

“Old Hickory Just Got All Sexypants: History and Politics in *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*”

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2010, *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* (BBAJ) debuted on Broadway. This theatrical production, co-written by Alex Timbers and Michael Friedman, with music by Friedman, experienced a 120-show run from October 2010 through January 2011.¹ The play gave Jackson a prominent role in a dramatic production, something that he has rarely received.² This paper examines the soundtrack, evaluating the song lyrics for their historical accuracy and interpretation of Jackson and the period named for him.

SUMMARY³

The soundtrack begins with the upbeat “**Populism, Yea, Yea!**” This anthem of the disenchanted, disenfranchised lower classes is filtered through Jackson’s teenage angst. The lyrics suggest that Jackson sought validation through populist politics to soothe the rejection he faced as an adolescent. His despondency continues in “**I’m Not That Guy,**” which highlights Jackson’s despair as someone left without a family. He transfers the blame for his life “suck”ing from his orphanhood to “[t]hose wealthy New

¹ The show premiered in Los Angeles in January 2008 and opened in the Public Theater in New York in May 2009. Les Freres Corbusier, “Repertory Archives,” http://www.lesfreres.org/archives/06_jackson.html; accessed 13 April 2012.

² Jackson has “starred” in only one full-length movie: *The President’s Lady* (1953). He played prominent roles in *The Buccaneer* (1938) and *The Remarkable Andrew* (1942). On TV shows, his most high-profile appearance was in “Jackson’s Assassination,” a season one episode of *The Adventures of Jim Bowie* (1957). Information taken from the Internet Movie Database, [imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com); accessed 13 April 2012.

³ All lyrics taken from the BBAJ CD liner notes.

England Congress fucks.” The song concludes with Jackson holding rage and doubt in tandem: he’s “Andrew Fucking Jackson,” yet he questions how he can “be that guy” who challenges a national government unwilling to defend the frontier.

What changes Jackson is meeting his future wife, Rachel Donelson Robards. **“Illness as Metaphor”** recounts their longing for one another as literal lovesickness. This relationship, and the optimism that it engenders in Jackson, unleashes the aggressive, violent Old Hickory with whom historians are familiar. Whereas in “I’m Not That Guy” Jackson questioned whether he can make the rain fall and the blood flow, he now declares in **“I’m So That Guy”** that “I will make them all bleed!” Before, his life “[sucked] in particular,” now he tells others, “your life’s gonna suck universally.” Native Americans suffer at the hands of Jackson’s newfound confidence. In a perversion of the nineteenth-century minstrel song, “Ten Little Injuns,” **“Ten Little Indians”** details their demise, presumably at the hands of Jackson and his men during the War of 1812 and the First Seminole War. The Indians die from various causes, including syphilis, alcoholism, and suicide. The mood of the song is one of depression.

Jackson’s success in prosecuting Manifest Destiny in the Southeast made him a dangerous political opponent, which elicits virulent criticism in **“The Corrupt Bargain,”** a tune that recalls *SNL*’s send-up of *The Lawrence Welk Show*. John Quincy Adams, John C. Calhoun, and Henry Clay all take shots at Jackson as the “real threat” to their power. (James Madison, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Michel Foucault all appear in this song, albeit in unflattering terms.) The three men also reveal their motivations for opposing Jackson. Adams wants to be president to follow in his father’s footsteps. Clay postures as the Machiavelli of the period, “play[ing] real politick[s]” to become secretary of state.

Calhoun wants to “keep the power in the hands of the chosen few” and promises Adams that he can become president if he does not “try to take away my slaves.” The three politicians hurl insults at both “the people” and Jackson. “The people” are “drunk and smell like pee,” while Adams calls them “stupid.” Jackson, Clay declares, is “a total twat.” Of course, Jackson loses the 1824 election because of the alleged agreement between Adams and Clay that gave the former the presidency (via the House election) in return for the latter’s appointment as secretary of state. **“Rock Star”** relays Jackson’s reaction to this political outcome. The first five presidents are criticized as rock star wannabes and told, “There’s no place in Democracy/For your brand of aristocracy/Take that shit back to Virginia/(Or Massachusetts Be-yotch!)”. Jackson declares that he would rather be shot in the head “if there’s really no place in America for a celebrity of the first rank” like himself.

