

For Flag Day: a Red, White and Blue Musical Tribute

*I'm a cranky hanky panky,
I'm a dead square, honest Yankee,
And I'm mighty proud of that old flag
That flies for Uncle Sam.*

*Though I don't believe in raving
Ev'ry time I see it waving,
There's a chill runs up my back
That makes me glad I'm what I am.*

These lyrics were part of a song that made its public debut in the proud-to-be-an-American George M. Cohan's stage musical *George Washington, Jr.*, which opened in New York in 1906. *You're a Grand Old Flag* became the 1st song from a musical show to sell over a million sheet music copies. The song's chorus remains a red, white and blue patriotic American favorite:

*You're a grand old flag,
You're a high flying flag,
And forever in peace may you wave.
You're the emblem of the land I love,
The home of the free and the brave...*

According to the legendary showman Cohan, the inspiration for the song's original title and lyrics came from a fortuitous encounter he had with a veteran of the Civil War. The man was holding an American flag which was old and ragged, but folded with great care. With obvious pride, he said to Cohan, "She's a grand old rag." Recognizing a good line when he heard it, Cohan, at first, titled his new song *You're a Grand Old Rag*, but wisely renamed it after hearing objections to the nation's flag being described as a "rag". After making revisions to the song, Cohan performed it in *George Washington, Jr.* while marching back and forth across the stage carrying the American flag.

Throughout his long career, George M. Cohan was a patriotic flag-waver, often including in his numerous stage productions music that provided opportunities for displaying the Stars and Stripes. The songs and shows he wrote celebrated the uniquely American spirit, character, and values with which most people in the country could identify during the earlier part of the 20th century. When the United States entered WWI, he showed his support for the troops and boosted the nation's morale with songs such as *Over There*.

Just before his 58th birthday, in 1936, Cohan was named as a recipient of a Congressional Gold Medal of Honor for special service to the country, specifically in recognition of *You're a Grand Old Flag* and *Over There*. The medal was to be presented to him by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Cohan, however, had developed a strong dislike for FDR and his Progressive policies, perhaps sensing that these aggressive reforms could lead to a diminishing of the basic American rights to liberty and the pursuit of happiness that had enabled him to succeed – and also recover from occasional failures. He left both the award and the President waiting for 4 years, finally accepting the medal in 1940. Two years later, only a few months before his death, Cohan, though in poor health, was able to see the film made about his life, music, and unabashed pride in America and our flag, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*. His sentiments expressed in *You're a Grand Old Flag* were still true:

*Red, white and blue, I am for you!
Honest, you're a grand old flag!*

Priscilla Poesse, AzFRW
Americanism

