization that is vulnerable to being “strong-armed” on some level. The accusation is followed by an unreasonable demand for punishment, which always centers on removing the “offender’s” influence - firing, censoring, banning, etc., which is done with a great display of affectation, clamor, and a heightened sense of fake outrage. Accompanying these demands is an explicit or implicit threat that the organization will pay the price in terms of public relations, standing, and bottom line if these demands are not met. The pressure group or wanton individual who is launching the attack will also target the sponsors in order to put additional pressure on the organization - which is why organizations should never deal with sponsors who can be so easily played.

Regardless of exactly how the process unfolds, the basic elements of distortion of reality, unfounded or specious accusations, menacing, unreasonableness, intractableness, absurd demands, etc. are generally used.

Why leaders fold under pressure

When politically correct threats show up at their door, leaders fail to respond powerfully, fearlessly, and courageously because they are spiritually and mentally unprepared to do so. In such instances, they are almost always blind-sided and subsequently overwhelmed in the moment. Instead of rightly dividing truth from fiction and what is spiritual from what is unspiritual, there is a tendency to allow what is fictional and unspiritual to dictate today's social norms and mores - all of which explains the events happening in our day that never happened before. This is all somewhat understandable; the prospect of facing such an outlandish orchestrated firestorm and mob mentality can be very unsettling and can cause otherwise decent men to falter and be weak at the very time they need to be solid and strong. Rather than being ruled by a calm, steady spirit and guided by a set of clear, rational, moral, and spiritual principles, they concede to the lowest common denominator as panic sets in and sound judgment and strength of reason are jettisoned for what seems to be expedient in the moment. Because leaders intuitively know that, more often than not in these cases, they are dealing with individuals who are either misguided or unreasonable, nasty, and dishonest, they capitulate to the pressure in order to make the matter quickly go away, rather than resolving it with integrity and real justice.

What is lost in surrendering to the tyranny of political correctness

Taking the path of least resistance is only of value when it is the correct one to take, but when it is not it always causes more problems than it solves in the long run because a foundation for false compromise has been created. Whenever a leader gives in to any form of tyranny - including politically correct tyranny - he compromises not only himself but also the organization that he represents. There is a loss of greatness, including moral authority, spiritual vitality, strength of character, spontaneity, creative impulse, loyalty, etc. This loss is felt throughout the entire organization, which has been submitted to the falseness and negative energy represented in that tyranny that has unduly influenced it. Distinction, honor, and excellence are replaced with abasement, dishonor, and irrelevance. The country also suffers in the process because one of its leading institutions no longer stands for American values or American valor, thus losing an element of the culture that makes it special. It is so sad to watch one man in leadership after another completely sell out to a wide spectrum of false agendas, including those that are immoral and anti-spiritual.

The temptation of appeasement is that it promises the fastest way to getting things back to normal with the least amount of disruption. However, this promise is a false one. Once a compromise has been made with a bad actor or there is agreement with a false narrative, what was normal has now shifted and become downgraded, and in the process, a new normal that is less powerful and appealing has now been established because now the organization has lost a degree of inspirational value in translation. What is special and beautiful in culture remains so only if it retains the qualities that make it special and beautiful. Once these qualities are relinquished, so too is the essence they yield.

Specific impact on professional sports

As far as professional sports organizations such as the New York Yankees, it is impossible for the kind of action that was taken against Kate Smith to not have a certain demoralizing effect on the whole team. This is because the organization aligned itself with negative energy and not with positive strength, and by doing so, that negative energy was diffused throughout the whole organization, including onto the players, who on some level, whether conscious or subconscious, have registered what happened to Kate Smith. To be politically correct in the presence of real men, who are asked to perform at high levels in pressure situations, is a sign of weakness and creates the occasion for the loss of respect from those men. Passionate athletes want to know that their coach and front office have their backs when they themselves may need to stand up for what is right. They also want to know that the men they are going to battle with, and for, are men that are true to God and ultimate principles.

How the Kate Smith controversy should have been handled

The following two standards are what needed to be firmly established before addressing the “information” that was brought to you about Kate Smith:

- 1) That your organization is solid in terms of being grounded in strength, wisdom, fairness, and goodness - and responds accordingly in these situations without giving in to any whim of offense or demand for action, no matter how loud, obnoxious, or determined the “offended” person or group appears to be.
- 2) That your first consideration be to Kate Smith - in terms of respecting her greatness, historical importance to the country, known body of great work, positive qualities, character, and connection to the Yankees over and against any specious accusations against her. This does not mean that you would automatically ignore negative information about her; it means that you

would give her the benefit of any doubt regarding that information, and put the overwhelming burden of proof on her accusers.

After these two standards had been established, the following critical questions needed to be asked in order to have properly evaluated the situation:

1. Who exactly is this “anonymous” person or persons that brought this obscure, nonessential information about Kate Smith to your attention? And what credibility did they have that you should have entertained them in the first place?
2. What could possibly have been the motivation for someone to have brought this information forward? Do they have any history of these kinds of hit jobs?
3. What proof was offered that their intention was for the public good, and that they are fair minded, honest, and true?
4. What possible good could come from the Yankees bringing this information to public light, and would it do more harm than good to do so?
5. Was Kate Smith a racist on any level?
6. Did Kate Smith actually do anything wrong or show any real poor judgment regarding the songs in question? If so, did that wrong-doing rise to such a level that it should be considered pre-eminent over all the good that she had done in view of her whole person and whole life?
7. Did Kate Smith sing any songs that were meant to be racist or that contained racist lyrics or themes in them; or did they just appear to be racist or offensive upon a superficial and uneducated reading of the lyrics and understanding of their context?
8. Is there a difference between how the songs were perceived by both black and white audiences at the time they were written and sung, as opposed to how they would be perceived today?
9. If the songs did have lyrics that were racist, were they hateful or just mildly offensive with no harmful intent?
10. If any level of wrong-doing was actually ascertained by the Yankees, was the “punishment” both appropriate and good for the country - and did it make sense according to all that should have been taken into consideration?

The truth about Kate Smith and racism

There is an enormous volume of resourced information and accounting of Kate Smith’s life, words, and actions that spans decades and has been available for decades. In all of this, there is not a scintilla of evidence that Kate Smith was in any way racist at all. On the contrary, everything that is known about her overwhelmingly indicates that she was one of the most decent human beings that anyone could have hoped to have encountered, and that everything about her exuded an astonishing love for all people. Kate Smith lived to touch the lives of others and make them feel important and worthwhile. It would be simply impossible to conceive that her abundant care and ardor for people was stopped by the superficial boundaries of race, ethnicity, or any other natural external characteristic - nor is there a single instance in her entire life that has ever been referenced to claim otherwise.

Kate’s tremendous compassion for others was the result of her simple country upbringing and naturally sweet disposition, which was further forged and tenderized by her Christian faith. Kate was very familiar with Jesus’ teachings, and she strove to put the spirit of those teachings into her interaction with others.

