Episode 346: Music and Politics in the Early United States

[00:00:00] **Announcer:** You're listening to an AirWave Media podcast.

[00:00:04] **Liz Covart:** *Ben Franklin's World* is a production of The Omohundro Institute and is sponsored by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Hello and welcome to episode 346 of *Ben Franklin's World*, the podcast dedicated to helping you learn more about how the people and events of our early American past have shaped the present-day world we live in. And I'm your host Liz Covart. In the last episode of our five-episode series on music in early America, in episode 345, Glenda Goodman took us into the world of elite white Americans, who used music as a way to create American culture in the early United States. But how did more everyday Americans in the early republic use and enjoy music? How did they create and circulate new songs and lyrics? Billy Coleman, an assistant teaching professor in history at the University of Missouri and the author of the book, *Harnessing Harmony: Music, Power, and Politics in the United States, 1788–1865*, joins us to investigate answers to these questions. Now as we continue our exploration of the musical landscapes of the early United States, Billy reveals the popularity of music in early America and the desire of early Americans to create new songs, information about how early Americans wrote songs to circulate ideas about politics in the early republic, and a brief history of "The Star-Spangled Banner," the national anthem of the United States.

But first, the musical sections in this episode come from the United States Marine Corps. You will hear the Marine Corps band play "Hail Columbia," a Marine Corps master gunnery sergeant, Peter Wilson, play "The Star-Spangled Banner" on violin. Now near the end of the episode, you'll also hear an arrangement of "Hail Columbia" that Billy Coleman and his collaborative partner Running Notch made for the twenty-first century. Links to these songs, their authors, and these musicians are on the show notes page, benfranklinsworld.com/346. All right. Are you ready to dive into the world of musical politics in early America? Let's go meet our expert guide.

Joining us is an assistant teaching professor in history at the University of Missouri Honors College and the Kinder Institute at the University of Missouri. He's written several articles and a book, *Harnessing Harmony: Music, Power, and Politics in the United States, 1788–1865*, for which our guest has also produced a book soundtrack that translates early American songs into twenty-first century styles. Welcome to *Ben Franklin's World*, Billy Coleman.

[00:02:59] **Billy Coleman:** Thanks so much, Liz. I'm really happy to be here.

[00:03:01] **Liz Covart:** So Billy, we're here to discuss music and its use in the early United States. Would you tell us about the kinds and styles of music early Americans liked to listen to in the early republic period and could you tell us something about the musical landscapes of the early United States?

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[00:03:18] **Billy Coleman:** I like the phrase of musical landscapes because there are very many different ways of experiencing all different kinds of music, depending on who you were or where you were. But there are some kind of ways of trying to simplify things, which is that, I guess if you're talking about middle- to upper-class Anglo-Americans, the music that they enjoyed most tended to be from the British Isles or Europe. And people can find it sometimes a little bit ironic that if you've just revolted from the United Kingdom, that you spend all your time singing British songs, but that is effectively what the average white person at that point was doing. Basically, early Americans had a lot of British sentimental songs, and a good example of that kind of tune that people would know is "To Anacreon in Heaven." It's the national anthem now, but even before it became "The Star-Spangled Banner," it was one of many incredibly popular melodies that people just used over and over again.

[00:04:20] **Liz Covart:** It sounds like early Americans were really interested in European, and specifically British, music. And I wonder if this rang true for all Americans, was an interest in European, and specifically British, music something that just wealthy white Americans were interested in? Or was this the kind of imported music that all types of Americans would've been interested in and would've had access to sing and play the music for?

[00:04:46] **Billy Coleman:** It is, and it isn't. Music that is beyond the bounds, essentially, of anything that you could make yourself is very difficult to access. If you were wealthy, it was possible to import some kind of sheet music from Europe or to import news about this kind of music. But things that required multiple instruments to be played together at once could get a lot more difficult to access. So in that way there is a difference. But at the same time, that difference allows for actually relatively common culture of music. Whether you are elite or nonelite, some of these popular melodies would be familiar to everyone. A lot of the sort of more day-to-day music practices would be shared across social classes. Even though in some ways the meanings of those uses of music would be different, but you could still have a relatively similar experience of music across those things. It's only if you sort of need to have higher class instruments or more organization in terms of like, if the music requires lots of people to play it, then that could make a difference.

