

Excerpt terms and conditions

This excerpt is available to assist you in the play selection process.

Excerpts are not intended for performance, classroom or other academic use. In any of these cases you will need to purchase playbooks via our website or by phone, fax or mail.

A short excerpt is not always indicative of the entire work, and we strongly suggest you read the whole play before planning a production or ordering a cast quantity.

The Greater-Than-Ever American Songbag

*A Play With Music
Plus Sing-Along Concert*

By

JEFF GOTTFELD and ELIZABETH WONG

Dramatic Publishing Company

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

*** NOTICE ***

The amateur and stock acting rights to this work are controlled exclusively by THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC., without whose permission in writing no performance of it may be given. Royalty must be paid every time a play is performed whether or not it is presented for profit and whether or not admission is charged. A play is performed any time it is acted before an audience. Current royalty rates, applications and restrictions may be found at our website: www.dramaticpublishing.com, or we may be contacted by mail at: THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC., 311 Washington St., Woodstock, IL 60098.

COPYRIGHT LAW GIVES THE AUTHOR OR THE AUTHOR'S AGENT THE EXCLUSIVE RIGHT TO MAKE COPIES. This law provides authors with a fair return for their creative efforts. Authors earn their living from the royalties they receive from book sales and from the performance of their work. Conscientious observance of copyright law is not only ethical, it encourages authors to continue their creative work. This work is fully protected by copyright. No alterations, deletions or substitutions may be made in the work without the prior written consent of the publisher. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, videotape, film, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. It may not be performed either by professionals or amateurs without payment of royalty. All rights, including, but not limited to, the professional, motion picture, radio, television, videotape, foreign language, tabloid, recitation, lecturing, publication and reading, are reserved.

For performance of any songs, music and recordings mentioned in this play that are in copyright, the permission of the copyright owners must be obtained or other songs and recordings in the public domain substituted.
--

©MMXXV by
JEFF GOTTESFELD and ELIZABETH WONG

Printed in the United States of America
All Rights Reserved
(THE GREATER-THAN-EVER AMERICAN SONGBAG)

ISBN: 978-1-61959-271-1

IMPORTANT BILLING AND CREDIT REQUIREMENTS

All producers of the musical *must* give credit to the authors of the musical in all programs distributed in connection with performances of the musical and in all instances in which the title of the musical appears for purposes of advertising, publicizing or otherwise exploiting the musical and/or a production. The name of the authors *must* also appear on a separate line, on which no other name appears, immediately following the title, and *must* appear in size of type not less than fifty percent (50%) the size of the title type. Biographical information on the authors, if included in the playbook, may be used in all programs. *In all programs this notice must appear:*

“Produced by special arrangement with
THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC., of Woodstock, Illinois.”

PREFACE

Many American schoolchildren have never experienced the fun and joy of belting out the time-honored songs that generations before have learned, loved and sung together. From “She’ll Be Coming ’Round the Mountain” to “Home on the Range” to “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad” to “Daisy Bell (Bicycle Built for Two),” and more. This play and concert combo helps bring these songs to life for a new generation.

Every song in this play is in the public domain. For productions in 2025, materials copyrighted before Jan. 1, 1930 are also public domain. For 2026, materials copyrighted before Jan. 1, 1931, and so forth. Directors may adjust songs, taking public domain dates into account. We also occasionally reference contemporary songs for director guidance, but others may be swapped.

ACT II is a unique choral concert plus optional audience sing-along. We provide two possible core setlists. Directors may use all or part of our suggestions or create a lineup that works best for their cast and audience. The chorus may be as small or large as the director desires—a whole grade or even a whole school is certainly an option. It can rehearse separately.

Finally, any time-sensitive references may be adjusted at the discretion of the director. Dialogue reflecting gender may similarly be adjusted, depending on casting choices.

Have fun. Sing! Together!