Another major influence that gave her compassion and tolerance for others was the bullying and ostracization that she faced early in her career because of her weight. Her description of the abuse that

she took, both on and off the stage, is truly heartbreaking, and her terrible experience in this is a clear example of what we call “body shaming” today. Nevertheless, the way she persevered with grace, strength, and forbearance was inspiring, and laid the foundation for a meteoric rise that would be accompanied by a deep empathy for others who faced bias or scorn. The woman who herself knew great humiliation, and the pain that it causes, was able to be a champion and inspiring “friend” for the millions of her listeners and fans who felt they had an intimate connection with her.

Kate Smith’s love for humanity was so overwhelming and so non sectarian that any recognition of race was only incidental. This does not mean that she was blind to race or that she was somehow perfectly immune to the influences of the time period in which she lived. It does mean that she lived beyond the confines of race when it came to human contact, and above the kind of vitriolic and abrasive prejudice that was more acceptable and openly expressed in her day.

No one can be a seer and divine the future in terms of knowing exactly how present day behaviors and social norms will be viewed upon by future generations. It was not up to Kate Smith to be perfect, nor possible for her to adjust her behavior according to the political correctness of a future day. But it was up to Kate Smith (as it is up to all people who want to be in the light) to simply be sound and solid, and conduct herself according to universal, spiritual and moral principles that transcend time and place. And this she did in exemplary fashion, and according to all testimony, to such a degree that we would be hard pressed to find her equal in today’s entertainment industry.

Basically, Kate Smith was never influenced by race, but by the situation at hand. For example, it was Kate Smith who gave Josephine Baker, a controversial and outspoken black female entertainer, her first break into American television. Kate invited Josephine on her show after a long absence in America during which she had been excluded, despite having been an international star and eventually having been awarded the Medal of Resistance by the French government for her efforts during WWII. The New York Times went so far as refer to her as a “negro wench”, while Kate went so far as to have her on her show. That bold decision by Kate is revealing in light of the fact that the same year that Josephine was on the show, she was awarded Woman of the Year by the NAACP.

Besides Josephine Baker, Kate had many black guests on her shows over the span of her career and promoted their work. These guests include the likes of Harry Belafonte, Nat King Cole, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Sugar Ray Robinson, the Supremes, Leontyne Prince, Sammy Davis Jr., and others. She also performed at Harlem’s famed Apollo Theater many times. It’s unlikely, to say the least, that these famous black artists would have gone on her show, or that she would have been invited to the Apollo Theater, had she been one to have been known to have sung racist songs.

It was a well-known fact that Kate Smith associated with ordinary people more so than the glitterati that she had access to. When reflecting upon one of the most important nights of her life - the first time she was invited to the White House by FDR himself to sing for the King and Queen of England, Kate went out of her way to recount the following story:

“I was so thrilled that I could not contain myself. When I got inside, I met an old colored maid who smiled and said, ‘we’re just as thrilled as you are, Ms. Kate. We’re looking forward to hearing you sing.’ Well, that simple, homey greeting made me feel I was among friends.”

Kate Smith lent her voice and celebrity to the causes of tolerance, togetherness, and equality on numerous occasions, and especially during the period of World War II, as these examples demonstrate.

"Now that the lightning has struck and the thunder has roared, we are no longer in doubt. All the small differences, the petty problems that have occupied the various, separate groups in the United States must recede in the background now. Republican and Democrat, capital and labor, interventionist and isolationist...all creeds and races who have enjoyed the good years of living in an America at peace can forget their separate arguments...For out of the tragedy of war, the blessed spirit of unity is blossoming today." –Kate Smith, December 8, 1941 (the day Roosevelt declared war on Japan).

"The most powerful weapon in all the world still lies in the morale of its people...the will to sacrifice any unswerving determination to go forward with faith...and without fear. These are the ideals that brought America into being and they are the ideals that will always keep her strong and free." –Kate Smith, December 8, 1941 (on a separate message to women).

"I thank God that the fighting is over, that the enemy is vanquished. But this day, which will go down in history for those who come after us, to read and to study, is only the beginning of the grave tasks that lie ahead. This chaotic world must be set in order, step by step...millions must be fed and clothed...other millions—the enemies who no longer feel the impact of our physical might—must be taught an entirely new way of life...a philosophy that does not include aggression and cruelty...they must be taught that there is no super-race, that all men are equal, and have equal right to enjoy the fruits of this earth, and the tranquility and decency to which the truly civilized subscribe. Only if we maintain the peace and improve the conditions of all mankind, will war be worth the terrific price we have paid." –Kate Smith, August 15, 1945 (the day Japan announced their surrender).

"Race hatreds—social prejudices, religious bigotries, they are the diseases that eat away the fibers of peace. Unless they are exterminated, it's inevitable that we will have another war. You and I must do it—every father and mother in the world, every teacher, everyone who can rightly call himself a human being. Yes, it seems to me that the one thing that the people of the world have got to learn is if we are ever going to have lasting peace is tolerance. Of what use would it be if the lights go on again all over the world, if they don't go on in our hearts?" –Kate Smith's "The Value of Tolerance" on "We the People" (CBS, 1945).

In 1945, Kate Smith was honored during Brotherhood Week, sponsored by the National Conference of Jews and Christians, whose mission statement is founded on promoting unity among Christians and Jews, and combatting racism and religious bigotry in all forms. President Roosevelt's pronouncement before Brotherhood Week stated: *"It is a solemn duty for us who live and work in the United States to keep our country free of prejudice and bigotry so that when our fighting men return they may find us living by the freedom for which they are ready to give the full measure of devotion."* Kate was given an award for being "rated the leading individual contributing to the ideal of understanding."

In 1946, Kate Smith received the Ed Sullivan Award of Modern Screen Magazine, presented by Ed Sullivan himself, in which he stated: *"It is seldom in this profession that a person comes along whose greatness as a performer is equaled by her greatness as a human being. Such a person is Kate Smith. So, Kate, I give this to you on these two accounts - outstanding performance and outstanding*

citizenship. This silver plaque reflects not only the warm respect of your own profession but the affection of a country your voice has charmed for over fifteen years."

The truth about the songs and lyrics in question

According to Smith's biographer, Richard Hayes, "Smith's selection of songs was influenced by her principles. Smith was very careful about the lyrics she sang, rejecting anything suggestive or offensive."

Simply put, the two songs that are in question - "That's Why Darkies Were Born," "Pickanniny Heaven" - (out of the 3000 that Kate Smith sang) are neither racist nor intended to be racist or offensive. On the contrary, they were intended to be empowering and uplifting. The misunderstanding surrounding them is the result of 1) a superficial and incomplete reading of the lyrics, 2) a total failure to identify the intent and purpose of the song, and 3) a general lack of understanding of the time period, genre of music, first person usage, historicity of the songs, and commonly shared standards and experiences of people - both black and white - of that day.

One of the problems we have today, and that is having a real warping effect on the area of social interaction, is that a growing number of people are programmed to believe that the more "woke" one is in terms of abiding by the new rules of "sensitivity," the better of a person they are. Once a red flag is raised in the mind of someone who has been preconditioned to interpret everything that does not conform to their indoctrinated limited perspective as offensive - everything else about a particular situation is ignored, and no other considerations are allowed to influence the individual's thought process.