In terms of instruments, like the most popular instrument is basically voice. And then you would have, you know, the cheap portable instruments would be the next most popular thing. So like the fiddle for instance would be up there, flutes, fifes, things like that, that you could easily carry around with you. And then if you were wealthy, then you might have like a harpsichord for your parlor or a piano or something like that.

[00:06:27] **Liz Covart:** So in his book, *Harnessing Harmony*, Billy argues that one of the everyday uses of music in the early republic United States was to use music as a form of political expression. Billy, how did early Americans use music as a form of political expression?

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[00:06:44] **Billy Coleman:** Typically, when people think about music and politics, they first think about protests and resistance. Sometimes even a sense of democratization, and this is because music is, as a medium, at least perceived to be more accessible to anyone, right? Anyone who has a voice and a melody and a message can use music in a way that could potentially change the world or influence society. And you know, music definitely was used in those ways in the early republic, whether you are going to think of it in terms of enslaved people using music to resist or express their humanity in the face of an institution that is designed around denying the idea of that humanity to them, whether it is white women writing songs to assert their political rights, whether it's lower-class men using music and so on, right? I mean, the thing about music is that it is true, you don't have to be educated or wealthy or enfranchised to use it to change things.

My book tries to focus on the fact that music was also attractive to people in the early republic because it had the ability to preserve privilege and power as well. And in fact, this aspect of music I think was particularly appealing to a postrevolutionary American elite who had a lot of power to try and use music in those kinds of ways and to shape the meanings of music who had just gone through a whole revolution of change. They just created this whole brand-new experimental type of republican government and they hoped that somehow it would stay together, right? Despite the fact that the people for whom that constitution that they made claim to speak, turned out to have all sorts of different ideas about what this new kind of nation was going to be or what it was going to look like, or what its values or identity would be. So it was kind of like, well, now that we have revolted successfully against the British, how do we stop our new nation from revolting against itself? Most revolutionary societies tend to have more than one revolution at a time. And so the answer for a lot of these elites, especially those who end up being in what becomes the Federalist Party, who sort of assume power in the administration under George Washington initially, the answer to them had to be something along the lines of instilling respect for the government and its leaders, especially since they now are leaders who are at least theoretically representatives of the people themselves. To see music as this means for facilitating the order and unity that was necessary to have liberty and a free society, as well as something that could improve that society and school its constituents in how to be a nation that is better and distinct from those that came before it. And undergirding all that is, again, accessibility.

Accessibility made music as a political tool attractive to nonelites because they could access it. But that same accessibility is what made it attractive to elites as well because they could access everyone else and their feelings and their sensations and their minds and their ideas. It could help people articulate a version of a political community that they wanted. And music could physically bring that community together because before you have recording technologies, you could only have music if performance was part of it. So that accessibility is actually important for both sides of the coin when it comes to either elites or nonelites trying to use music to either change the world or to keep it exactly how it was or to preserve the existing hierarchy.

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[00:10:24] **Liz Covart:** I wonder if you could give us an example of how using music in these political ways worked on the ground because we are talking about the preradio era. So how did different jingles for political candidates or songs that would instill respect for the new nation and its government or for other political causes catch on?