The Greater-Than-Ever American Songbag

CHARACTERS

MEL: The rhythm guitarist in a garage band with Jett, Crash and Ringo. She is energetic and bubbly on the surface to hide an underlying sadness. She also has a YouTube channel called DumpsterDive where she flips salvageable trash.

JETT: The bandleader and electric guitar player who takes on a parental role and is something of a control freak. He is stressed out because of an ailing, beloved grandfather in the hospital.

CRASH: The bassist in the band who is stressed from over-scheduling and too-ambitious parents.

RINGO: The drummer in the band who is learning to beatbox by watching videos online. He is a latchkey kid whose parents let him do what he wants.

CARL SANDBURG: The great American bard, historian, poet and song-collector who compiled *The American Songbag* in 1927. He is affable, approachable and folksy. He wears a rumpled shirt with the long sleeves rolled up and a small, tasteful black bowtie.

ALL-IN: The AI assistant on Mel's phone who may or may not have a British accent. An offstage or prerecorded voice.

LULU: Crash's older sister. An offstage or prerecorded voice.

MUSIC COACH: The play director or music/chorus teacher who introduces the concert.

CHORUS: Flexible and expandable to suit your needs. Chorus members in ACT I wear 1920s clothing; those in ACT II wear modern clothing.

TIME: Present.

PLACE: Your community.

PRODUCTION NOTES

CASTING: All roles may be cast as any gender and pronouns updated as needed, even Carl Sandburg.

MUSICAL ABILITY: Mel, Jett, Crash, Ringo, All-In and Sandburg all sing. Mel and Sandburg will need to strum at least basic chords on acoustic guitar. We suggest Ringo and Jett both play openings to a couple of familiar rock songs. If the other band members can play their instruments, that's great, but it is not necessary, and instrumental music can be prerecorded and mimed. The choral concert could have a piano accompanist.

SING-ALONG CONCERT: At the end of the script, two possible setlists are provided with their lyrics for the sing-along concert, though you are welcome to build your own set list to suit your area. Of course, Carl Sandburg's *The American Songbag* is a great resource for classic American public domain songs.

The Greater-Than-Ever American Songbag

ACT I

(An empty urban, suburban or rural street.

CARL SANDBURG enters, softly singing the old folk song “Midnight Special” and carrying a trashed acoustic guitar. Maybe the guitar sound hole is stuffed with plastic flowers and/or a rubber mask covers the pegs.)

SANDBURG.

LET THE MIDNIGHT SPECIAL
SHINE A LIGHT ON ME
LET THE MIDNIGHT SPECIAL
SHINE A LIGHT ON ME
LET THE MIDNIGHT SPECIAL
SHINE A LIGHT ON ME
LET THE MIDNIGHT SPECIAL
SHINE AN EVER-LOVIN’ LIGHT ON ME.

(SANDBURG sets down the old guitar in multiple places on the stage before finally settling on the optimum spot. Then he steps aside in a dim light to watch.

MEL enters, carrying an electric guitar case.)

MEL *(on her phone)*. I know I know I know I know I know. I know! Awkward and miserable ... I know, yeah yeah. I hide it. I’m good at hiding it, but I feel the same way. And I can’t even tell you why. I just do.

(MEL stops by the decrepit guitar but is so wrapped up in the call, she pays it no mind.)

MEL (*cont'd*). It's when they comment, that's the worst. Learn from me, the voice of experience. Do NOT ever let your parents follow you on social media. Ever. Oh—got another call, yeah yeah I'm so popular ... I'm hanging up on you ... (*Taps phone to switch calls.*) I'm coming, I'm coming, I'm coming! ... Yes, I got it. Yes, I learned it ... no, *you* tell Jett. I'm not gonna tell Jett. He's worse than my dad! ... Yeah yeah yeah, ETA? Almost there.

(MEL clicks off and walks away, never noticing the guitar. SANDBURG, who's been watching the whole time, wants her to take it.)

SANDBURG (*whispering urgently*). Turn around. Turn around. (*Regular voice, sharply.*) Turn around!