Additionally, it was common in the early twentieth century for both blacks and whites to address racism indirectly through various mediums such as music, rather than directly through public demonstrations. Progressives like Ray Henderson and Lew Brown (who wrote "That's Why Darkies Were Born" and who were inducted into the Songwriter's Hall of Fame) often used satire as a common vehicle to challenge the conventions of the time period that they were addressing. The satire often combined wit, irony, and deep sentiment to powerfully express certain ideas, and therefore only an insightful reader would be able to get it.

Analysis of “That’s Why Darkies Were Born”

News outlets that reported on this story in the past several weeks have only printed and commented on the song’s title and the following lyrics:

Someone had to pick the cotton
Someone had to pick the corn
That’s why darkies were born

However, reading only these lyrics while ignoring the rest of the song creates an entirely misleading understanding that would naturally lead anyone unfamiliar with the meaning of all the lyrics, biblical allusions, literary style - and the fact that the song was from the perspective of a slave or sharecropper - to conclude that this was simply a racist song of its day. But these lyrics read in full context and with proper understanding clearly take the song in an entirely different direction than that of racial denigration.

Brothers, sisters, when this world began
There was work to be done
And it seemed that someone
Left it to the colored man

Brothers, sisters, what must be, must be
Though the balance is wrong
Still your faith must be strong
Accept your destiny

Brothers, listen to me
Someone had to pick the cotton
Someone had to pick the corn
Someone had to slave and be able to sing
That's why darkies were born

Someone had to laugh at trouble
Though they were tired and worn
Had to be contented with any old thing
That's why darkies were born

Sing, sing, sing when you're weary
And sing when you're blue
Sing, sing, that's what you taught
All them white folks to do

Someone had to fight that old Devil
Shout about Gabriel's Horn
Someone had to stoke that old train
That would bring God's children to green pastures
That's why darkies were born

The fact is that “That’s Why Darkies Were Born” was written with nuanced lyrics, certain satirical elements, and biblical allegory that identified a greater purpose behind the suffering of the slaves. It is a song of suffering, overcoming, and final triumph - which is allegorical to the Hebrew slaves and then ultimately to Jesus.

A partial breakdown of the song will reveal its true purpose:

That’s Why Darkies Were Born...

Firstly, as far as the title itself and the use of the word “darkies”, it needs to be understood that the piece was written in 1931 as a historical song from the perspective of a slave, and it reflected back on a time in history when the usage of the term “darkie” was considered no more offensive than the word “colored”. Therefore, the use of the word “darkie” was used in a historical context for authenticity purposes - as was often done with this genre of music. Authenticity is critical to providing maximum emotional impact.

Though the balance is wrong
Still your faith must be strong
Accept your destiny

These lines firmly establish that there is an injustice that needs to be corrected, and that there is a plan and destiny in this that will require great faith.

Someone had to laugh at trouble
though they were tired and worn...
sing, sing, sing when you’re weary
and sing when you’re blue

There had to be a people whose spiritual resilience was so great that no hardship could steal their laughter or their singing - the two greatest expressions of real human freedom.

Sing, sing, that’s what you taught
all them white folks to do

And this resilience had to be so great that it would serve as an encouragement and example to others that they too could do the same in their hardships.

Interestingly, this is the same exact thought that Col. Robert Gould Shaw (Commander of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, the first all black fighting regiment in the Civil War) expressed, when in one of his letters he observed in his black soldiers a wonderful characteristic that must have stood in contrast to his experience of his own people.

“They are almost grave and sedate under instruction and they restrain themselves. But the moment they are dismissed from drill, every tongue is relaxed and every ivory tooth is visible and you would not know from the sound of it that this is an army camp. They must have learned this from long hours of meaningless, inhuman work to set them free so quickly. It gives them great energy. And there is no doubt we will leave this state as fine a regiment as any that has marched.”

For someone who is not familiar with the depth of and reverence for the use of biblical themes and illustrations that were replete in negro spirituals, of which the writer borrowed from, the following lines would be lost on them:

Someone had to fight that old Devil
Shout about Gabriel's Horn
Someone had to stoke that old train
That would bring God's children to green pastures
That's why darkies were born

It is this last stanza that brings the whole song powerfully together and reveals how “the balance that was wrong” will be settled. “Darkies” were born with a destiny to win the battle against the enemy of men’s souls (“Fight that old Devil”), announce that victory was imminent (“Shout about Gabriel's Horn”), and lead the way to both, temporal and eternal, salvation (“stoke that old train that would bring God's children to green pastures”).

Green pastures is a reference to Psalm 23—

“The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He lead me beside still waters. He restores my soul...”

Finally, the fact that Paul Robeson (African-American) and Mildred Bailey (Native American) both sang “That’s Why Darkies Were Born” should end any discussion of the song being racist. And Robeson - one of the most prominent African-American activists of his day - not only sang the song, but recorded and released his own version of it the same year that Kate Smith did (1932). Many of Robeson’s statements clearly demonstrate the level of his commitment to elevate the status of black people to full equality.

“...when I am abroad, I speak out against the injustices of the Negro people of this land.”

“Artists are the gatekeepers of truth, we are civilization’s radical voice.”

“Just as in Lincoln’s time the basic interest of the American majority made it necessary to strike down the system of Negro enslavement, as today those interests make it necessary to abolish the system of negro second class citizenship.”

It is difficult to imagine that any clear thinking person would believe that Mildred Bailey or Paul Robeson would have recorded and sung a song that was racist on any level, let alone overtly so.

Analysis of “Pickanniny Heaven”

The mistake of mischaracterizing “Pickanniny Heaven” as racist and offensive stems from 1) misdefining the word pickanniny, 2) not knowing the role the song played in its original application, and 3) viewing the song from the narrow-minded perspective of trying to uniformly apply today’s standards when judging another generation’s attitudes, actions, and use of language.

To begin with, Hall of Fame songwriter Sam Coslow wrote “Pickanniny Heaven” in 1932 not as a regular song, but as part of a score for the movie “Hello Everybody.” The movie was written especially for Kate Smith to star in by Fannie Hurst, who was one of the most popular writers of the era, and whose works included socially progressive and conscious themes related to race. She was known as an activist and advocate for African-Americans, immigrants, and the working class, and was well connected to the Harlem Renaissance. Once again, it would be hard to imagine that anyone with the background and reputation that Fannie Hurst had, would be involved in anything degrading of blacks.

“Pickanniny Heaven” was introduced in the movie by Kate Smith’s character who was on the radio singing in order to raise money to save the farmers’ land in the valley where she and they lived in. In the process of raising money, she dedicated one of the songs (“Pickanniny Heaven”) to a group of young black orphans who listened to her sing it over the radio from their orphanage. When the “God Bless America” controversy first began, a clip of that scene from the movie was circulated and falsely identified as a real life scene (without any background story), thereby creating an incomplete and misleading narrative used to reinforce the argument for Smith’s racial insensitivity.