[00:10:47] **Billy Coleman:** Once you write a song, you can get it into newspapers, get it distributed, people can read it and then incorporate it into their own lives. I guess "Hail Columbia" could be a good example. So "Hail Columbia" is a song written by Joseph Hopkinson, who writes it because he wants to honor George Washington and George Washington's values of neutrality and nonpartisanship. And he does it in keeping with the fact that his father, Francis Hopkinson, had done the same thing a few years beforehand. And so he writes this song in the middle of the XYZ affair, when partisanship is really at its height between the Federalist Party and the Republicans. One side of which is emphasizing the importance of allying with Britain, the other emphasizing the importance of allying the United States with France. And he basically says, we need to rise above this. And just remember that Washington said we should be neutral. We should look out for our own interests rather than others'. But he emphasizes in doing that we need to have unity in order to have that kind of liberty first. And he emphasizes that we need to respect the president who is in the chair.

And so when he does that, it's this kind of way of saying we need to rise above party through emphasizing Federalist Party ideals in ways that the Republican Party at the time and people editing Republican newspapers are like, hang on. That's really not the kind of nonpartisanship that I was into, right? If we want to glorify John Adams, you know, we could have had a king of America, but we decided not to do that. We'd rather not have a song like that that is being played in theaters and being called for in theaters and being published in newspapers and being told to everyone that this is a patriotic song, as opposed to a partisan song. That's the kind of example of how a song can take on a popular quality. The politics of it is people arguing about what it means, right? About, you know, is this political? Is this partisan? Is this patriotic? Should we be valorizing these aspects of our values like unity, or should we be saying that liberty is more important? So on and so forth.

[00:13:08] **Liz Covart:** It sounds like one of the ways that music was conveyed to people in this preradio era was through newspapers. So I'm imagining that we're opening up an early American newspaper and we see the musical lyrics to "Hail Columbia." But my question is how did people know what kinds of musical tunes or melodies to put underneath these musical lyrics? Could you tell us a bit about "The Star-Spangled Banner," which was also a political song, and how people knew that they should put the melody of "To Anacreon in Heaven" under these lyrics?

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[00:13:40] **Billy Coleman:** Oftentimes the lyrics of a song would be published in a newspaper or on a broad side or slightly later on in songsters, which were just small, cheap publications full of song lyrics that didn't have any musical notation either. And so some songs would be published with an indication of the tune that they go along with. But other tunes, actually, like "The Star-Spangled Banner," are initially published without any indication of the tune that it's supposed to go to. The idea is that people in some ways can do it themselves, and so arguably there is an aspect of like creativity there and that people can figure out the best tune for it. But also it's just speaking to the fact that some tunes just are so popular that if you write a song that is in the right meter and that works with that tune, that people will just inherently get it, and that they'll sort of make the connection themselves and figure out that that is the right melody.

[00:14:42] **Liz Covart:** So if Francis Scott Key published the lyrics to "The Star-Spangled Banner" without any indication that it should be put to the melody of "To Anacreon in Heaven" how did Americans understand that that was the melody that they should use to sing the song?

[00:14:58] **Billy Coleman:** Yes. Well, the melody to "The Star-Spangled Banner," to "Anacreon in Heaven," is a relatively sort of specific and complicated melody, and so most of the time when musicologists have tried to sort of pinpoint that definitely this is meant to be the melody for it, usually the argument is just that it fits so perfectly with that melody that it could hardly have been meant to be anything else. Francis Scott Key was also known to have written a previous patriotic type of melody to "Anacreon in Heaven" earlier on, so there's a kind of track record there. And it was also a melody that beyond being just innately popular, had also been just used for political purposes a number of times already, and it wasn't associated with any particular party. Federalists had used it, Republicans had used it. Everyone had used that song in support of politics or patriotism. The sort of commonality of that song, it's popularity, as well as the uniqueness of the melody connected to the lyrics to which it was put, just tend to lead musicology specialists to believe that it is definitely that melody that was intended to be associated with it.

[00:16:10] **Liz Covart:** And speaking of those lyrics, could you tell us more about Francis Scott Key and how he came up with the lyrics or the words for "The Star-Spangled Banner"?