(MEL finally notices the guitar and stops, but not because of SANDBURG. Only the audience sees and hears him.)

SANDBURG (*cont'd, whispers*). Look what you've found. Closer. Closer. (*Regular voice, sharply.*) Get closer!

(MEL quizzically approaches the discarded guitar.)

SANDBURG (*cont'd, whispers*). It's yours. Take it. Take it.

(MEL snaps a pic of the guitar.)

MEL. Hashtag DumpsterDive! I am gonna rescue and sell you.

(MEL picks it up and examines it. SANDBURG smiles, then slips away. MEL decides to take a quick video and holds her smartphone aloft.)

MEL (*cont'd*). Hello, fellow dumpster divers, Mel to the rescue. Check out this sad pathetic old thing. Smells like pizza and poop. Trash or treasure? I say, treasure! Gimme a week to fix, then make me an offer.

(She taps her phone to post. It then sounds with an incoming text. She types out an answer.)

MEL (*cont'd*). I'm coming!! Geez!

(MEL taps to send and rushes off with her guitar case and the found guitar.)

Dim lights up on CRASH's garage or basement for band practice. JETT, CRASH and RINGO enter and quickly set up for rehearsal. Then they get lost in their phones, checking notifications.

Meanwhile, SANDBURG enters downstage in a spotlight.)

SANDBURG (*folksy, directly to audience, spoken word rhythm*).

Sometimes things don't last. No, they don't.

Sometimes things get wrecked. Yes, they do.

Customs come, customs go. Time marches on. It does.

Sometimes dogs get abandoned. So sad.

Sometimes people too. They do. It's true.

Even songs get lost. Get forgot. Toss'd aside.

Discarded. Disposable. Unless, we sing them—

Rediscover them, remember them.

Recall a simpler time

When we sang songs—*together*.

When we all knew all the tunes, all the words.

When we'd find the joy—*together*.

No matter where you live or who you are.
No matter how little or how much you got.
The joy of singing together.
I'd like that, wouldn't you? I sure do.
The joy of singing *together*.

(Lights up on the band, engrossed in their phones. No talk. No interaction. Only stares into the digital netherworld. RINGO has earbuds in, watching a beatbox video and practicing "boots and cats.")

RINGO *(steady beatbox rhythm)*. Boots and cats. Boots and cats. Boots and cats ... *(Etc.)*

(Breathlessly, MEL enters, displaying the guitar that is now magically restored and indicated with some special magical lighting. None of the bandmates notice MEL.)

MEL. Look what I found. Ten minutes ago!

(SANDBURG smiles and slips away. MEL holds up the guitar. It's kind of glowing in the light.)

RINGO *(beatboxing a little faster)*. Boots and cats. Boots and cats. Boots and cats ... *(Etc.)*

MEL. It was just sitting at the corner of [a well-known local intersection].

RINGO *(going fast, messes up the rhythm)*. Boots and cats. Boots and cats—*(Exasperated.)* Boots and cats. Boots and cats!

(Deep into their phones; no one acknowledges MEL.)

MEL. And you won't believe this. I don't believe this. It had two broken strings and smelled like poop. I think a mouse was living in it. Now look at it!

(Finally, JETT realizes MEL's there. JETT's sharp voice gets everyone else's attention.)

JETT. You're late.

MEL *(sheepishly)*. I know, I know, I know. Sorry. Sorry, guys.

(They mostly wave "hi" and stay focused on their phones.)

JETT *(adulting, very parental)*. Rehearsals are important, Mel.

MEL. I know, I know, I know.

JETT. Ringo got here on time even though he had to take the bus. Crash got here *on time* even though his soccer practice got moved up, making this rehearsal even shorter. We're going into talent-show mode under-rehearsed, and we'll sound like amateurs—because *you're late!!*

CRASH *(to JETT)*. It's gonna be hard for me to rehearse. I got soccer, I got Tae-Kwon-Do, I got the dentist, and my math tutor switched days. My parents think I'm a bot, not a serious musician.

