

Standard #1: Cadets participate in patriotic activities and develop a spirit of patriotism
b. Sing a variety of patriotic songs

What makes a song patriotic?

From sea to shining sea, Americans unfurl their patriotism in songs as spangled as Old Glory

By John von Rhein, Chicago Tribune, July 3, 2010

Patriotic songs are the soundtrack of the American nation.

Flag-waving anthems such as "America the Beautiful" and "God Bless America" have brought together Americans of all stripes since our magnificent experiment in democracy won independence from the British 234 years ago.

Patriotic songs have boosted our morale in times of crisis, strengthened our resolve in eras of uncertainty and rekindled pride in who we are, and what we represent, as a great nation.

As we gather in parks and along parade routes this Fourth of July for booming fireworks displays punctuated by brass bands hoisting "The Stars and Stripes Forever," we might take a moment to ponder the question: What makes a patriotic song patriotic?

Clearly the answers are as complex and varied and personal as the emotions this music inspires in us.

The great American songwriter Irving Berlin, whose red, white and blue classic, "God Bless America," arguably has become America's de facto national anthem, said it succinctly.

"A patriotic song," he wrote, "is an emotion."

Whether it be an iconic anthem like "The Star-Spangled Banner" or "America" (also known as "My Country 'Tis of Thee"), or a patriotic ballad of more recent vintage, such as Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A." (a Persian Gulf War hit that again surged to the top of the charts when radio stations added it to their playlists following the 9/11 terrorist attacks), we are talking good old fashioned fist-pumping, breast-swelling emotion.

Such songs speak to us as only music can, evoking feelings of national fervor despite — or perhaps because of — their sometimes commonplace-to-cornball lyrics. It's no coincidence that patriotic music has accompanied virtually every war the U.S. has been involved in, save perhaps for the Afghan conflict.

More often than not, what makes a song patriotic is what also makes it popular. But to have genuine popular appeal, that music should conform to certain guidelines.

For starters, the song should be tuneful and memorable, and easily singable, even by nonsingers. The text should have vivid metaphors and images that transcend time and place. Also, the lyrics should capture basic sentiments and not bunch up on the tongue.

Some would say that, on the latter count, our national anthem fails to make the grade.

The difficulty many folks have wrapping their mouths around "The Star-Spangled Banner's" nearly two-octave range may help to explain the results of a 2004 Harris Poll, which found that nearly two-thirds of Americans don't know all the words to the national anthem. Perhaps the words they *do* remember are so awkward to sing that they would just as soon not learn the rest.

But, then, what can you say about an anthem that originated as an 18th century British drinking song and that countless celebrity "singers" have mangled at countless ballgames?

The enduringly popular "America the Beautiful," "God Bless America" and "America" — any of which would qualify as our unofficial national anthem — all are more singable, more direct in emotion and melody than the anthem Whitney Houston launched to the top of the charts following 9/11.

What's more, they have one thing in common: They make us feel good about our country even when our country does something we believe is wrong.

Now, let's agree that a song is patriotic if, over time, the overwhelming majority of citizens recognize and accept it as such.

By that definition Civil War-era songs like "Dixie" and "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," though still popular today, may not qualify for inclusion in the great American patriotic songbook because some people would find them too controversial or too regional.

If traditional patriotic songs carry an implicit my-country-right-or-wrong message, many good and true Americans would insist a song is no less patriotic when it reveals the failure of this nation to live up to its own ideals.

One such song is the full, multiple-verse version of Woody Guthrie's beloved "This Land Is Your Land," the Dust Bowl balladeer's early-1940s indictment of a nation he felt robbed common people of their dignity. Another is Bruce Springsteen's far more recent "Born in the U.S.A.," a song that rails against senseless American war-mongering. (Many listeners mistook it for a flag-waving polemic when it first appeared.)

Neither Guthrie nor Springsteen sang of the triumph of military might, as Francis Scott Key did in his lyrics to the national anthem, but, rather, about the pride we are entitled to share as free and equal citizens of a great land. And that makes them as patriotic, in their way, as he was.

It should be clear from the above examples that no single musical statement can possibly represent a pluralistic society.

Lexile Measure – 1410L

Academic Vocabulary

Patriotic	Pride	Tuneful	Melody
Anthem	Emotion	Memorable	Controversial
Democracy	Ballad	Metaphor	Implicit
Independence	Cornball lyrics	Sentiments	Polemic
Morale	Appeal	Enduring	Pluralistic

Writing Prompt

Pick two songs, one that is a well-known and recognized as patriotic, and one that may not be viewed as patriotic. Compare and contrast the similarities and differences of both songs and discuss why they would or would not be considered patriotic. Include examples of specific lyrics and refer the article about the "guidelines" of a patriotic song. Prompt should be a minimum of 2-3 pages.