

GLOBAL

What Makes a Great National Anthem?

A writer tours the world through song and explains why he has always hated “God Save the Queen.”

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A national anthem is a lot like a pop song: The best ones have melodies so catchy that the words are practically irrelevant. It's a shame so many of them have boring tunes.

So says Alex Marshall, author of the recent book *Republic or Death!: Travels in Search of National Anthems*, a kind of world tour through song. In France, Marshall cycled the same route volunteer soldiers walked during the French Revolution, between Paris and Marseille, while they sang the French national anthem “La Marseillaise.” In Kazakhstan, he tried to score an interview with the lyricist for “My Kazakh” but was rebuffed—the country's dictator happened to have written the words. In South Africa, he investigated how a national anthem could come to have verses in five different languages.

I recently spoke to Marshall about his book, the role national anthems play from independence movements to sporting events, and why he thinks even the Islamic State finds it necessary to have one. I started by asking him to explain his lifelong distaste for “God Save the Queen,” the anthem of his own country, the United Kingdom. An edited and condensed transcript of the conversation follows.

Jillian Kumagai: When was the last [time] you sang “God Save the Queen” and, for people who haven't had the chance to read your book, can you say why you don't like that song?

Alex Marshall: I literally couldn't remember the last time I had sung it. Maybe—ironically—while watching a World Cup game in 2002. That was a particularly memorable World Cup.

There's almost too many reasons not to like “God Save the Queen.” Partly it's because, as [with] all anthems, there are things that are so everyday that you hear so much that they can become over-familiar. It's not like “The Star-Spangled Banner,” which has a massive range—it's quite an exciting tune to listen to. “God Save the Queen” is so simple. And it just plods along, you know—[sings]. When you hear it, you can't get excited about it.

And, the other big issue: It just has absolutely nothing about Britain today. All it says is, “We have a monarch, and we'd really like her to reign for a long time.” And I love the queen, I fully agree with that statement, but most anthems are at least meant to say something about your character. At the very least, they're meant to say your hills look nice. And ours doesn't even do that. And that's why, if you go to an English sports event, people don't get excited singing it. They get far more excited singing songs with titles like “Land of Hope and Glory.” Or there's

one called “Jerusalem,” which is about “England’s green and pleasant land.” And those songs actually speak to the country and people’s sense of hope. Those mean so much more. If the U.K. had a different anthem I might get more excited about it.

Then there’s also all the political associations. When I was growing up, it was very associated with the far right and with things called the British National Party and Combat 18, which was like a horrific bunch of thugs. If you grew up around that, it puts you off that sort of ostentatious nationalism quite a bit. And the other reason I don’t like it is that I’ve got an awful singing voice. That’s why I don’t sing it. There are almost far too many reasons.

Kumagai: At American sporting events, people love singing “The Star-Spangled Banner.” I didn’t realize that British people didn’t feel the same about singing their own anthem.

Marshall: Well, if you get us drunk enough, we happily will! I went to Nashville, and I went to one of those anthem auditions. I [sang] your anthem just to experience what that’s like. For a lot of people in America, I think “The Star-Spangled Banner” is almost a singing contest. And it becomes exciting for that reason. If someone sings it beautifully, it really does make you stop and listen. And if someone sings it horribly, it *really* makes you stop and listen.

It’s a song that’s so easy to do brilliantly and so easy to do badly, and that makes it more effective as an anthem because you actually pay attention to it. There’s some groups of people in America whom it really does touch. The bizzarrest and most interesting conversation I had in the States was with one of the writers of Nigeria’s national anthem, this guy called Babatunde Ogunnaike. He’s a [chemical-engineering] professor in Delaware and you’d have thought his own anthem he wrote for Nigeria would mean everything—this song he wrote to inspire his country to achieve. But instead, all that means to him is disappointment because of the state Nigeria’s in. He’s an effusive man, but as soon as I asked him what he felt about “The Star-Spangled Banner,” he almost clammed up. He couldn’t find words to describe it, because to him all of those hackneyed phrases, “the land of the free and the home of the brave,” just meant so much. That’s what America meant to him. To see that genuine power of the song was revelatory to me.

Kumagai: You observe in the book that there aren’t many famous composers who composed anthems, for a couple reasons. One of them is that there’s a risk entailed in writing an anthem, because you never know what’s going to end up happening to it. If you’re a famous composer and you write an anthem, then it might end up being sung by angry mobs later that day. How many of the composers you spoke to had thought about that risk, that their anthem could take on a life of its own, as songs do?