RINGO. At least yours care what you're doing.

MEL. Guys ...

RINGO. You found a nice guitar. You'll sell it on DumpsterDive.

JETT. So let's rehearse.

MEL. Guys.

CRASH *(to JETT)*. I talked to my sister. She can drop you at the hospital if you want to visit your grandfather.

JETT *(to CRASH)*. Thanks, man.

RINGO. Can she take me home, too?

MEL. Guys.

JETT. Put that thing down, Mel. We're electric. Everyone, plug in and tune up. Like my grandpa says, we're burning daylight.

MEL (*mutters to herself*). I feel a strange compulsion to play that thing now. It's a weird feeling. Like craving ice cream.

JETT. Mel! Did you even hear what I said?

MEL. No, not really. I tuned you out. I do that. Just ask my mom.

But look look look. (*Holds up the guitar.*) It's like, *glowing*.

JETT. It's like, *acoustic*. Let's do this.

(JETT straps on a super showy electric guitar, and RINGO heads for his drum kit.)

RINGO (*to MEL*). My kid sister is learning on a guitar like that. It's pink.

(MEL puts down the acoustic and straps on her electric.)

CRASH (*to MEL*). You found it like that? Looks new. Smells kinda lemony fresh.

MEL. That's what I'm trying to say. The guitar actually repaired itself. I mean, I didn't see it actually happen, but it was like magic.

RINGO. Mel, read the room. Jett needs to shred.

(JETT bangs out a sustained wailing, whining chord. The rest of the band joins in. They can play rock, metal, techno or anything original. It doesn't have to be good. MEL puts down her electric and starts strumming the acoustic.)

The band stops abruptly, but MEL keeps playing. They stare slack-jawed as she sings the sea shanty "Drunken Sailor.")

MEL (*joyfully*).

WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH THE DRUNKEN SAILOR?
WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH THE DRUNKEN SAILOR?
WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH THE DRUNKEN SAILOR?
EARLY IN THE MORNING!

WAY HAY AND UP SHE RISES
WAY HAY AND UP SHE RISES
WAY HAY AND UP SHE RISES
EARLY IN THE MORNING!

(MEL stops, baffled.)

MEL (*cont'd*). Whoa! Wicked weird.

JETT. What are you doing?

MEL. No idea. It's like I *had* to sing that.

CRASH (*interrupting*). Come on, Mel, stop fooling around.

RINGO (*flash of recognition*). *SpongeBob*. Yeah! That's what it was. The title music for Mr. Krabs or The Krusty Krab. I didn't know it had words. No words, just du du du du du du du du-DOO-du.

MEL. I've never watched *SpongeBob*.

RINGO. Seriously? That's depraved.

MEL. And I definitely don't know that song.

JETT. Can we practice, *please*?

CRASH. Let's go, Mel. I got a game to lose.

MEL. Sorry, Crash. I don't know what happened there.

JETT. Get your ax. Let's rehearse!

(MEL swaps out the guitars.)

JETT (*cont'd*). OK, new dance number, everyone. I'm calling it "Four to the Floor." Mel, try to keep up.

(JETT hands out sheet music. Everyone takes it and puts it where they can see it.)

JETT and/or CRASH start a beatbox rhythm. Everyone but MEL gets ready. She has once again switched back to the acoustic and starts a strummed rendition of "Home on the Range.")

MEL (*joyfully*).

OH, GIVE ME A HOME
WHERE THE BUFFALO ROAM
WHERE THE DEER AND THE ANTELOPE PLAY,
WHERE SELDOM IS HEARD
A DISCOURAGING WORD,
AND THE SKIES ARE NOT CLOUDY ALL DAY.

HOME, HOME ON THE RANGE,
WHERE THE DEER AND THE ANTELOPE PLAY—

JETT. Hold it, hold it. What the heck, Mel?

(*MEL stops.*)

JETT (*cont'd*). What are you doing?