And just as with “That’s Why Darkies Were Born,” when those who were reporting on the story of the controversy only, spotlighted the title and certain lyrics like “Great big watermelons roll around...And old Black Joe is their Santa Claus”, while ignoring the rest of the lyrics and the arc of the song, thus giving the illusion that the song was a mocking stereotyping of blacks.

Further confusion stems from the misunderstanding of some of the words in the song. Today, the word “pickanniny” in America - though so obscure it’s virtually non-existent - is considered a racial term. But it was not always considered such, and it certainly was not used as such in this song. In fact, it was used as a term of endearment just as it was used in different places at different times. Etymology of the word reveals that it evolved from the Spanish word “pequeño” (which means tiny, small) to the Portuguese “pequeno” (small, young child). “Pickanniny” was then used in both Creole English and Creole French by West Africans and slaves in the West Indies to affectionately refer to their little ones. This affectionate usage followed into the United States. Only gradually, and over time, did the word become bastardized by those with racist attitudes.

Therefore, what was totally missed in the criticism of “Pickanniny Heaven”, is that the word “pickanniny” was often used by African-American songwriters of the same era in an obviously non-derogatory way. For example, the fabulous African-American writing team of Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, who revived the all black “Minstrel Show”, wrote and performed the song “Pickanniny Shoes” in 1921, the famous African-American jazz singer, Ethel Waters recorded “Pickanniny Blues” in 1925, and Paul Robeson recorded "Pickanniny Lullaby (Do L'il Pickanniny's Gone to Sleep)" in 1931. There was even an all black band who called themselves “The Original Pickanniny Band.” The fact that “pickanniny” was a term commonly used by blacks during the same time period in which Kate Smith sang “Pickanniny Heaven”, once again changes the entire reality behind the false impression that the word was used only by whites in a derogatory fashion.

Like many terms with a racial connotation, the meaning of the word “pickanniny” changed over time, and therefore could have been a positive, neutral, or negative reference, depending on who was using it, when they were using it, and how they were using it.

Ultimately, “Pickanniny Heaven” was meant to be a simple, affectionate song of comfort (after the long, rich tradition of black lullabies) for children who were missing their mothers:

Full Lyrics

Little pickaninnies listen to the tale of a place that I know
It's twice as high as the moon
You get there in a balloon

Haven't you been told of the place where the good little pickaninnies go?
I've just been there so I ought to know
Great big watermelons roll around and get in your way
In the pickaninny heaven

Luscious pork chop bushes growin' right outside your doorway
In the pickaninnies' heaven
I've heard that they've even got a Swanee River made of real lemonade
And though the good lord took your mammy
She'll be waiting for you In the pickaninny heaven
Heaven
Heaven

They eat the windows and doors
They eat the ceilings and floors
Every kind of pet from a big teddy bear to a little Mickey Mouse
And old Black Joe is their Santa Claus

I've heard that they've even got a Swanee River made of real lemonade
And though the good lord took your mammy
She'll be waiting for you In the pickaninny heaven
Heaven
Heaven

To further illuminate the tender spirit of “Pickanniny Heaven”, I have included the lyrics to the lullaby song “Pickanniny Dreams”, which was written in 1912 also by Sam Coslow, as the original idea to “Pickanniny Heaven.”

Mammy, old and gray, Mammy, far away
Singing soft and low, “Hush-a-bye, don't you cry”
Mammy, once again, I am on your knee
Dreaming once again, While I hear you sing to me

Choc'late and molasses are a-growing on the trees
Humming birds a-humming pretty Dixie melodies
Melons are growing most ev'rywhere you go
Sweet breezes blowing in fields as white as snow

Silver headed mammies crooning tender lullabies
Down in Alabammy underneath the southern skies
Jam and lots of candy covered up with honey cream
That's a pickaninny's dream

Sweet melons growing, sweet breezes blowing
Angels are watching I know
While mammy sings soft and low
Sleep honey sleep in slumber deep
Ah, Ah, Ah, Ah, that's a pickaninny's dream

Besides the word pickanniny, other terms in the songs deserve clarification so that they too don't get mischaracterized. "Mammy" is used in its original meaning of mother (or grandmother). "Old Black Joe" is a reference to a positive black fictional character that was accepted among blacks. The use of "watermelon" has no negative racial stereotyping whatsoever; it is used alongside many references to various sweet foods that children of all colors find delightful (lemonade, chocolate, melons, honey cream, etc.).

If the themes of older songs that were written in that time period and that interfaced with racial themes are not accurately discerned, the cost in terms of artistic contribution to cultural history will be great.

A few examples will suffice to demonstrate just how far off it is possible to be in this regard.

The iconic Rodger's & Hammerstein's "You've Got To Be Carefully Taught", which was sung in the movie "South Pacific" is a sample of the overt use of satire to ridicule racist attitudes. Yet, if the lyrics to this song were presented out of context today to an unsuspecting public, these lines would have been taken literally, and everything "Rodgers & Hammerstein" would fall into disrepute:

You've got to be taught to hate and fear
You've got to be taught from year to year
You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made
And people whose skin is a different shade
You've got to be taught to before it's too late
Of all the people your relatives hate

However, anyone familiar with the film would know that the song was specifically exposing the idiocy of racial prejudice.

Henry Clay Work's famous song "Kingdom Coming" would have been considered racist today:

Say, darkies, hab you seen de massa, wid de mufstash on his face
Go long de road some time dis mornin', like he gwine to leab de place?
He seen a smoke way up de ribber, whar de Linkum gunboats lay;
He took his hat, and lef' berry sudden, and I spec' he's run away!
De massa run, ha, ha! De darkey stay, ho, ho!
It mus' be now de kindom coming, an' de year ob Jubilo!

However, this song was a pro-unionist song, sung from the perspective of a slave who was celebrating his imminent freedom as the northern army was approaching his plantation. It was said to have been sung by the black soldiers of the Massachusetts 54th Infantry as they marched into Richmond.

Two songs, “My Old Kentucky Home” and “Old Folks at Home” (Swanee River), were respectively adopted as the Kentucky and Florida state home songs, and have recently come under accusations of being racist and there have been attempts to remove them. These attacks against the songs stem from the failure to understand them in context because of a stunted provincial tendency to view everything from the prism of racism, rather than from the historical perspective of a creative, sympathetic writer.

The attacks against “My Old Kentucky Home” and “Old Folks at Home” are especially striking and ironic in light of the fact that both were ballads written by Stephen Foster, who was staunchly antislavery, and both were celebrated by the most influential African-American leaders of the time frame.

Frederick Douglas (who lanced the hypocrisy he saw in particular minstrel shows of his day) said of “My Old Kentucky Home” that “the song awakens sympathies for the slaves, in which antislavery principles take root, grow, and flourish”. And W.C Handy, known as the Father of The Blues, also stated of the song, “something there suggests close acquaintance with my people.”

W.E.B. Du Bois said of “Old Folks At Home” that the song “is legitimately considered an authentic song of the Negro race...who have adopted it to express their own emotions”.

