



Who Should Sing 'Ol' Man River'?: The Lives of an American Song

Todd Decker

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A Broadway classic, a call to action, and an incredibly malleable popular song, "Ol' Man River" is not your typical musical theater standard. Written by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II in the 1920s for *Show Boat*, "Ol' Man River" perfectly blends two seemingly incongruous traits—the gravity of a Negro spiritual and the crowd-pleasing power of a Broadway anthem. Inspired by the voice of African American singer Paul Robeson, who adopted the tune for his own goals as an activist, "Ol' Man River" is both iconic and transformative.

In *Who Should Sing "Ol' Man River"?: The Lives of an American Song*, author Todd Decker examines how the song has shaped, and been shaped by, the African American experience. Yet "Ol' Man River" also transcends both its genre and original conception as a song written for an African American male. Beyond musical theater, this Broadway ballad has been reworked in musical genres from pop to jazz, opera to doo wop, rhythm and blues to gospel to reggae. Pop singers such as Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, and Judy Garland made "Ol' Man River" one of their signature songs. Jazz artists such as Bix Biederbecke, Duke Ellington, Dave Brubeck, Count Basie, and Keith Jarrett have all played "Ol' Man River," as have stars of the rock and roll era, such as Sam Cooke, Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, the Temptations, Cher, and Rod Stewart. Black or white, male or female—anyone who sings "Ol' Man River" must confront and consider its charged racial content and activist history.

Performers and fans of musical theater as well as students of the Civil Rights movement will find *Who Should Sing "Ol' Man River"?* an unprecedented examination of a song that's played a groundbreaking role in American history.

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