[00:16:19] **Billy Coleman:** Yeah. Most Americans know the basic story of how Francis Scott Key wrote "The Star-Spangled Banner." That he witnesses Fort McHenry in Baltimore, withstanding the British bombardment in 1814 during the War of 1812. The thing that struck me about that story is what motivated Francis Scott Key to write a song in that situation. I mean, if he was genuinely filled with patriotic spirit in witnessing that event, he could have done all sorts of things, but he decides to write a song, so I wanted to try and figure out why he did that. In that story, the way it gets told, he becomes a kind of cipher for pure patriotism in a way that sort of

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suggests that he may not have had any other interests in his life whatsoever. And so I wanted to see what happens when you center the fact that he was a political person with a political identity.

So Francis Scott Key is someone who is initially born into plenty of wealth and grows up on a plantation and grows into being a young Federalist lawyer by the time that he is writing "The Star-Spangled Banner." And obviously "The Star-Spangled Banner" is written during the War of 1812, and the thing that is really worrying Francis Scott Key at that point is his sense that factionalism had unnecessarily brought people into this war and that people—again, not essentially too unlike Francis Hopkinson—that people needed to realize that they had to rise above that factionalism to try and get themselves out of it. He's a very religious person and so he actually feels like maybe that there is a kind of religious motivation to that course of events, like maybe this will teach us the lesson that we were supposed to learn from this kind of event. The thing about that is that he can claim that he's antipartisan and that he's trying to be patriotic, but what I found when I looked at his correspondence surrounding this time period was not only was he interested in trying to sort of get rid of antipartisanship, but he was interested in doing it in a very specific way, which was that he was trying to get up an antipartisan newspaper that was avowedly going to be against the current Republican administration. So he wanted to create an antipartisan newspaper that was specifically against the Republicans, which isn't exactly the kind of like nonpartisan patriotism that people might imagine that he had.

Key does not, as far as anyone knows, write down at the time, any kind of explanation about why exactly he wrote the song when he did. But I think it's important to recognize that his version of patriotism was particular, that his version of patriotism was to oppose the Republican administration, to unite in support of a war effort that he had previously been against, but now as a southern Federalist was for after the British essentially invaded and sacked the White House, and, you know, had done all these things that he thought were risible, and he figured he needed to rise above partisanship to realize the wisdom of his own point of view. So the song itself and the lyrics are not particularly partisan. The lyrics are relatively straightforwardly describing the situation that he witnesses. He is watching the bombardment happening and the defenses withstanding. And this is a remarkable story. And that's partly why it is quite unambiguously popular at the time in ways that songs tend not to be. But this song has the unique advantage of being associated with the eyewitness account of a military victory against a foreign aggressor. And not just any foreign aggressor but, you know, one of the strongest empires in the world at the time, the British. So that combined with the fact that Francis Scott Key doesn't initially advertise his authorship—so, you know, despite the fact that he was a Federalist lawyer, people don't initially read this song as something that is associated with a particular person—that just helps it be a very popular song.

[00:20:27] **Liz Covart:** I'm glad you brought up partisanship because Brian has a question about whether music acted as a form of political propaganda in the early United States. And before you start to answer this question, Billy, we need to take a moment to thank our episode sponsor.

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As we've been hearing, music was an ever-present aspect of early American life. And our friends at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation have a new exhibition in the art museums of Colonial Williamsburg called *Making Music in Early America*. *Making Music in Early America* will immerse you in the musical world of the eighteenth century, a time when you could hear songs sung in the work fields, at militia drills on town commons, and places like churches, ballrooms, and family parlors. This exhibition at the art museums of Colonial Williamsburg will allow you to see the instruments used to enliven dinner parties, theaters, and life in enslaved quarters. It will also allow you to see how music changed over time and created communities and community life. To learn more about Colonial Williamsburg's *Making Music in Early America* exhibition visit benfranklinsworld.com/music. That's benfranklinsworld.com/music.

Billy, we know that the news is based on fact and that propaganda is based largely on opinion and that a lot of political partisanship often comes from opinion. So would you answer Brian's question by telling us if early Americans used music as a tool for political propaganda in the early republic?