In the final analysis, not only did Kate Smith not sing racist songs, as has been falsely stated, but she did sing and record a whole collection of beautiful and reverent negro spirituals, including “Old Time Religion”, “Rock Of Ages”, “Nobody Knows The Trouble I’ve Seen”, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”, etc. I find it telling that whoever found the two songs which they (wrongly) believed revealed racism in Kate Smith failed to find these spirituals, which did in fact reveal her true sentiments and could be supported by the totality of her life. What was an attempt to undo Kate Smith should now be that which enhances her legacy.

Race and Culture

The common mistake that most people today make when they look back over the period from the Civil War to the first half of the 20th century is to basically broad-brush the entire era as statically racist, with little distinction made from decade to decade and from place to place, except for the obvious extreme situations in the deep south. This erroneous assumption explains why people from this earlier time with good intentions, like Kate Smith, are easily cast in the wrong light. The fact is that the cultural and racial history of this period was very complex, diverse, and dynamic, with many different things happening in many different directions, making it very difficult for the casual observer to accurately assess a person’s behavior and motivation.

Throughout this entire time period, there was a huge demand and appreciation for black culture on the part of large segments of the white population – especially in the north. Whites were curious and enamored with both the realistic and romantic aspects of black life and the Old South. Much of what people today deem offensive when they look back on entertainment in this time was actually racism being worked out of society – albeit slowly and awkwardly at times - through that medium by very well-intentioned individuals who strategized how to fully humanize blacks in their day while being careful not to "whitewash" their distinctive cultural qualities.

For example, during the period of the Harlem Renaissance (in which “Pickanniny Shoes”, “Pickanniny Blues”, “Pickanniny Heaven”, etc. were written), many progressive whites sought to associate themselves with the renaissance and the acculturation of black artists, which explains why they wanted to use the same words that blacks themselves were using and did not consider offensive. (This should not be confused with the whites who did in fact negatively stereotype and caricature blacks before, during, and after this time period.) Many whites consulted with black artists on how to present their work and, in fact, black writers were hired to write the songs that whites sang in order to make it sound more authentic.

And furthermore, much of what some people today would consider offensive or racist was routinely supported by African-Americans of that day through their participation in writing, singing, recording, purchasing, and enjoying many songs with the same lyrics that Kate Smith sang. Moreover, this crossover acceptance was widely evidenced not just in music, but throughout entertainment and the other arts. For example, “Amos and Andy”, the famous sitcom voiced by two white actors playing two black men in Harlem, was popular with both whites and blacks throughout its entire run starting in 1928. And Carl VanVechten, a well-known white hipster whose strong patronage of black culture and controversial writings about everyday people and life in Harlem, won the praise of the most influential leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, with whom he had forged close relationships, including Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and Zora Neale Hurston.

What Kate Smith meant to America

The extent of Kate Smith’s positive influence on this country is so great that it would be impossible to capture, but one thing is for sure: few people in American history have touched the lives of so many millions of ordinary Americans in such a profound and personal way for so long as did she. Her career spanned an unbelievable fifty years and the place in history that she so powerfully intersected with constitutes one of the most important ones imaginable. The times, events, and people that made up the period from the Great Depression through the Korean War are auspicious to say the least. Her remarkable life story reads more like a rendezvous with destiny than it does the events of a mere entertainer. As one begins to retrace her steps, one has a chance to experience a heroic period in our history, one in which she was the center of, and indeed, abundantly exemplified.

Culturally, Kate Smith was everywhere and was one of the most well known women in the 20th century. She recorded over 3000 songs, and between 1936 and 1946 she introduced more songs on the air than any other singer. She hosted more than 10,300 radio shows, and in her peak had an audience of more than 15 million listeners a week. She also appeared on over 1,000 television shows representing nearly every famous TV program imaginable from 1940 to 1970, including every variety and talk show, from Bob Hope to the Johnny Carson Show. Even as late as the 1970s, Kate Smith was still influential, appearing on still more TV specials, including The Tony Orlando & Dawn Show, The Donnie & Marie Osmond Show, and the Mac Davis Show, etc.

Virtually every important cultural figure of the time interfaced with Kate Smith, from athletes to entertainers, to politicians and presidents. Individuals as diverse as Babe Ruth (who became a regular on her radio show), James Braddock, Eddie Rickenbacker, Bill Tilden, Tony Bennett, Bing Crosby, Andy Russell, Abbot & Costello, Lucille Ball, Gene Kelly, Orson Welles, Cecil B. DeMille, Henry Cabot Loge, John F. Kennedy, FDR, and Ronald Reagan are just a few of these cultural figures. Such an eclectic group of outstanding individuals bespeaks of Kate’s ability to connect with people of every stripe.

How did Kate Smith do all this? She was no rock star, no movie star, no glamour girl, no pin-up woman, nor was she a politician or charismatic figure. The answer is that she did it with an unmistakable genuineness, love for people, and in-the-moment spirit that made people feel as though she was directly connecting to them. The 25 million fan letters that she received over her career bespeak of her ability to make people feel that she was speaking directly to them and listening to their needs. Furthermore, the numerous charities that she supported and the causes that she championed made her intimately aware of the needs of real people. Kate Smith, indeed, had the heart for America because she first had the heart for Americans. And her simple, folksy philosophy of life cottoned to everyday people:

"I guess my creed - whether you're fat or thin, young or old - is to get as much good, clean wholesome fun out of life as you can. Come alive, and stay alive! Get physically tired at some exercise you enjoy doing! And at night, you'll sleep like a baby and wake up with a sparkle in your eye and a zest for whatever the day happens to bring."

The following quotes are just a sample of the vast array of the respect and affection that Kate Smith earned during her lifetime:

"From 1931 onward, Kate Smith did seem to personify the country—idealistic, generous, home-spun, sentimental, emotional, and proud. The mere mention of her name evokes a warm response from anyone who has ever seen or heard her." –George T. Simon, former Executive Director National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences.

"With a voice as lyrical as a clear mountain stream and a name as American as Smith or Kate..." –Andy Williams, 1966.

"I think it is safe to say that all our generations, yours and mine, can look back through the years and find one very lovely memory. Her name is Kate Smith." –Jack Paar, 1963.

"In all of radio's bright history, no name shines brighter than that of our star today. As commentator, singer, forceful personality, and discoverer of stars, she has no equal on the air." –Paul Whiteman, 1945.

"Someone like Kate Smith comes on and sings and it's something that time and generation does not erase, because songs and good singing are always valid, regardless of what is happening in the country." –Tom Smothers, 1967.

"When the encyclopedia of great singers is finally written, one of the most illustrious pages will be devoted to THE FIRST LADY OF SONG, the one and only Kate Smith." –Jackie Gleason, 1967.

"Here's a lady that is really, I think, a world institution. If you had to pick out a number of performers who are revered all over the world, she would be one of them." –Johnny Carson, 1966.

"Thank you Kate Smith for the swell job you've done on all my songs in the past, along with the other songwriters, I am thankful for Kate Smith." –Irving Berlin, 1945.

"Kate was truly a remarkable woman with a voice of pure gold." –William S. Paley, CBS President, 1989.

