Speaker 1:

Welcome to the "Michigan Minds" Podcast, a quick and informative analysis of today's top issues, from University of Michigan faculty.

Speaker 2:

Thank you so much for joining me today on Michigan Minds. Before we get started, could you please introduce yourself, and share a little bit about your role at the University of Michigan?

Mark Clague:

Sure, happy to. My name is Mark Clague. I actually grew up here in Ann Arbor, I'm one of the weird faculty who grew up in town, and still teaches at the University of Michigan. I feel like I've loved the University of Michigan forever. I'm a professor of musicology, which is the history of music. I also serve as associate dean of the School, Music, Theater, and Dance, for collaborations and partnerships. I run the Gershwin Critical Edition, that celebrates the music of George and Ira Gershwin, and co-direct the American Music Institute. I've been here a while, and do a lot of cool things. Michigan is an amazing playground for research and ideas.

Speaker 2:

Thank you so much for sharing that. I want to ask you, in what areas does your research focus?

Mark Clague:

I focus on music in the United States of America. What's cool about that is, it's not focused on a particular time, or a particular style. I can talk about symphonic music, and classical music by Beethoven being performed by the New York Philharmonic, or I can talk about jazz created by Louis Armstrong, or rap by one of my colleagues, Diedre D.S.SENSE Smith. It's a pretty amazing intellectual exploration of looking about the way music has shaped ideas about the United States of America, who we are as a people, what does it mean to be American, in this conversation through music. It's an incredible range of stuff that defines my research area.

Speaker 2:

Absolutely, and that is so cool that it's such a wide range. You are one of the foremost experts on the "Star Spangled Banner," I'm hoping that we can start with a very vague question. Why is it important to study and understand the history of the "Star Spangled Banner?"

Mark Clague:

That's not vague at all, at least in my mind. I started my research out of my teaching. I teach a big undergraduate class for music majors at the School of Music, Theater, and Dance, focused on American music. It's music in the students lives, music and history at the same time. One of the things I start the first lecture off with is talking about the "Star Spangled Banner," because what's more American music than the "Star Spangled Banner?" I look at Jimi Hendrix at Woodstock, and unpacking the complexity of that musical statement, which is both a protest tied in with the Vietnam War, and the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr., and of all the racial tension of the 1960s, but also is a statement of, I think, hope and pride. I think Hendrix was excited about the potential of Woodstock, by young people having this amazing moment of coming together in peace, love, and music.

There's a lot of hope in that song as well, or that rendition. Teaching that to my students, led to a discussion about the complexity of American patriotism. The questions came up, where did this song come from? Who wrote it, and when? How was it sung 200 years ago? Obviously, it was not on an electric guitar. We started looking into all of these questions, and I think that's the amazing thing about history. When you start digging into it, you find surprising answers that are different than what I learned as a kid. About the "Star Spangled Banner," that it was a poem, that Francis Scott Key was a prisoner aboard a British ship when he wrote it, that it comes to him in a flash of inspiration. It turns out that those things are sort of true, but mostly not true, that mythology, and unpacking that.

It turns out, Francis Scott Key was on his own American truce ship. He wrote a song lyric, thinking of a specific melody in his mind, that he was matching new words to fit. It wasn't a poem that someone else put to music later. It didn't come to him in a flash, it actually took him three days to figure it out. It's a very carefully constructed political statement about trying to create unity, and expressing a vision for a strong nation, at a time when the country actually was pretty divided, and pretty weak. The British were harassing cities of the Chesapeake Bay. They had burned Washington DC's federal buildings, the White House, the Capital building, to the ground, and we couldn't kick them out of the country. We actually had a very weak military at the time. We became that international superpower in World War II, but in 1814, when Francis Scott Key writes the song, we're not that at all.

Speaker 2:

Absolutely. Thank you so much for sharing that. You recently published a book titled, "O Say Can You Hear?" which is a cultural biography of the "Star Spangled Banner." Can you provide us a brief overview of your book, and how it examines the national anthem?

Mark Clague:

I tried to signal with the title that it was a fun, readable book. Yeah, it's academic, and yeah, there's a lot of research in there, and original, new, fresh stuff, but it's also something that's meant to be accessible. It's a history of America through the lens of the song, the "Star Spangled Banner," and that's why I call it a cultural biography. One of the things I discovered about the "Star Spangled Banner" in my research was that it's not just one thing, it's actually many things. Because it's a song, it's brought to life in performance. The flag is a symbol, and the national anthem is its auditory, or musical equivalent. The flag is something you look at, it's pretty much unchanging, until we add another state, and the number of stars change, but it stays pretty much the same day to day. The "Star Spangled Banner" is brought to life every time we sing it. The book really is a biography of the history of the song, as it traces the history of America.