[00:20:52] **Billy Coleman:** That is a thorny question, I would say, but is a good question. My take is that propaganda is not necessarily the most accurate word to describe the political impact of music in early America. One of the reasons for this is semantic in the sense that early Americans were not familiar with that word in the late eighteenth century or the early nineteenth century. It's also nowadays loaded with a certain amount of twentieth- and twenty-first-century implications about disinformation campaigns that are consciously pernicious and consciously manipulative and deceptive. But I think people in early America that were using music in even what they perceive to be relatively explicitly political terms didn't perceive of what they were doing in those kinds of negative ways. People might criticize them sometimes in those ways, but that's not how their self-perception of this was.

[00:21:53] **Liz Covart:** Now earlier you mentioned that a lot of musical writing in the early republic actually involved writing lyrics because the most popular instrument for early Americans was, of course, the voice. And you also mentioned that these lyrics would be circulated in things like songsters and newspapers, and that Francis Scott Key was a young Federalist lawyer. So this raises the question, Billy, of who was writing music in the early American republic when you don't necessarily have to have a composer's mindset because you don't actually need to write a musical score to go along with your jingle or your musical lyrics. So who was writing music, or musical lyrics, specifically, in the early republic?

[00:22:37] **Billy Coleman:** Well, the answer is all sorts of people. And certainly you didn't need to be a professional musician to write songs. Songs as a genre could be lyrically based, and you could attach it to a melody, but you didn't need to have skills and musical composition or notation or performance in order to do that. Another reason that professional musicians didn't

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necessarily write all that many songs, especially like political songs, themselves, was that lyrical songs—there wasn't much money to be made in that. I mean, if you're a professional musician, there wasn't really even that much money to be made out of any of the things that you could make money out of. So if you are producing a song, say like Francis Scott Key did, there's no copyright. There's no ability for people to reprint that in different newspapers and for the royalties from all that activity to come back to you. All there is, is the kind of personal satisfaction of having that material out there. And it's partly why one of the most common categories for political songwriting tends to be upwardly mobile professional young men. People who tended to be lawyers, who wanted to leverage being a lawyer into a better, more prosperous, more prestigious situation than they were currently in.

The main complication is that, when it comes down to it, most songs don't have any indication of their authorship attached to them whatsoever. This is on purpose, especially when it came to campaign songs. They wanted to be perceived as natural effusions that kind of just came from the people themselves. But authorship for even anonymous songs tended to be something of an open secret at the time. People in the community knew who was writing songs but we do know enough to be able to say that many women wrote songs. The convention for women was definitely to not attribute their name to a song and to do it anonymously or to just use the signifier of "a lady" or something like that, but enough women did put their names to things to make it clear that it was more than possible.

[00:24:53] **Liz Covart:** We've talked a lot about the secular world of politics and the role that music played in that secular political world. But what role did churches play in circulating music and bringing music into the everyday lives of early Americans during this early United States period? You know, we tend to think of churches as full of music today, and I wonder whether they were full of music during the early United States.

[00:25:17] **Billy Coleman:** Church plays a really fundamental role in circulating music and bringing it into the lives of early Americans. One of the most important things that churches do as an institution is enable Americans to learn how to sing and how to read at least versions of notes on a page. And so this does go back to kind of colonial era disputes over the best way to worship God with music and arguments about whether this sort of traditional practice that they had of lining out, where a preacher would sing one line of a song at a time and the congregation would sing it back to them, that was called lining out and it was this call-and-response kind of thing, and it was a collective, communal experience and it was really fun for a lot of people but some started to question whether it was giving people too much freedom to interpret the word of God for themselves. And so instead, they decided that it would be better for congregations to read notes off a page, right? And that would give them more control and discipline and the kind of standardization that they would need to worship God properly.