Two of the most poignant songs, **“The Great Compromise”** and **“Public Life,”** address Andrew and Rachel Jackson’s marriage. Rachel laments her husband’s frequent absences and broken promises of domestic tranquility in “The Great Compromise,” concluding with “I give up everything, You give up nothing.” Following Rachel’s death in December 1828, President-elect Jackson ironically promises to his dead wife that he will “give his life to the people now.”

“Crisis Averted” serves as Jackson’s inaugural song, outlining his hopeful outlook at being “the people’s president.” “It’s morning again in America” is his Reagan-esque promise. Jackson’s optimism wanes in **“The Saddest Song.”** As a “powerless, bloody, and scarred” president, Old Hickory has to summon his strength to keep the nation united. He recognizes that “[i]t’s gonna be hard, but this country comes first.” Part

of his success entails pursuing Manifest Destiny by removing Native Americans from the Southeast, the topic of “**Second Nature.**” In a nod to the reality that Jackson’s removal policy began during the War of 1812, the soundtrack concludes with “**The Hunters of Kentucky,**” an 1821 homage to the men who helped Jackson achieve victory at New Orleans.

ANALYSIS

The *BBAJ* soundtrack both supports and challenges traditional Jacksonian historiography in several ways. The first is in its depiction of Jackson’s relationship with Native Americans. The Jackson in *BBAJ* is the rough, violent frontiersman whose purpose in life is to avenge his family’s deaths at the hands of Native Americans. History does not bear out this interpretation of Jackson’s later motivation in removing the Indians during the 1810s and the 1830s, and most scholars, thankfully, have not followed the lead of Michael Paul Rogin in emphasizing Old Hickory’s supposed pathological hatred of Native Americans. Unquestionably, Jackson viewed Indians as inferiors and “enemies.” This attitude was born out of growing up in an area of South Carolina infused with violent Indian-white confrontations, an aspect of Jackson’s childhood that historians have underemphasized.⁴

⁴ Michael Paul Rogin, *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* (New York: Knopf, 1975); Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2001); Francis Paul Prucha, “Andrew Jackson’s Indian Policy: A Reassessment,” *JAH* 56 (December 1969): 527-539; Bettina Drew, “Master Andrew Jackson: Indian Removal and the Culture of Slavery,” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2001); Dawn Peterson, “Unusual Sympathies: Settler Colonialism, Slavery, and the Politics of Adoption in the Early American Republic,” (Ph.D. diss. New York University, 2011).

But Jackson's treatment of Indians was more complex, as *BBAJ* suggests by including in its cast Lyncoya, the infant Creek boy whom Jackson sent from the battlefield to live at the Hermitage until his death in 1828. Lyncoya was one of three Indian boys sent to the Hermitage during the Creek campaign. The documentary evidence pertaining to all three is limited. We know the most about Jackson's relationship with Lyncoya, but even that is not much. The evidence we have is also contradictory. In December 1813, Jackson wrote Rachel about Lyncoya, "When I reflect that he as to his relations is so much like myself, I feel an unusual sympathy for him." He also attempted (unsuccessfully, it turned out) to secure Lyncoya's appointment to West Point. Yet, Jackson rarely wrote about Lyncoya and made no mention of the young man's passing in 1828, which could be a reflection of his lack of concern or simply a gap in the documentary record.⁵

Another element of *BBAJ* that engages Jacksonian historiography is the focus on the Jacksons' marriage. I was struck by the sympathetic portrayal of Rachel in "The Great Compromise." Her plight was not unusual for the wives of Early Republic politicians, who often found themselves confined to home while their husbands were away in Washington. In Rachel's case, while Jackson's political career prior to her death was sporadic and short, he was nevertheless often away on military expeditions.⁶

⁵ AJ to RJ, 29 December 1813, in Dan Feller et al., eds., *The Papers of Andrew Jackson*, 2:515-516.

