

BASEBALL'S BALLAD

'Take Me Out to the Ball Game' turns 100 today

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For 30 seconds last weekend, Taylor Clark and Kayle Mustafaga felt like the center of the baseball universe.

It's not just that their faces were on the giant video screen at Fifth Third Field downtown, or that they had a microphone shoved in their faces. It's that the teen cousins from West Toledo were leading thousands of baseball fans in a rousing chorus of the grand-daddy of them all, "Take Me Out to the Ball Game."

There is one thing Kayle, 13, would change, though, if she had it to do all over again.

"I'd get all the words right."

To many, it's not the words of this beloved song, which turns 100 today, that matter; it's the tradition they signify. Singing them during the seventh-inning stretch is like a bridge between fans and the game and even to the ghosts of baseball's past.

How ironic, then, that this pitch-perfect salute to the national pastime - said to be the third most frequently heard song in America behind "Happy Birthday" and the national anthem - wasn't played at sporting events when it first came out in 1908.

"There was no reference to the song being played in the ballpark until it was the 1930s," said Bob Thompson, a co-author of *Baseball's Greatest Hit: The Story of Take Me Out to the Ball Game*.

Instead, he said, this serenade to the sport of our fathers and grandfathers, caught on at movie theaters. Vaudeville singers came in during reel changes and taught songs to the audience to help promote sheet music sales. (Remember, people's homes back then were filled with pianos, not radios.)

VIDEO

[Toledoans sing 'Take Me Out to the Ball Game'](#)



Taylor Clark, middle, and Kayle Mustafaga sing 'Take Me Out to the Ball Game' at a recent Mud Hens game. (THE BLADE/DAVE ZAPOTOSKY)

The tune - submitted to the U.S. Copyright Office on May 2, 1908, and the year's biggest hit - was written by lyricist Jack Norworth and composer Albert Von Tilzer. The story goes that Norworth was inspired to write it when he saw an ad for a baseball game at the Polo Grounds while riding the New York City subway, though that claim wasn't reported until 50 years later, according to Mr. Thompson, associate dean of the Conservatory of Music at Purchase College in New York.

Allegedly, neither Norworth nor Von Tilzer had ever been to a ball game, but they still managed to capture the soul of the experience in the song's chorus. That's the only part people sing today. The rest of the ditty is about a baseball-mad girl named Katie Casey, who didn't want her beau to take her to a show. What she really wanted him to do was ... well, you know the rest of the story.

As for the custom of linking the song to the seventh inning stretch - which every Major League Baseball team does these days - that didn't become a phenomenon until relatively recently. The first recorded instance was in 1945, but the ritual never really took off until broadcaster Harry Caray started singing it when he was with the Chicago White Sox in the mid 1970s and later with the crosstown Cubs.

"It's a tradition that actually dates back to 1976, but that feels like such a good tradition that most people assume

that it goes back much further than that," said Tim Wiles, director of research at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, N.Y., and another co-author of *Baseball's Greatest Hit*.

Now, its place in the baseball lyrical canon is considered sacrosanct.

"It's clearly the pre-eminent baseball song by any measure," Mr. Wiles said. "Football doesn't have a song. Basketball doesn't have a song. Baseball has a song that's central to its experience."

Hundreds of baseball anthems have been cataloged by the Library of Congress over the years, and "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" was by no means the first one of the genre or even the first popular one. "Base Ball Polka" popped up in 1858, and "Slide, Kelly, Slide" was a number one hit in 1892.

There was something different about "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," something so compelling that it's been recorded by more than 400 musicians. LL Cool J has a version. So do Bruce Springsteen, Jimmy Buffett, and Frank Sinatra.

"Regardless of musical genre, there's a real attraction to record this song," said Russell Schmidt, associate professor of music performance at Bowling Green State University.

Unlike the notoriously difficult "Star-Spangled Banner," "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" is an easier song with a more conservative range, he said. It even encourages you to shout, which is part of the fun.

A bevy of celebrations will mark the song's 100th anniversary this year. Baby Ruth has a contest to lead the song at the All-Star Game at Yankee Stadium, and the U.S. Postal Service will issue a commemorative stamp. In Cleveland, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame has an exhibit, "Take Me Out: Baseball Rocks!," that will run through Sept. 28.

But for life-long fans like Toledoan Bill Gibson, the best possible tribute is hearing the song in person at a baseball game. That's where the attention shifts from the field to the fans and conjures up the fondest of memories.

"Every time I hear it, it gives me goosebumps," he said during a recent Mud Hens game. "I'm home. I'm safe."

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The full lyrics to the 1908 version of 'Take Me Out to the Ball Game'

Katie Casey was base ball mad.
Had the fever and had it bad;
Just to root for the home town crew,
Ev'ry sou* Katie blew.
On a Saturday, her young beau
Called to see if she'd like to go,
To see a show but Miss Kate said,
"No, I'll tell you what you can do."

"Take me out to the ball game,
Take me out with the crowd.
Buy me some peanuts and Cracker Jack,
I don't care if I never get back,
Let me root, root, root for the home team,
If they don't win it's a shame.
For it's one, two, three strikes, you're out,
At the old ball game."

Katie Casey saw all the games,
Knew the players by their first names;
Told the umpire he was wrong,
All along, good and strong.
When the score was just two to two,
Katie Casey knew what to do,
Just to cheer up the boys she knew,
She made the gang sing this song:

"Take me out to the ball game,
Take me out with the crowd.
Buy me some peanuts and Cracker Jack,
I don't care if I never get back,
Let me root, root, root for the home team,
If they don't win it's a shame.
For it's one, two, three strikes, you're out,
At the old ball game."

*A sou is a low-denomination coin.