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And so what was created out of that was this institution called a singing school. There was a kind of church-adjacent organization or institution where you'd have these self-taught singing masters that were sometimes affiliated with the church, sometimes were itinerant and would travel around putting on singing schools, and they would teach the basics of musical literacy and vocal skill. But it became especially popular, in large part because it was one of the few places that young people, especially, could socially mix together with the opposite sex. And one of the things that I certainly noticed reading people's diaries and so on, is that when people would mention or write about going to singing schools, they would spend as much time or more talking about who they walked to the school with and who they walked back home with as much as they actually talked about the session itself. And they do evolve over time in terms of repertoire. By the revolution, singing schools are teaching people to sing psalms, they are also teaching them to sing secular glees, and also patriotic music. So someone like Samuel Adams in Boston had a kind of secondary job as a singing school teacher, and his sort of Tory opponents would deride him for inculcating sedation in his musical societies or in his singing schools. And so, yeah, church really facilitates that kind of combination and it gives people that amount of musical experience and literacy that then can be translated into other spheres of their life, whether it is in a kind of explicitly political context, or whether it's in the home or wherever.

[00:28:02] **Liz Covart:** Now speaking of places where early Americans could gain a sense of musical literacy, we get the sense from your book, *Harnessing Harmony*, that early Americans formed a lot of different musical associations and musical clubs in the early republic. So would you tell us about those clubs and about their influence on music in the early United States?

[00:28:23] **Billy Coleman:** It does follow on well because I guess generally speaking, what would happen is that coming out of these singing schools, a lot of the time there would be some participants that would get a taste for learning music and it wouldn't be uncommon for some of them to want to take it further in one way or another. And one solution to that would be to create a musical organization. There were all sorts of these kinds of things. There were musical associations and clubs and societies and academies. Some of them were big, some of them were small. Some of them could be nationally significant, others purely locally focused. Some of these organizations focused on putting on concerts, others focused on providing musical education. Some were dedicated to sacred music, some were dedicated to secular music. It's impossible, at least for me, to sort of guess exactly how many of these organizations and musical societies there were at any particular point in time, but they spanned the entirety of the East Coast from Georgia all the way up to New England and in 1818, New Hampshire alone chartered at least twenty-seven musical societies by one contemporary estimate. So there is quite a lot of them going on.

And their common goal, I guess, despite all their variety, was to cultivate a higher taste of skill for music in the United States. And they would do this through the guise of nonprofit enterprise. And that's essentially what distinguishes a musical society from a theater company or an artist troop or a touring artist, someone that is distributing music and musical performance for profit.

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And I guess because of this, there is an assumption on the part of a lot of the people that are disposed to be parts of these societies that they are suited to telling Americans what music they should consume and how they should consume it and how it should be played. And this fit relatively nicely with a bunch of conservative Federalists who, as we've been talking about, were versed in using music and popular culture to try and shape American society but following the War of 1812 could no longer really access the powers of elected office anymore, since the Federalist Party wasn't really competitive after that period, at least in most parts of the country. And so what you have is the creation of some particularly significant organizations like the Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia, it was established in 1820, that try and unite the cultural capital and expertise of the best musicians in that city with the economic and social cache of these like politically exiled young elites who still see it as their responsibility to advocate for what is right rather than what's popular, in order to improve society by giving it what they felt it needed, rather than necessarily what it wanted.

And so a group like The Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia has this extramusical component to it in terms of its goals on the part of what were called "amateur members of the society," who were the people who didn't play music, but who paid money to be a part of the organization. And then it had the professional members that were the musicians who didn't have to pay to be a part of it, but they would agree to participate in a certain number of performances and practices that people would be invited to come watch. And in return they would get essentially like income protection insurance. So if they did this, the kind of elite of the city would support them in their time of need, at least theoretically. And this was also a way for Americans that were interested in this to pool their resources so that they could afford copies of higher—what would be perceived, at least by them—as higher class music and bring over printed copies of the kind of music from Europe that they're interested in trying to introduce to American audiences. And also to create actual buildings for performances. Some of those buildings still exist, if you go to the Academy of Music in Philadelphia and so on.