There's just so much in it. It's 250 pages, but it talks about France Scott Key writing the song, where the music comes from, which actually, the music predates the lyric. The music is from London, England, from 1773, and was actually written by John Stafford Smith, who was one of the composers in the Royal Chapel of King George III, the guy that we had that revolution from, in 1776. That's pretty ironic, that that guy wrote the music for our national anthem. Along the way, I explore the symbolic power of the anthem to rally troops during the Civil War, all sorts of different translations of the anthem. Famous performances, like by Jimi Hendrix.

I spend a lot of time dealing with the legacy of slavery in American history, and the way in which that impacts not only Francis Scott Key, who was a slave owner, but also a lawyer who fought against slavery in court. The ways in which the song has been the basis, or the platform for protests, Colin Kaepernick probably being the most recent, and the most famous. That really inspired me to dig deeper into the controversies around the "Star Spangled Banner."

Speaker 2:

You briefly touched on this, but what led you to the title of the book?

Mark Clague:

It's the opening lyric. Instead of, "O Say Can you see?" it's, "O Say Can You Hear?" because it's a music book. As I said, I struggled with the title. I think every author is constantly trying to figure out what their book is about, and I spent a decade, at least, writing this book. I also had a title called "Singing Citizenship" that I was thinking about. My publisher liked "O Say Can You Hear?" in part because it immediately signals that it's a book about the story of the national anthem.

Speaker 2:

Thank you for sharing that. What would you say is one thing about the "Star Spangled Banner" that most Americans don't know?

Mark Clague:

Most people I talk to, when I give presentations on my book, think that Francis Scott Key wrote a poem that someone else later set to music, and that's false. He wrote a lyric, he wrote a set of words that were meant to be sung, and they were meant to be sung to this exact melody that we use today. The melody has changed a little bit over time, in musical details, but it's the same contour. The high notes that you sing, that are so hard, and people complain, "You can't sing the "Star Spangled Banner," it's too hard," those high notes are on the words, "Rocket's red glare, bombs bursting and air." Those are the moment of peak tension in the story that the lyric tells about the Battle of Baltimore, about the bombing of Fort McHenry, and about the heroism of the American soldiers and Militiamen who protected that fort, saved Baltimore, and saved the nation.

It's not an accident that the bombs, the big threat, is to the high notes. That's the dramatic tension of every verse. Each verse tells a little mini story in the shape of almost like a novel. It starts with an introduction that's low, and it has this high point of tension, and then, it resolves. The music and the words are married to one another in an expressive way that I think, for Francis Scott Key, captured what he witnessed, this moment of hope and heroism, and tried to share that emotion with fellow Americans. This was all part of a tradition that was super common in the 19th century, called the broadside ballad, or the newspaper ballad tradition. I compare them to the TikToks of the 19th century.

Now, everybody's making their little songs, and sharing them with the world through these apps. In the 19th century, the way you shared a song was to write a new set of words to a melody that everybody already knew. Imagine today, we would write new lyrics to "Happy Birthday," or new lyrics to "Take Me Out To the Ballgame," or to the "Star Spangled Banner." Actually, that just happened. Amanda Gorman, the national poet who spoke at the inauguration of Biden, wrote a set of lyrics to the "Star Spangled Banner" about the Highland Park shooting, on the 4th of July. This is a tradition that continues today. Actually, we're trying to inspire students at the University of Michigan to write new songs for a competition, to encourage their peers to get involved in democracy. Not only to vote, but to run for office, to just roll up their sleeves and get involved. For me, that's what the "Star Spangled Banner" is.

It's a call to citizenship. It's not a dead, old icon that we do in only one way. It's actually a living, breathing expression of what it means for the singer, and for us who are participating in the ritual, to be American. It asks us the question. There's literally a question mark at the end of the first verse, almost nobody remembers that. It's not an exclamation mark, it's a question mark. "O say does that star spangled banner yet wave in the land of free and the home of the brave?" Are we brave enough to live up to our ideals? For me, it's an always contemporary and important symbol for us today.

Speaker 2:

Thank you so much for sharing that. You mentioned a competition for University of Michigan students. Could you elaborate on that please?

Mark Clague:

It's called Songs for Democracy, it runs all fall, and the submissions are due a week after the midterm elections. It's meant to be a nonpartisan statement of possibility, of expressing getting involved with the nation, and of getting involved with our democracy. It's sponsored by the Democracy and Debate Initiative at the University of Michigan, which comes out of the Ford School, and a lot of other schools, including the School of Music, Theater, and Dance. The prize is $3,000, that should be motivating.

They're looking for people to write music and lyrics, and you'd have album art, too, to work with some of our art and design students. It's a team effort to submit. We're thinking of totally original songs, but also, songs that might be written just like Francis Scott Key did. Taking a melody that people already know, and writing a new set of lyrics that would speak and resonate with the student body.

Speaker 2:

What a cool opportunity for students to have. Thank you for sharing that. I want to change gears a little bit. Obviously, we know there's so much history behind the national anthem, but there's so much history that has happened since it was written. How has the meaning of the national anthem changed over time? Do different versions of the Anthem have different meanings?