"The voice of America" –New York Times Magazine.

"Radio's own Statue of Liberty" –LA Times.

Of all the praise and honor that Kate Smith received, perhaps none were more telling of her extraordinary importance to America than that which she received from two of our greatest presidents, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan. When FDR introduced her to the King and Queen of England just prior to England's entry into World War II, he warmly stated:

"Your Majesties, this is Kate Smith—this is America".

And when Ronald Regan presented her with the Medal of Freedom in 1982, he said:

"The voice of Kate Smith is known and loved by millions of Americans, young and old. In war and peace, it has been an inspiration. Those simple but deeply moving words, "God Bless America," have taken an added meaning for all of us because of the way Kate Smith sang them. Thanks to her they have become a cherished part of our lives, an undying reminder of the beauty, the courage, and the heart of this great land of ours. In giving us a magnificent, selfless talent like Kate Smith, God has truly blessed America."

Kate Smith and World War II

Kate Smith's obituary from The Los Angeles Times read, "Kate Smith's ringing rendition of God Bless America cheered her countrymen through the darkest days of WWII and transformed her from a popular singer to a national symbol of joyful patriotism".

What Kate did for this country during World War II deserves special recognition. Our current generation has almost no ability to understand what that generation of Americans went through in World War II in terms of the galvanizing and gripping impact that the threat posed by nazism and fascism to our civilization had on the whole country. Furthermore, too many have absolutely no concept of the need to come together in order to preserve our Union.

Besides providing the nation with the rallying song of "God Bless America," which was played during every one of her radio programs throughout the duration of the War, Kate Smith played an enormous role in the war effort at home. Just two days after Pearl Harbor was attacked, Kate Smith, on her radio program, set the tone for the patriotic steadfastness that she would exude for the next four years:

"We go forward now with one common purpose. The days to come are going to require all the effort of heart and hand that we are capable of giving. These are facts which we accept without flinching. The road may not be an easy one to travel. It may take many long months to accomplish. It will mean anxious hearts, but it will also reveal courageous hearts. Our strength will be tried, but it will not be found wanting. Our record in the past has been a flaming torch that has lighted the path of freedom. That freedom is being threatened now, but it cannot be destroyed. Millions of men and women have in the past sacrificed everything they hold dear, everything save honor, to preserve liberty. Millions of us now stand ready to offer the same sacrifices so that liberty may not vanish from the earth. These are not empty words, not merely oratorical utterances based on what we would like to believe: they are the pulsating voice of America sweeping across this broad land and all its outposts."

Kate Smith raised more money in war bonds than any other single person in history - a staggering 600 million dollars - which today would be the equivalent of 10 billion dollars.

She was a constant source of encouragement to the troops, both home and abroad. It was estimated that she travelled some 520,000 miles to military bases all over the country and visited wounded soldiers in hospitals. She was incredibly popular with the soldiers everywhere she went. Of her visiting the wounded, she said:

"I saw them come back—some blinded, some shell-shocked, others raving maniacs because they could not bear what they went through. They returned on crutches, in wheelchairs, minus an arm or a leg. They dragged their way home diseased and spent, and in their hearts was locked a bitterness that they would never admit. I've visited many of them since then, in the hospitals and homes which the government has built and maintained for them. I've seen their tired eyes light up with pleasure because I came to sing to them... the little, simple songs... in return for my small efforts, the boys have given me medals, honorary memberships in various American legion posts; they've written me letters, and sent me engraved scrolls."

Kate was also a special source of warmth and comfort for the women whose sons and husbands went off to battle. These women sent her thousands of letters looking for solace and advice on what to do. In one of her broadcasts, she had a special message for them:

"I'd like to add a word for the millions of us women who are asking ourselves just exactly what we can do. The work we can do with our hands will be clearly set forth in the pattern of civilian defense. Meanwhile, never forget that we are the very backbone of this nation in keeping our morale at its highest pitch. We can wipe fear from our consciousness, we can pray...and we can go about our business of homemaking as usual. The most powerful weapon in all the world still lies in the morale of its people...the will to sacrifice...and the unswerving determination to go forward with faith and without fear. These are the ideals that brought America into being, they are the ideals that will always keep her strong and free."

Not only did Kate Smith encourage civilian and soldier alike, raise money, entertain, and console the wounded, she also set a personal example for the kind of sacrifices she repeatedly asked the nation to make to aid the war effort.

"Like most folks, I ride on buses and streetcars and subways. I shop in all our stores without benefit of special escort or special favor. I have no chauffeur-driven car waiting for me wherever I go. That luxury went out for me with Pearl Harbor... and I wouldn't want it any other way. I budget ration points like every other woman in America and keep an eye on the dwindling quarter-of-a-pound of butter. I write letters to dear ones and friends overseas...I crochet and do needle work and love it!"

Though Kate Smith had plenty of money that would have allowed her to have easily avoided what most people had to do by necessity, she chose to enter into the rank and file of American life in order to better identify with the country's challenge.

Kate Smith and “God Bless America”

“God Bless America” is a love song to America. Next to the “Star Spangled Banner”, it is the most patriotic and most identifiably American song there is. As glorious as the “Star Spangled Banner” is, “God Bless America” has a certain warmth and personal connection that the “Star Spangled Banner” doesn’t. The song’s power and depth comes from the heart-felt emotions of an immigrant’s love for a country as beautiful as ours - a homeland of freedom to be cherished and honored because it stood in such contrast to the miserable hell of degradation that was experienced in other places. Irving Berlin originally wrote “God Bless America” in 1917 but did not find the right outlet for the song, so he never released it. In 1938, Kate Smith was looking for a song that she could sing that would stir the hearts of Americans and wake them up in light of the threatening events in Europe. She said of her desire for such a song:

“I felt I wanted to do something special—something that would not only be a memorial to our soldiers—but would also emphasize just how much America means to each and everyone of us. I wanted more than an Armistice Day song—I wanted a new hymn of praise and love and allegiance to America... so, several weeks ago I went to a man I have known and admired for many years...”

After Kate made her request to Irving Berlin, he responded by saying “*Kate, you want something more than a popular song.*” After several attempts and not being able to strike the right expression, Berlin recalled, “*...suddenly I remembered the song I had laid aside twenty years before. I got it out, made a few changes, and found it hit the nail on the head.*” He then sent it to Kate, and this is how she described receiving the song: “*The other day he sent me his masterpiece, and along with it was this little note: ‘Dear Kate, here it is...I did the best I could, and it expresses the way I feel.’*”

On November 10, 1938, Armistice Day, Kate introduced the song to America over her radio broadcast by stating: “*When I first tried it over, I felt, here is a song that will be timeless - it will never die - others will thrill to its beauty long after we are gone. As I stand before the microphone and sing it with all my heart I’ll be thinking of our veterans and I’ll be praying with every breath I draw that we shall never have another war. And I’ll also be deeply grateful to Mr. Irving Berlin for his beautiful composition, “God Bless America.”*”

This first broadcast takes on extra significance because it occurred one day after Kristallnacht - the night (and day) of the greatest violence committed against the Jews to date in Germany.