⁶ For scholarship that addresses the Jackson marriage, see Richard B. Latner, "The Eaton Affair Reconsidered," *THQ* 36 (Fall 1977): 330-51; Harriet Chappell Owsley, "The Marriage of Rachel Donelson," *THQ* 36 (Winter 1977): 479-92; Norma Basch, "Marriage, Morals, and Politics in the Election of 1828," *JAH* 80 (December 1993): 890-918; John F. Marszalek, *The Petticoat Affair: Manners, Mutiny, and Sex in Andrew Jackson's White House* (New York: The Free Press, 1997); Kirsten E. Wood,

Rachel was frequently on Jackson's mind during his years in the military and on the national stage. During the War of 1812, he thanked his wife for her "determined resolution, to bear out our separation with fortitude." On another occasion, he assured her that although he had to tend to his responsibilities as a military commander, "my heart is with you." Rachel's responses were often maudlin and filled with pious reminders. "Do not My beloved Husband let the love of Country fame and honour make you forget you have me," she wrote shortly after Jackson left in early 1813. "How many pangs how many heart rending Sighs has your absence cost me." Upon learning of the death of her nephew, Alexander Donelson, Rachel was inconsolable about her separation from her husband: "My prayers is unceasing how long o Lord will I remain so unhappy no rest no Ease I Cannot sleepe all can come home but you I never wanted to see you so mutch in my life." When Jackson received appointment to the Senate prior to the presidential election of 1824, the two were separated once again. Upon her husband's return in

"'One Woman So Dangerous to Public Morals': Gender and Power in the Eaton Affair," *JER* 17 (Summer 1997): 237-76; Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a New Government* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000); Andrew Burstein, *The Passions of Andrew Jackson* (New York: Knopf, 2003); Ann Toplovich, "Marriage, Mayhem, and Presidential Politics: The Robards-Jackson Backcountry Scandal," *Ohio Valley History* 5 (Winter 2005): 3-22; Patricia Brady, *A Being So Gentle: The Frontier Love Story of Rachel and Andrew Jackson* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

On the effect of travel and separation on marriages, see Steven M. Stowe, "The Rhetoric of Authority: The Making of Social Values in Planter Family Correspondence," *JAH* 73 (March 1987): 916-933, esp. 920; Stowe, "Singleton's Tooth: Thoughts on the Form and Meaning of Antebellum Southern Family Correspondence," *Southern Review* 25 (Spring 1989): 323-333; Anya Jabour, *Marriage in the Early Republic: Elizabeth and William Wirt and the Companionate Ideal* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Lorri Glover, *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 102; Nikki Berg Burin, "A Family Firm: The Marital and Business Partnership of Ann and Richard Archer," in *Family Values in the Old South*, ed. Craig Thompson Friend and Anya Jabour (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010), 142-143, 150-153.

August 1824 after a seven-month absence, Rachel reflected to a friend, “Oh the time was long. but in this would we shall have tribulation. Says the Blessed Savior, in me ye shall have peace. O glorious hope.” Historians have attributed Rachel’s pious Presbyterianism to the religious revival of the early 1810s or to her guilt over their controversial marriage. In fact, it may have been a replacement for her relationship with her husband.⁷

The last theme that I want to highlight is *BBAJ*’s political message. One theater critic who reviewed the play noted that its “creators are out to draw shocking parallels between the Jacksonian era and politics today.” In an interview, Alex Timbers credited the contemporary political relevance of *BBAJ* to Andrew Jackson, whose politics serve as a continually shifting kaleidoscope that envelops politicians as diverse as Sarah Palin, Mike Huckabee, John Edwards, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. A graduate student contributor to the *viz.* blog observed that the lyrics of “Populism Yea Yea” “could have come as easily from [George W.] Bush’s western-inflected mouth as from a Tea Party pamphlet. Historian Michael Kaplan was more forthright, entitling one of his blog posts “The Tea Party is the Spirit of Jacksonian America.”⁸

⁷ AJ to RJ, 8 January 1813, 14 December 1813, 31 July 1814, RJ to AJ, 8 February [1813], 5 April 1813, 10 February 1814, 12 August 1824, in *PAJ*, 2:353-355, 486-487, 400, 3:28-29, 101-102, 361-362, 5:432-433; Katherine W. Cruse, *An Amiable Woman: Rachel Jackson* (Nashville: Ladies’ Hermitage Association, 1994), 18-19; Brady, *A Being So Gentle*, 105, 107-109.