Mark Clague:

The answer is yes, absolutely. It has changed over time, and the meaning has shifted. Perhaps the biggest change is, when Francis Scott Key wrote the song, it was a party song. It was a song of celebration of an unexpected victory over a superior British force. It's upbeat, it's celebratory, it has a rolling triple meter, "O say can you see, by the dawn's early light?" We tend to sing it way slower these days, and that's because, I think, it's social function has shifted. Since the Civil War, and the sacrifice of American life to preserve the union, and end slavery, it's become a sacred hymn to the nation. For that reason, it's more like going to church, it's slower. In fact, really famous versions that people say are incredibly traditional are in a different meter entirely. They're more like a four four church hymn. "O say, can you see?" Whitney Houston at the Super Bowl, in 1991. That's an amazing version, check that out on YouTube. That's changed.

The other thing that's changed, as I said, is that there actually are almost 600 different sets of lyrics that I've found in my research, that have been sung to the tune we know as the "Star Spangled Banner." There's lots of commentary on what it means to be American. There are women's suffrage songs for voting rights, there are anti-slavery abolitionist songs, there are union rallying songs. There are songs about the military, and naval discipline. There are songs about women's rights. There are songs about temperance, and prohibition, which was a huge issue in the 19th century. There are also a lot of 4th of July songs, and there are a lot of presidential campaign songs, because what's at stake but the identity of the nation, when you elect a new president?

In the 19th century, the tune that was associated with the identity of the nation became the tune that you would argue, "My candidate is the best one for America." There are three campaign songs written to the tune that we know today as the "Star Spangled Banner" that were written for Abraham Lincoln's election, in 1860. That's pretty amazing.

It has changed a lot. I think in the 20th century, most recently, and for us today, it's not about changing the words so much, it's actually about changing the musical expression. Someone like Jimi Hendrix, or Whitney Houston, they insert their own personal identity. For Whitney, I think there are these gospel stylings that claim a space for African Americans, and Black Americans in American life, and say, "We've been here." For her, it's both a sincere personal statement, but I think there's a universal statement of belonging, about the importance of African Americans to our democracy. In many ways, African Americans' demands for rights has been what's held the nation to account, to live up to its ideals.

Hendrix, as I mentioned, it's a youth anthem. He's saying, "It's time for young people to take over, to take control of this country, to get involved." There are a lot of different meanings that come out of the individual performances of the anthem, and that's what fascinates me, as a historian.

Speaker 2:

It is all so fascinating, thank you for sharing that. With this conversation that we've had today, what is one thing that you hope everyone listening takes away from the information that you've shared?

Mark Clague:

I hope that people, after hearing this conversation, when they sing the "Star Spangled Banner," they don't treat it as a throwaway ritual, they treat it as a moment of reflection. As I said, there's a question mark at the end of that first verse. For Francis Scott Key, it was literally, "Is the flag still there? Did the British defeat the Americans, and put up their own flag? Is it still the American flag?" At that time, it would've been called the American Flag. Francis Scott Key's lyric is actually what gives the "Star Spangled Banner" it's name that we often use to refer to the flag, and the song today. I think it's really important about that issue, with the question mark, it's a call to citizenship. It's a call for us today to get involved, and answer that question in our own way, to make our voice heard as part of the nation.

Speaker 2:

Thank you so much for sharing that information. Is there anything else that you would like to share, before we end our podcast today?

Mark Clague:

I'll share a tip. One of the things that get asked all the time is, why the anthem is so hard to sing. The reason for that is that in 1773, when it was a song, the melody was originally composed for an amateur musician's club in London. People think of it as a drinking song, and they certainly had a good time, and partied a lot, and there's no doubt that alcohol was involved. It's really a club anthem. It's a club song, and not a pub song, as I will often say. They're a musicians club, they're meant to show off how great they are as musicians. They wrote an impressive tune that was athletic, and challenging to sing. For me, what makes the anthem so exciting is that it's so bold, and heroic, and independent.

I think it wraps into all those things that we want to hold dear as Americans, that we're pioneering, and we're brave, and we're out to do spectacular, courageous things. I think it takes a little bit of heroism to sing the song, but it also takes commitment. In the 19th century, it would've been sung by a soloist. Now, we're singing it in the Big House, with 110,000 plus people. Collectively, everybody can hit all the notes, for sure, so just get up and sing when you have the opportunity. If you are ever called upon to sing the song by yourself, the key is to start low. You can get to the high notes as long as you start the opening low enough. The beginning of the song is pretty comfortable for most people, then, of course, it gets high. If you start uncomfortably low, the high notes will be comfortable.

Speaker 2:

That is such a great tip to share, thank you so much. Thank you so much for joining me today on "Michigan Minds," it's been great speaking with you.

Mark Clague:

Thanks so much.

Speaker 4:

Thank you for listening to the "Michigan Minds" podcast, a production of the University of Michigan. Join the conversation on social media, with hashtag "UMichimpact."