Marshall: I think all the anthem composers I’ve met, and I think I’ve met almost a dozen of them, are all [from] new countries [or countries under new regimes], places like Bosnia, Nigeria, South Sudan, Kosovo, Nepal. Their anthems are written at times of rebirth for their country. I just think the moment for them was one of such joy and inspiration that most of them, apart from the guy in Bosnia, were genuinely writing it just to inspire. And I don’t think they were even considering it. They were just caught up in the moment.

If you asked someone like Thom Yorke of Radiohead to write a British anthem, I can guarantee he would immediately think, “Hang on, this is going to be sung by people I just don’t like.” And that would put off so many professionals. But there are some weird exceptions—the incredibly famous British composer Benjamin Britten wrote a national anthem for Malaysia. I think he only did that—for one, they paid him an awful lot of money—but also because he couldn’t picture Malaysia. He didn’t have any of those thoughts of politics and how it was going to be used.

Kumagai: One of the reasons you don’t like “God Save the Queen” is that it has nothing to do with Britain today, but in the book, you write that at the time the song was popularized it would’ve sounded like punk. How many anthems are better seen as historical artifacts than as contemporary cultural objects?

Marshall: That’s what I’m trying to do in the book, is to show people that all these songs at one point have had great historical significance. “God Save the Queen” for about 50 years was this incredibly important rallying cry in Britain. King George III was a guy who was foaming at the mouth, but everyone liked him and hated his son, who was his heir. And so people used to sing [God Save the King], almost believing or hoping it might have magical powers and keep him alive.

If people realized how important these songs have been in the past and how important they are in parts of the world today, they might think about them differently. It might not mean they like their own anthem, but it might make them think, “Hang on, is this the right song for us? And maybe we should get a song that’s more meaningful which can inspire us to want to improve our own country.” Nationalism and patriotism to a lot of people are awkward subjects, but inspiring someone to want their country to be better—I don’t think you can ever argue with that. If more of these songs did that, that’s only a good thing.

Kumagai: What is singing someone else’s anthem like?

Marshall: It’s very weird. I’ve sung loads of them. I went to Liechtenstein, because they have the same tune as “God Save the Queen.” That was incredibly discombobulating to hear a song that’s so familiar with completely different lyrics. It almost made me look at it afresh.

I found singing yours utterly horrific just because it was in front of—not as a public singer—standing in front of several hundred people, all of whom are actually professional singers and realizing [I was] getting it incredibly wrong. I was singing it so slowly it was going to last about four minutes. But then other times—I sung South Africa’s on top of Table Mountain. Seeing the joy this great anti-apartheid hymn brought people was a wonderful moment for me.

Kumagai: When you wrote about popular music before you started researching this book, what made that different from writing about anthems? Do you think of anthems as a genre of music now?

Marshall: I do think of [anthems] as separate things now. Most music you can do whatever you like—if you listen to rap, someone like Kanye West is so different from [another rapper]. There's so much variety that you can have. Whereas anthems you've got these rules: The song has to be a minute, it has to talk about a country and its hopes and dreams. They become their own form in this bizarre little world. They are their own genre, but I treat the composers of anthems as I would treat a rapper. I look for the interesting things in their lives. It's not so much a book about music as a book about people and politics.

The guy who wrote [the French national anthem] “La Marseillaise”—his life includes everything from being thrown in prison to having an affair with Napoleon's wife, to writing pornography because he's struggling, to a failed suicide attempt. He's incredibly egocentric. He's full of wild dreams. He writes these letters to Napoleon that are so insane, telling Napoleon—the most important person in the world at that time—and you've got the balls to write him letters basically telling him how to do his job. You could say this man is almost like the Kanye West of his day.

The guy who wrote Egypt's: He was this big revolutionary in 1919 when they're trying to get rid of the British. He's got a [drinking] habit, he's a womanizer, and he completely turns upside down Egyptian music. Egyptian music before him used to be 17-minute endless wailing about love and romance, and he writes these three-minute pop songs about politics and about everyday life. He becomes the most important songwriter in Egypt at the time, but he also annoys everyone.

There's all these fascinating people and it made it incredibly easy to write about. It wouldn't be any different from doing a profile on Kanye West.

Kumagai: One of the book's chapters is about Nepal, whose anthem you think sounds like the country it came from. Do you have a favorite example of an anthem that sounds like the country it came from?

Marshall: Nepal's is a favorite example just because it doesn't sound like anything else. If you heard it at a sports stadium you'd just think something had gone wrong. I think it's beautiful because it does illustrate [that] Nepal, unlike anywhere else, had this ... moment [after] it had a horrific Maoist revolution and this incredible tragedy amongst its royal family where one member of its family killed everyone else. It led to this short moment where all the many, many ethnicities in the country were released from the cultural constraints they'd been under before. People no longer felt like they had to toe the line of the upper-caste Brahmins. And that meant a song like this could actually be picked as a national anthem, whereas if it'd been a year later, it probably wouldn't have emerged. I think that's quite fascinating.

