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Rudimental Classics ‘Yankee Doodle’

By Robert J. Damm

Although the tune for “Yankee Doodle” has perhaps become the most recognizable “American” song in the world, the drum part traditionally used to accompany it is, ironically, a generic march pattern called “The Army Two-Four.” This is a standard drum beat historically applied to any 2/4 march tune for which a drum part was needed. This tradition is documented in *The Complete Music for Fife and Drum*, where the snare drum part suggested for “Yankee Doodle” is “The Army Two-Four,” a general-purpose drumbeat, or “The General” (Sweet, p.4–5). “The Army Two-Four” found in *The Drummers’ and Fifers’ Guide* is in a section called “Standard Beats” where it is called quick-step “Biddy Oats” and is recommended as the drum beat for 13 other tunes “as now used in the Regular Army of the United States” (Bruce and Emmett, p. 56). “Biddy Oats: The Army 2/4” is also found in the *Collection of Drum Solos* (Ludwig, p. 16). Although a bass drum part is included in both the Sweet and the Fennell collections, the bass drum did not become part of American field music until the early 19th century (Camus in Groves, p. 229). There is no bass drum part included in *The Drummers’ and Fifers’ Guide* (Bruce and Emmett).

The connection of “Biddy Oats: The Army 2/4” to “Yankee Doodle” clearly illustrates the importance of knowing the relationship of the rudimental drum part to its associated fife tune. In this case, a generic march beat, because of its

connection to a patriotic song, becomes one of the most important drum beats in the history of the United States. Playing “Biddy Oats: The Army 2/4” as a snare drum solo, without knowing its function and its connection to specific tunes, will not provide the rich musical experience of playing it as the drum beat in a fife-and-drum performance of “Yankee Doodle.”

As a song, “Yankee Doodle” had a long history in oral tradition before it evolved into its present form. “The implication is plain that we are here dealing with a genuine folk melody, the origins of which are lost in antiquity,” reported Lowens (p. 92–93). The earliest written record of “Yankee Doodle” (also called “The Lexington March”) was in the form of sheet music printed by Thomas Skillern in London between 1775–1777 (Damon, p. 1).

“The legacy of ‘Yankee Doodle’ is as rich as the heritage of America...it evolved during the American Revolution to become our most stirring anthem of liberty” (Murray, cover jacket). In addition to its use for marching and dancing, the “Yankee Doodle” tune was used for creating “new songs” about current events. In the early American colonies of the 1600s, there was hostility between the Dutch in New Netherland and the English in New England. The Dutch called the English “Jankes” (meaning “Johnnies”) but pronounced “Yahnkes”) and made up verses about the English Johnnies as they sang their “Janke doedel”



harvest song (Murray, 3–17). The song was taken up much later by the British during the American Revolutionary War in derision of the New Englanders:

Yankee doodle came to town
Riding on a pony,
Stuck a feather in his hat
And called it macaroni

The meaning of this verse is understood through etymology. In the 1770s, *Yankee* referred to America’s English colonists. *Doodle* meant a “fool” or “simpleton.” A *macaroni* (also known as a fop or a dandy) described a man who was preoccupied with or vain about his clothes and manners. The term also referred to a young man who had traveled in Europe and extravagantly imitated such Continental fashions as long curls and glasses. The macaroni wig was an extreme fashion of the time. The verse, therefore, meant that the colonists were so unsophisticated that they thought that by simply sticking a feather in a cap they could achieve the height of fashion (Oxford English Dictionary Online).

The American war camp provided a new subject to be set to the tune. In 1775, when Washington took command in Cambridge, a British military surgeon by the name of Edward Bangs made up humorous verses about “Yankee Doodle” to make fun of the New England militia. Using an earlier version, Bangs wrote “The Yankee’s Return from Camp,” which was widely printed as a broadside and became the official text. The version depicted a naive boy’s view of army camp and provided the new chorus:

Yankee doodle, keep it up,

“Biddy Oats” as printed in *The Drummer’s and Fifer’s Guide* by George Bruce and Daniel Emmett

STANDARD BEATS.

As now used in the Regular Army of the United States, the tunes which follow answering the same beat.

QUICK STEP. “Biddy Oats.”

Yankee Doodle

with Army Two - Four

Yankee doodle dandy,
Mind the music and the step
And with the girls be handy (Damon, p. 11).
“The song ‘Yankee Doodle’ was at first despised by New Englanders, but in the 1775 battles of Lexington and Concord the victorious rebels hurled it back at the retreating redcoats. By the British surrender at Yorktown in 1781, the colonists had made ‘Yankee Doodle’ their ‘National Air’ and inverted its meaning to a patriotic song of defiance and triumph” (Murray, cover jacket).

The enduring popularity of “Yankee Doodle” is evidenced by its printing in dozens of American newspapers during the 1780s and 1790s bearing the title “Air – Yankee Doodle” (Lowens, p. 92). It was also printed in America for Benjamin Carr’s “Federal Overture,” a medley of patriotic songs published in 1795 (Sonneck, p. 121).

The famous patriotic painting by Archibald Willard called “Yankee Doodle” (later known as “The Spirit of ’76” after it was exhibited in the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876) depicts two drummers and a fifer marching across a battlefield during the American Revolution. This painting epitomizes the historical connection between the song and the fife-and-drum tradition. In fact, “Yankee Doodle” “remains the signature tune of all traditional fife-and-drum corps” to this day (Cifaldi in Sweet, p. 98).

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