⁸ David Finkle, “First Nighter: Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson Is Bloody Awful,” *Huffington Post*, 21 October 2010, www.huffingtonpost.com/david-finkle/first-nighter-bloody-bloody-b_769870.html; accessed 13 April 2012; Gerard Raymond, “Playhouse Fever: An Interview with Alex Timbers,” *Slant Magazine*, 30 September 2010, www.slantmagazine.com/house/2010/09/playhouse-fever-an-interview-with-alex-timbers/; accessed 13 April 2012; Rachel Schneider, “‘Putting the “Man” in “Manifest Destiny!”’: Making Populist Iconography and Queer Historiography in Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson,” *viz.*, 25 September 2010, <http://viz.dwrl.utexas.edu/content/putting-man-manifest-destiny-making-populist-iconography-and-queer-historiography-bloody->

Historians have frequently depicted Jackson as one of the major populist voices of the Early Republic. Indeed, the terms “Jacksonian America” and “Jacksonian Democracy” derive from the move toward democratic politics that Jackson embodied and encouraged. These descriptions of the period have not been universally embraced. In his monumental and prize-winning survey of the 1815-1848 period, for example, Daniel Walker Howe rather testily explained his reasons for not using the two terms. Jacksonian America, he argued, “suggests that Jacksonianism describes Americans as a whole, whereas in fact Andrew Jackson was a controversial figure and his political movement bitterly divided the American people.” According to Howe, Jacksonian Democracy was incorrectly applied to a period when women, African Americans, and Native Americans suffered at the hands of Jackson’s Democratic coalition.⁹

While I do not share Howe’s antipathy toward Jackson, he was right to point out the disconnect between perceptions about Old Hickory’s background and the reality of his place in life when he ran for the presidency in the 1820s. Bettina Drew argued that

[blo](#); accessed 13 April 2012; Michael Kaplan, “The Tea Party is the Spirit of Jacksonian America,” The New Jacksonian Blog, 23 September 2010, <http://newjacksonianblog.blogspot.com/2010/09/tea-party-is-spirit-of-jacksonian.html>; accessed 18 April 2012. See also Jonathan Mandell, “Review of Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson,” 17 October 2010, <http://www.thefastertimes.com/newyorktheater/2010/10/17/bloody-bloody-andrew-jackson-review/>; accessed 13 April 2012; National Public Radio, “Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson Rocks Broadway,” 23 September 2010, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130076742>; accessed 13 April 2012.

⁹ Mark R. Cheatham, “‘The Shape of Democracy:’ Historical Interpretations of Jacksonian Democracy,” in *The Age of Andrew Jackson*, ed. Brian D. McKnight and James S. Humphreys (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2011), 1-21; Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4-5.

Jackson's background was not quite as hardscrabble as contemporaries and biographers made it out to be. "[A]s there were slaves in the household where he grew up," she proposed, "Jackson must be considered part of the master class." Even if we set aside the uncertainty of Jackson's socioeconomic status in the Waxhaws, by the time he was nominated for the presidency by the Tennessee General Assembly in 1822, Old Hickory was a fifty-five-year-old planter who owned multiple farms and plantations in Tennessee and Alabama and approximately fifty slaves just at the Hermitage. He had been wealthy since early after his move to Tennessee and marriage into the Donelson clan. Jackson claimed that he was the people's president, and his supporters supported that image, but he was not a commoner when he ascended to the presidency.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

I would not recommend *BBAJ* as the sole source of information about Andrew Jackson's life or times, but it does have some pedagogical usefulness. This past semester, I assigned several songs from the soundtrack as inspiration for research papers in my Jacksonian Democracy course. While the results of the papers were mixed, students were able to analyze the lyrical content sufficiently to understand the messages conveyed. The soundtrack also allowed us to discuss several themes of the course in ways that likely will stick with the students beyond the semester. At the very least, the tunes are catchy enough that students mentioned humming them during the final weeks of the semester. Try to find another president about whom one can make the same claim.

¹⁰ Drew, "Master Andrew Jackson," 24-27, 37; Fourth Census of the United States: 1820 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1821). This argument is more fully explained in chapter 10 of my biography, *Andrew Jackson, Southerner*, contracted with LSU Press and projected to be published next year.