There's some really weird ones. Burundi's—I've never been to Burundi—but Burundi's sounds like it's full of African cowboys. It's got this weird horse-clopping-along, people standing outside saloons feel to it, and I'm assuming there are no African cowboys in Burundi. But their anthem's weird as hell.

Kumagai: What was your favorite place in the book to travel?

Marshall: Can we go with most memorable? The one that sticks in my mind, and I don't think I'll ever forget, is Kazakhstan. Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, is the strangest place I've ever been and must be the strangest place on Earth: a capital created in the desert almost on a dictatorial whim, where you've got this old Soviet city on one half of the river and then you have basically Disney World [on the other]. You travel around the new capital and you just don't know what to look at. It's the only place I've ever been that looks as if a man has taken the contents of his head and turned it into concrete.

I went there trying to find out if a dictator's influence would destroy the power of national anthems, because [Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev] wrote his own. The worrying thing was—I could talk to people who were strong opponents of his, people he'd basically thrown in prison and who had nothing good to say about him—but when we got to the anthem, they all said that he'd actually done quite a good job. It was quite a beautiful song. His lyrics were far better than the ones they had before. He's an incredibly good songwriter.

Kumagai: What's your favorite anthem?

Marshall: The anthem that almost kick-started my interest was Uruguay's. It was the first South American anthem I'd listened to. It's this rollicking four- or five-minute-long anthem with all these different instrumental sections, like a mini-opera. I just found it so exciting the first time I heard it. It was like, finally: a proper piece of music. So that one still has an awful lot of significance for me.

Kumagai: What's your favorite story behind an anthem?

Marshall: Unfortunately, it's the negative ones that come to mind. I find Bosnia's very interesting because of the fact that it was written by a man who was just trying to make money, not with a sense of patriotic pride, just because he was on holiday—his first holiday since the Bosnian War—and needed to pay his hotel bill. He enters a deliberately sad song because he thinks he'll come second or third, and it's the same prize money [as first place], and he'll walk away. Instead, they pick his and his life is ruined instantly. He's a Serb, and the Serbs wonder, "Why are you collaborating with the Bosnian state?," the Bosnians think, "Why the hell is a Serb writing our national anthem?," and the Croats think the same. It just descends into this horrific situation where the man can't work and his family crumbles around him.

I went back three years later, and he'd had a complete change of heart. He had been this dejected man, and yet he'd decided, partly due to a heart attack, to look on things positively. To see that, "If people don't want my anthem, that's their problem. This song can help bring this country together and this song can achieve. For those it does inspire, I am grateful. And for those it doesn't, they can take it or leave it."

I found his transformation perfect. If that man can find hope, then hopefully the country can too. That's why I like that.

Kumagai: You describe the way ISIS adopted an anthem almost as if it was seen as being a requirement of a state. Can you trace back to the historical moment that anthems were seen as a requirement of statehood?

Marshall: The idea that you have a song which represents you to the world and which foreign dignitaries get welcomed with, that's pretty much a requirement in Europe by the early 1800s. By the 1880s, it becomes a requirement for the rest of the world because independence movements start realizing the power of song, treating it like, "We need a song just to prove we're genuine about our aspirations, just as we have a flag."

Kumagai: You mention Algerian immigrants in the chapter about "La Marseillaise." How easy is it to adopt a national anthem that's not yours? Is it as easy to adopt a national anthem as it is to adopt a cuisine?

Marshall: I think it's really quite hard. In the Japan chapter, there's all this conflict around singing the anthem in schools and whether the flag should be raised as well. Most teachers there didn't object that much to the flag being imposed on them, but one said to me, "Being asked to look at a flag is one thing. Being asked to open your mouth and sing is entirely another." It's very easy for someone to adopt—for the Syrians going into Germany—I think it's very easy for them to start saluting the German flag, or feeling moved by it. But to ask them to sing a song in another language which they may not identify with is very hard.

Kumagai: One of those actions is more passive than the other.

Alex Marshall: [Singing an anthem is] very active. There's this theory called banal nationalism about how our sense of national identity is reinforced everyday by things like newspaper headlines, [when] you read, "America is doing this" or "Our government is doing this," and it reinforces your sense of belonging. Those theories don't deal with anthems much and when they do, I think they're actually doing it incorrectly. Because you're right, it's very active. Even if you're just standing there, standing still for a minute is quite hard. Even the countries which have wordless national anthems, they're not passive things. Syrians piling into Europe, it would be several generations [before they adopt another anthem]—it might never happen.

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