[00:32:21] **Liz Covart:** Well we've had a pretty wide-ranging conversation in that we've talked about different ways that music fit into the everyday lives of early Americans, how it fit into their political lives, their social lives, and their religious lives. And as we think about the roles that music played in the everyday lives of early Americans, Billy, I wonder what you would like us to better understand about music's significance to the development of politics and culture in the early United States. So what is the takeaway you'd like us to walk away with?

[00:32:53] **Billy Coleman:** Yeah. One thing that I do think is important is to realize that culture is not a kind of even playing ground. If you have economic power, political power, social power, you can use music to shape society in the ways that you prefer, in ways that are arguably as or more effective than everyone else can, despite the fact that they can access that music. Just because you can make a great song doesn't mean that you can distribute it or that you can get it to people's ears or that you can have the power to determine how they interpret the meanings of

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those songs. I also want people to see that music can bring people together, right? It organizes and it harmonizes, it reflects, but it rarely does those things in a way that actually attempts to resolve what pushed people apart in the first place. And that, I think, gets to the heart of how some of the many qualities that make music politically effective, that it brings people together, are also what make it politically imperfect because it doesn't really address any of the underlying differences, which just speaks to the fact that, you know, power, I think, is important in this equation because music doesn't magically just like change the world by itself. But what music can do, and I guess what I think makes music feel so special to us, so often, it has the power to convince us and sometimes even to show us, just by kind of inhabiting the world of a song, that a better world is still possible. And so it kind of keeps everyone afloat and I think that's an important thing to take away.

[00:34:26] **Liz Covart:** Let's get into the "Time Warp." This is a fun segment of the show where we ask you a hypothetical history question about what might've happened if something had occurred differently or if someone had acted differently.

Now given the important role music played in the early republic United States, in your opinion, how do you think the United States' culture and politics would've developed if music hadn't existed in the early Republic or if early Americans hadn't been that interested in music?

[00:35:15] **Billy Coleman:** That is a really tough question, and I'm going to try and answer it by bypassing the philosophical question about what music even is and if human societies are possible to exist without music. But I'd say in terms of American political history, that I think the most important thing music gave Americans in the wake of a revolution is a blueprint in their own minds for what a perfected, harmonious union could look like. And in a broad way, it kind of convinced Americans that a harmony of feelings and interests was actually possible, that they might have even heard it before in a song or in some music. And that's how it becomes this kind of political lodestar for the republican experiment itself. And that trick to it, I guess, is just that that political lodestar was informed by all sorts of varied and different personal visions about what that perfection was meant to look like. And that is with us now, it's not entirely huge coincidence that Americans then or now can't agree on what good government is and also can't agree on what good music is. They're two enduring questions. I think without music, early Americans of any kind of persuasion or group without music, I think at minimum they would've had less hope for the future. I think they would have less reason to believe that solutions to any of their problems were possible, and I think music helped give people that path forward.

[00:36:43] **Liz Covart:** Do you think music can give us that path forward today? As I think about how you were talking about partisanship in the early republic, we have a lot of political partisanship today. And I think a lot of us hope that maybe someday we Americans will all come back together. And I wonder if you think that we derive any hope from music today and whether

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you think that we can still use music as a tool to bring the nation back to the middle and hopefully to a more civil discussion.

[00:37:10] **Billy Coleman:** I think so. I think that is one of the most fundamentally important things about what music can do for groups of people or on an individual sense. You can think about it politically. You can also think about it on an individual level, like if you have an argument with your parents as a teenager and then go run away into your room and put on your records, they feel like they're your records because they're speaking to your vision of what a better world could be and a sense of an existence that it is there, that there are people out there that agree with you. And you know, that is how people in the early republic engaged even with the political questions of their day.