MEL (*genuinely baffled*). I'm sorry. That wasn't on purpose.
Again.

JETT. Do you want to be in this band or not?

MEL. Really, guys. I don't even know what I sang. It's like the guitar made me do it. But I'm happy. Like the song made me happy, or something ... uh, yeah ...

(*The whole band stares as MEL's voice trails off. She takes off the acoustic guitar; maybe even backs away from it.*)

CRASH. Somebody drank too much Yoo-Hoo.

RINGO. It's the sugar. I'm trying to cut back.

CRASH. Gutsy. Since your parents let you eat whatever you want.

RINGO. Dude. We haven't had a family meal in years.

JETT (*to RINGO and CRASH*). Can you guys get serious? (*To MEL, as if to a child.*) People don't sing songs they don't know. First, you hear a song, then you learn the song, and then you sing it. And when you sing it, that means you know it. That's how the universe works.

MEL. You sound like my ... [father.] (*Her voice trails off again.*)

JETT. Mel. We like you. You're a great musician. And we know you've been having a hard time lately. You've missed a ton of school—

MEL. Just because I'm sad sometimes doesn't mean I don't show up. Most of the time.

RINGO. Sad? You're not sad.

CRASH. And you're always smiling.

MEL. Yeah? Well fooled you.

JETT. I just need to know—do you want to be in the band or not?

MEL. Being in the band ... is everything to me. It's just this guitar— [is doing something to me.]

CRASH. Ummm, Jett? The adulting is giving me the creeps. Can we practice before I gotta bounce?

MEL (*offers the acoustic to CRASH*). You don't believe me. OK. Take it.

CRASH. Rehearsal?

MEL. Take it.

CRASH. No.

RINGO (*spooky voice*). Ooooo ... haunted guitar possessed by— (*He makes a face of disgust.*) melodies! Harmonies! And ... lyrics! Ugh, yuck, lyrics.

MEL. I said, take it. Play it!

(*MEL thrusts it into CRASH's hands. A game of hot potato ensues, RINGO being the eventual loser.*)

RINGO. Fine. Since I barely play.

(RINGO straps it on and starts to pick out the opening of Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven," or another instantly recognizable rock song. It doesn't have to be good. And just like with MEL, RINGO segues into the American classic "Oh My Darling, Clementine." He can either strum it or sing a cappella.)

RINGO *(cont'd, joyfully)*.

OH MY DARLING, OH MY DARLING,
OH MY DARLING, CLEMENTINE!
YOU ARE LOST AND GONE FOREVER
DREADFUL SORRY, CLEMENTINE!

(RINGO yanks off the acoustic as if haunted.)

RINGO *(cont'd)*. What was that? Seriously? What. Was. That?
CRASH. Ghost guitar wins.

JETT. Am I being punked here? Who's filming?

(RINGO shares a puzzled smile with MEL, who feels a little vindicated.)

RINGO. Whoaaaaa! That was not "Stairway to Heaven."

JETT. That's "Oh My Darling, Clementine." My granddad used to sing it to me before I fell asleep. It's like 100 years old, that song. How do *you* know it?

RINGO. I don't. I absolutely don't. And I don't know who Clementine is. Never met her. This thing, it's freakin' crazy haunted. Sorry to doubt you, Mel.

MEL. What's new? I doubt myself sometimes.

JETT. OK. Let me see this possessed demon guitar. *(He examines it.)* There's a date etched behind the headstock. 1925. A hundred years ago.

RINGO (*to MEL*). That was fun. I feel kinda great.

MEL. Like a smile, right?

RINGO. Like a mom hug. Not that I would know.

CRASH (*phone chimes; he checks the text and speaks to JETT*).

My sister wants to know if you want a ride to the hospital.

MEL. I'm pulling for your grandpa, Jett.

RINGO. We all are.

(Just when it seems like there may be a moment of true connection, JETT breaks the tension.)

JETT. Let's see what this thing can do. Queen. "We Will Rock You."