“God Bless America” swept through the country and within months was heard everywhere. It was sung at both the Republican and Democratic conventions. The lyrics were made part of the congressional records and there was a motion to have the song become the new national anthem - which both Smith and Berlin rejected the idea of. The song became so popular that Kate Smith gave up the exclusive rights to the song so that it could be America’s song. To this present day, all proceeds from her rendition have gone to the Boy Scouts (and Girl Scouts) of America.

In reality, Kate Smith’s rendition of God Bless America is the only true and pure rendition- and no other rendition can quite ever replace it. To try and replace it (as opposed to supplementing it with other renditions), is to remove the soul from the song. This is because Kate’s rendition was created out of the original emotion and meaning behind the words and no one else today can have the same reference point that Kate had.

The importance of the Yankees

The Yankees are the greatest organization in the history of sports. It is more than the record 40 Pennants and 27 World Series titles. It is the entire culture of excellence, unique connection to New York City, and the true to life glory that sets them apart.

The sweep of nostalgia, storied mystique, and patriotic pride is richly woven into the emotional experience of every true Yankee fan, and especially those born and bred in New York.

But the Yankees' influence extends far beyond their fans and New York itself. If baseball is our national pastime, then the Yankees are our national pastime's greatest symbol. And as such, no sports team has contributed more to the social order of that history.

As a symbol of our culture, the Yankees have both the privilege and responsibility to act consistently with the grandeur they have represented and inspired in others throughout the years. If the Yankees act inconsistent with that grandeur now, the whole legacy of the organization suffers, and a link in the chain of cultural integrity is damaged.

The Yankees and Kate Smith

The combined greatness of the Yankees and Kate Smith made them a formidable pair for the patriotic standing of our country. George Steinbrenner, who himself was extremely patriotic, knew exactly the excellence that he was invoking when he established the tradition of playing "God Bless America" at every Yankee game after 9/11, and then specifically Kate Smith's rendition beginning in 2009. And I believe that if someone had brought the same thin and misleading information about Kate Smith to him, they would have been politely escorted out of the building, along with their fake concern regarding Kate Smith and her supposed racist lyrics.

If the Yankees now allow themselves to be utilized as a vehicle to impugn the greatness and reputation of Kate Smith, they are simultaneously impugning their own greatness and reputation, as well as that of the country. What has become problematic for Kate Smith will surely become problematic for the Yankees.

What is progressively being forced upon us in terms of the "new rules and standards" of what constitutes an offense and how offenses must be dealt with bears little resemblance to our entire sense of justice and the way an enlightened society interacts. We are seemingly now an accusation-based society that is becoming so unforgiving, so inflexible, and so exacting, that our true American and Judeo-Christian qualities of justice, true tolerance, and forgiveness are being suppressed.

In fact, these new standards are so draconian that if they become the norm, no decent, honest person who has built a good reputation is safe from having all that that they have worked for their entire life taken away in a single moment because of some specious or false allegation, or some mistake they may have made. Furthermore, virtually no positive aspect of our history - no cherished, iconic elements of our nation's past - would be safe from the nefarious hidden agendas of emotionally and spiritually unhealthy individuals who are increasingly being given free course to alter our society. No great artistic or cultural work, movement or achievement, no great individual or group of individuals, no matter how much good resulted from their life would have a guaranty of their standing tomorrow. Our civil discourse would fall into such a dysfunctional and ineffectual state that actual progress would become impossible.

And what could be said of the New York Yankees if the same standards and maladjusted mindsets that were used to judge Kate Smith were deployed against them? The entire Yankee organization willingly and actively took part in a 50-year color ban barring black players from playing major league baseball, and when the color ban was “lifted”, the Yankees were one of the last few teams to sign a black player - Elston Howard.

Throughout the decades of this time, there is no example of any Yankee player, coach, or executive publicly speaking out against the color ban. In light of this, would it now be reasonable - according to the new rules of obliterating the memory of racial offenders, actual or perceived - to label the Yankees as a racist organization and demand a boycott of them? Should the monuments and plaques of the players and managers such as Ruth, Gehrig, and Miller Huggins be removed because of their tacit cooperation with “Jim Crowe baseball”? Should we err on the side of caution and have Yankee stadium demolished because it is a “symbol of hate” and a reminder of past oppression? And finally, should we demand the Yankees stop playing “New York, New York” at the end of every game and “God Bless America” all together because of Frank Sinatra’s and Irving Berlin’s potentially offensive elements within their pasts that could surely be dug up?

In a sane world, these hypotheticals are, of course, insane. But within the current rationale that supports the continual undoing of our shared history - from the attacks against Shakespeare, Columbus, Washington, and Teddy Roosevelt, and seemingly everyone in between - these hypotheticals appear almost logical. It seems as though George Orwell’s “1984” was for our present time.

“Every record has been destroyed or falsified, every book has been rewritten, every picture has been repainted, every statue has been renamed, every date has been altered. And the process has continued day by day, minute by minute. History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right.”

–George Orwell, 1984

I am absolutely all for having high standards for those who are given honor or positions of leadership in our society - so long as those standards are evenly applied across the board, and that the standards are for men, and not for angels. I think those who want to cherry pick from our nation’s past to find the aspects of heros’ lives that they find objectionable would be in for a rude awakening to discover how they themselves are completely products of their own time in terms of following and believing what their culture tells them to follow and believe, but what in fact violates basic common sense, as well as in some cases, moral and spiritual law. In fact, today we routinely air in giving credence or honor to those which previous generations would rightly judge as underserving of that credence or honor according to the most basic standards of judgement.

Where things stand now, and the fans’ reaction

The situation regarding Kate Smith is extremely important to get right because there is far more at stake than meets the eye, and so much currently hangs in the balance - including the Yankees’ honor, legacy, and national influence. As it stands now, you appear to be reactive followers rather than proactive leaders. Going after the woman who gave us “God Bless America” for the thin reasons that were given was a loser from the start, and nobody who has common sense and common decency is applauding, and whoever is applauding this decision is most likely ill-informed and doing so with not much enthusiasm anyway. You neither took a bold stand against true injustice (since what was leveled against Kate Smith was contrived), nor did you stand against the real purveyors of injustice - those bullies that are imposing

their unnatural and foolish standards on the rest of us. As such, your decision about Kate Smith has placed you in no man's land with a no-win situation.

You say that you are "erring on the side of sensitivity", and I believe that you are sincere in this, but in fact you were entirely insensitive to Kate Smith, her family, and the millions in the nation that loved her and do love her. Instead of being sensitive to them, your sensitivity was toward a phantom group of people.

Let's face it, nobody going through the turnstiles at Yankees stadium had ever heard of the songs in question, nor cared about lost recordings from ninety years ago - furthermore, not a single person in America was being threatened by Kate Smith's influence today or the existence of these songs. On the contrary, millions have been blessed by Kate Smith's rendition of "God Bless America".

