

AMAZING GRACE - The Myths Dispelled.

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Love it or hate it, the tune "Amazing Grace" has become synonymous with the Great Highland Bagpipe. It is requested almost every time a piper appears in the general public and therefore many serious pipers are not great fans of the tune. It is often stated that it is "not a Scottish tune", or "it was originally a Gaelic air", or it is an "African American spiritual". Well, what is the truth and where did it come from?

WORDS

The words are obviously a Christian hymn and were penned by John Newton (1725–1807) and were published in 1779. As a young man, Newton was pressed into the Royal Navy and after his service eventually worked as a sailor aboard a slave trading vessel. During a ferocious storm he called out to God in fear and this marked his Christian conversion. Some years later he left the slave trade and began studying theology, eventually being ordained in the Church of England in 1764. The hymn was written to illustrate a sermon on New Year's Day 1773. It imparts a message of forgiveness and redemption, no matter how great one's sins. Not all of the current words are attributed to Newton as there are later additions.

MUSIC

In 1835 William Walker joined Newton's hymn with the music we now recognise. The tune was known as "New Britain" and had been an amalgamation of two traditional folk tunes known as "Gallaher" and "St Mary". It is speculated that these tunes were Scottish Folk ballads passed orally by the predominantly Scottish immigrants of Kentucky and Tennessee or folk songs developed in Virginia or South Carolina, from where Walker originally came.

POPULARITY

Issued to soldiers in two hymnals during the American Civil War the hymn became popular in a time dealing with so many tragic deaths. It also featured in an immensely popular anti-slavery novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin". The simple and moving words and attractive melody saw the hymn becoming a popular African American Spiritual.

In the 1960's it was a commonly used hymn by the African American Civil Rights movement and also by the opposition groups to the Vietnam War.

BAGPIPES

In 1972 The Royal Scots Dragoon Guards recorded "Amazing Grace" combining both their Pipes and Drums and Military Band. The arrangement opened with a solo bagpipe which was joined by the Pipe Band and full Military Band. The track quickly rose to number one in the charts in the UK, Ireland, Canada, South Africa and Australia and by 1977 had sold seven million copies. It also reached as high as 11 on the US charts.



The Royal Scots Dragoon Guards had only been formed in 1971 by the amalgamation of the 3rd Carabiniers and the Royal Scots Greys. Pipe major at the time of the recording was Sgt. A J Crease and the Bandmaster was WO1. C I Herbert. We have been unable to confirm the suggestion that Tony Crease was summoned to the Army School of Piping at Edinburgh Castle and chastised for “demeaning the bagpipe” following release of the recording. We doubt this as the Director of Army Bagpipe Music at the time Capt. John MacLellan later published the score in one of his many books of tunes for the Highland Bagpipe.

It is without any doubt that this recording created the strong link that the Bagpipe now shares with the tune “Amazing Grace”. Many recordings (both good and bad) have been made since further cementing the relationship.

Amazing Grace is featured on the Scotland the Brave Album available here: http://www.schoolofpiping.com/shop/beginners_publications.html