(JETT starts to play the opening chords of "We Will Rock You" or another instantly recognizable tune, on the acoustic. But with a thoughtful breath, JETT ends up singing "When Johnny Comes Marching Home.")

JETT (*cont'd, emotional*).

WHEN JOHNNY COMES MARCHING HOME AGAIN,
HURRAH! HURRAH!
WE'LL GIVE HIM A HEARTY WELCOME THEN,
HURRAH! HURRAH!
THE MEN WILL CHEER, THE BOYS WILL SHOUT,
THE LADIES, THEY WILL ALL TURN OUT
AND WE'LL ALL FEEL GAY WHEN JOHNNY COMES
MARCHING HOME.

(Everyone is stunned at how beautifully he sings this song, including JETT.)

JETT (*cont'd*). What did I just sing?

CRASH. No idea.

RINGO. Who's Johnny? And why is he marching home?

(MEL gets an idea. She activates ALL-IN, the AI assistant on her phone.)

MEL. Hey, All-In.

ALL-IN *(V.O.)*. Hello, Mel. How may I assist you today?
Would you like to see another funny cat video?

MEL. No, not right now.

ALL-IN *(V.O.)*. Do you want me to tell you a joke? Jokes often cheer you up, Mel.

CRASH *(taking the phone)*. All-In, hi. We're kinda in a hurry.
Could you please just zip it and let Mel ask a question? Thanks.

ALL-IN *(V.O.)*. Well how terribly rude, but, of course, I'm happy to assist you.

MEL. All-In, listen to my friend sing a song and identify.

ALL-IN *(V.O.)*. I'm listening.

JETT. I'm not sure I can, I mean it just kinda ... you know.
Flowed.

ALL-IN *(V.O.)*. I'm still listening.

JETT. OK. I'll just ... *(Strums the guitar and begins to sing joyfully.)*

THE OLD CHURCH BELL WILL PEAL WITH JOY,
HURRAH! HURRAH!
TO WELCOME HOME OUR DARLING BOY,
HURRAH! HURRAH!
THE VILLAGE LADS AND LASSIES SAY,
WITH ROSES THEY WILL STREW THE WAY
AND WE'LL ALL FEEL GAY WHEN JOHNNY COMES
MARCHING HOME.

LET LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP ON THAT DAY,
HURRAH! HURRAH!
THEIR CHOICEST TREASURES THEN DISPLAY,
HURRAH! HURRAH!
AND LET EACH ONE PERFORM SOME PART,

TO FILL WITH JOY THE WARRIOR'S HEART,
AND WE'LL ALL FEEL GAY WHEN JOHNNY COMES
MARCHING HOME.

(Everyone applauds. Even ALL-IN.)

ALL-IN (*V.O.*). “When Johnny Comes Marching Home,” a ballad from the American Civil War, 1861 to 1865. It was sung by both the North and the South, although each side changed the lyrics slightly. The melody reportedly comes from an Irish folk song called “Johnny We Hardly Knew Ye.” Would you like to know more?

MEL. OK sure. Tell us more.

ALL-IN (*V.O.*). “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” was once known to nearly everyone and was once learned by every American.

JETT (*to CRASH*). Did I ever learn this?

CRASH. Nah. We’ve been at the same schools since kindergarten, bro. We never learned it.

RINGO. All-In, I think you made a mistake. But I forgive you. Because I think I love you.

ALL-IN (*V.O.*). I hear that a lot.

MEL. Thanks All-In. You’ve been a big help.

ALL-IN (*V.O.*). Singing was a favorite recreational activity, especially for children and teens.

JETT. OK, thanks All-In. We learned a lot.

(But ALL-IN is on a roll.)

ALL-IN (*V.O.*). The famous poet Carl Sandburg traveled the country in the 1920s to collect folk songs like “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” in order to preserve and pass them to future generations. His collection, *The American Songbag*, came out in 1927, contained 280 songs and was a massive bestseller.