[00:37:55] **Liz Covart:** Billy, *Harnessing Harmony* is now out in the world as a book and a soundtrack. So what are you researching and writing about now?

[00:38:03] **Billy Coleman:** I am thinking quite a lot recently about the concept of national music, especially as it applies to settler societies like the United States and potentially Canada, Australia, New Zealand. These places that take European ideas about folk music and the music of the people and music to define a society and how they use those to try and articulate a sense of distinctiveness through an inherently nondistinctive concept. We're going to have national music and that's going to make us distinctive and also set us apart from the other groups of people that were already living in these settler societies. So I'm trying to think through some of those questions.

[00:38:53] **Liz Covart:** And where can we reach you if we have more questions about music in early America? And could you tell us how we can access the soundtrack for your book *Harnessing Harmony*?

[00:39:01] **Billy Coleman:** The book soundtrack is completely free. It's available if you search for it on almost any streaming service that you might think of, like Spotify, and you can also find the songs more information about them at harnessingharmonysoundtrack.com. If you'd like to contact me, email is colemanw@missouri.edu.

[00:39:24] **Liz Covart:** Billy Coleman, thank you for joining us and for helping us to understand the ways that music fed into early American politics and society, as well as for sharing the music that you and your collaborative partner Running Notch created for your book, *Harnessing Harmony*.

[00:39:39] **Billy Coleman:** Thanks so much, Liz. Thanks for having me. It was really great.

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Episode 346: Music and Politics in the Early United States

[00:39:44] **Liz Covart:** Music played important roles in the early United States. As we discovered in episode 345 with Glenda Goodman, music helped early Americans create and establish a distinctly American culture, a culture that helped early Americans navigate a European-dominated Western world. And in our conversation with Billy just now, we've seen and heard how music helped early Americans navigate and express their feelings and ideas about politics during the intense partisanship of the early republic. Now, it may be interesting to think of songs like "Hail Columbia" or "The Star-Spangled Banner" as editorials on early republic politics. Like the editorials of today, the lyrics to these songs were published in and circulated by newspapers, although meant to be sung as musical lyrics. In this print medium, many Americans just read the lyrics just like we'd read the words of an editorial today. And thanks to Billy, we know that these musical lyrics, like those for "Hail Columbia," presented commentary on how Americans felt about politics and partisanship in their new nation.

But what Billy really wants us to walk away knowing is that culture and the establishment of American culture was not an equal or even playing field. To play the game well, to write songs that might catch on like "The Star-Spangled Banner," you needed to have free time and the economic capacity to support that free time so that you could think about and write lyrics that might catch on with your fellow citizens. And then you also needed to have time and resources to get your lyrics into print so that they could circulate and have a chance of catching on. Early Americans believed that music had the power to change the world, or at least the world of early American politics. Music allowed men like Francis Scott Key and Joseph Hopkinson to convince their fellow Americans of the correctness of their political views and to show them how the world might be better if Americans followed their ideas and advice in the lyrics they wrote. Now, could music help us achieve similar ends today in our own very partisan world? That's for you to think about and to decide. Look for more information about Billy, his book and soundtrack, *Harnessing Harmo*ny, plus notes, links, and a transcript for everything we talked about today, all in the show notes page, benfranklinsworld.com/346.

Next week our five-episode series on music will continue with an exploration of the influences of African and African-American music on early American culture and on American musical styles today. If you're enjoying this series on music, please tell your friends and family about it. Production assistance for this podcast comes from The Omohundro Institute's digital audio team, Joseph Adelman, Holly White, Ian Tonat, and Dylan Holzer. Breakmaster Cylinder composed our custom theme music. This podcast is part of the AirWave Media podcast network. To discover and listen to their other podcasts, visit airwavemedia.com. Finally, after you've had some time to think about whether music could be used to create a sense of political unity in the United States today, I'd love to hear what you're thinking. Please tell me, liz@benfranklinsworld.com. *Ben Franklin's World* is a production of The Omohundro Institute and is sponsored by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

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