So who exactly wins here? Nobody. Who loses? To start with, everyone that was blessed by her rendition of "God Bless America" at Yankee stadium. Most importantly, society suffers because of the weakening effect on the Yankees, and the dishonor brought to Kate Smith and the nation that supported her.

The reaction to your no longer playing Kate Smith's rendition has gone somewhat underneath the radar, which is good news for you at the moment. As I read it, most people are only vaguely aware of the situation, with a smaller percent of people being more aware of it. However, whatever degree of awareness people have, they are expressing a disapprobation that ranges from confusion and annoyance to total frustration and outright anger. Right now the situation is simmering, but as more and more people find out about her banning and the total dynamic behind it, the more upset they are going to be. In speaking to many people, I have found that one thing is for sure, no matter their degree of awareness, everybody recognizes what has happened, and is growing more impatient with the overarching tendency in society to pander to political correctness.

By acting in the manner that you have, which is with the presumption of guilt toward Kate Smith being racist on some level, you have given assent to others to do the same. Unfortunately for the Yankees, what the Philadelphia Flyers did - in following your lead - is now tethered to the Yankees. What they have done is so totally reprehensible that I have not even wanted to mention it in this letter. Their disloyalty to their beloved "good luck charm", the woman who was given stirring standing ovations that lasted for minutes on end when she performed for them live on their home ice, and whose rendition of "God Bless America" was synonymous with their phenomenal success at winning the Stanley Cup, is chilling. And the fact that they removed her statue and covered it in black - as though she were a public villain - is cowardly and beyond words. The outrage and movement by fans in Philadelphia could easily gain momentum, and when it does, it will reflect back negatively on the Yankees.

How is it possible?

In view of Kate Smith's whole life, whole person, and whole history, how is that only now, after ninety years of being a public figure - an extremely well known and popular one at that - has it been determined that she is deserving of public repudiation? How is it that a woman's "racism" - a woman who was known as the first lady of radio and later the first lady of television - went unnoticed all these years? How is it that we have absolutely no record of anyone from any background from the incredible amount of influential people that she interfaced with over the span of decades ever raising an issue about her related to race?

Of all the great people that she was affiliated with, should we assume that every entertainer and artist, both black and white, every executive from every radio, record, and TV studio, every athlete, every organization that ever honored her, all somehow missed what somebody today found by scavenging through her archives?

The answer is self-evident: they didn't miss it because it was never there to begin with. But what was there was a life that was lived truthfully in the moment, and that accrued honor, love, and adoration, one day at a time, from a nation that experienced her in her lifetime. If the songs were really offensive or racist on their face, we would have heard about it somewhere along the way before now because individuals and organizations were speaking up at the time about racial issues when compelled to do so, long before Kate Smith sang "That's Why Darkies Were Born" and "Pickanniny Heaven". For example, when the "Birth of a Nation" came out in 1915 - a film that clearly had racist elements - the NAACP and others were quick to criticize it in a mass way.

The bottom line is that we need an entirely different and enlightened way of dealing with modern criticisms of historical figures. If something is not called into question when it is out in the light for all people to evaluate in full dimension and in real time, it must be taken at face value and left to stand alone - which should speak for itself. In order for this standing to change, new substantial information that can be clearly proven beyond any reasonable doubt must be presented. If, on the other hand, any suspicion is raised at a later time that does not meet this sound criteria, but is only specious and speculative, that suspicion must be rejected on its face.

Kate Smith in proper perspective

Just to glimpse Kate Smith's life is both humbling and awe-inspiring.

The millions of lives that she touched, the culture that she enhanced, the performers of every background that she helped along the way, the grace that she demonstrated, the patriotism that she fostered, the service to our country that she gave, the honors she was recognized with, the money that she donated, the encouragement she provided, the song "God Bless America" that she brought to the public, and the 50 year duration of excellence that she achieved - is all a wonderful account of a wonderful woman, of which we would be hard-pressed to find a woman even close to her equal in today's entertainment industry. Kate Smith now deserves veneration from a nation that owes her a great debt, not the defamation that she has received.

What the Yankees can do now

The Yankees cannot afford to have this situation hanging over the rest of this season like a cloud. This is not going to go away as though nothing happened. An injustice has been done and needs to be undone. Something that is wrong remains wrong, and is felt in the air until it is made right. In real terms, I hope you side with the pride of the Yankees and the pride of America, and reject the kind of political correctness that is destroying our country. You actually have an opportunity to come out of this looking solid and strong, as well as setting an example of the kind of leadership that our society is so in desperate need of. By stating what you did on April 19th "while no real decisions have been made", you smartly did not paint yourself in the corner like the Flyers did. Instead, you left the opportunity to make your final decision the right one - thereby completely extricating yourself from what could have become a very bad long-term mistake.

I honestly believe that if you come out with a clear, simple, balanced statement on this, and one that puts Kate Smith's rendition back into play at Yankee stadium, that you will win the respect of millions and millions of Americans and electrify both the players and the fans. Basically, you would become the heroes that took on the bully on behalf of a righteous cause. I think we all know what the reactions of the fans would be the first time Kate Smith's "God Bless America" was played at the stadium again - there will be a tremendous outpouring of emotion in that ovation that would be right up there among the greatest moments at Yankees stadium.

Kate Smith loved New York, was an ardent Yankee Fan, and was friends with Babe Ruth. She loved America and all the people of America. She was there when our country needed her the most, and we need to be there for her legacy now. For if FDR said "*this is Kate Smith - this is America*", then we can rightly say "*what has been done to Kate Smith, has been done to America*", and we can also now say "*what we will now do for Kate Smith, we will now do for America*".

My offer to help

I am one hundred percent available to help you in whatever way is necessary. As indicated, I have done a tremendous amount of work looking fully into this controversy, and will continue to do so for your use and benefit. And because of this, I can provide for you all the foundational, inspirational, and intellectual elements that can be detailed into a total approach and clear, all-embracing statement that will overwhelmingly satisfy every open mind and open heart.

Additionally, over the past several weeks I have been in continual contact with Kate Smith's niece, Suzy Andron, and her husband Bob, who is the family spokesman. These are very good people who are naturally upset over what has been implicated about Kate Smith. They are beside themselves that no one from the Yankees or Flyers have bothered to reach out to them. They simply want Kate's good name restored. I have repeatedly told them that the good owners of the Yankees will do the right thing, and act in good faith, when furnished with the right information and given a whole perspective. They are aware that I have written to you, and would welcome any way that I could be a liaison between the Yankees and them, over and against any other consideration they may have going forward. They have had no material impact on the content of this letter.

Regardless of whether I had connected with the Androns or not, I have written this letter to you entirely on my own accord, for my own self-interest as a Yankee fan and for the purposes that I have stated. I purposely want to feel good about my team, and sincerely hope that this letter is received in the genuine spirit that it is written, and I look forward to a truly positive communication with you. I believe that if we really follow through on this, a tremendous amount of good will come out of this.

I am available to meet with you immediately in person or speak with you over the phone regarding any aspect of this letter. To learn more about my work and interests, please visit my website at www.jayetzel.com.

Sincerely,

Jay Etzel
(914) 384-1288