



Moonlight Memories DJs **Newsletter**

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As a disc jockey I have played the song “Happy Birthday to You” countless times. Last month I decided to find out where the song originated. Here is what I found. Hope you find it interesting.

Bruce Doorly



“Happy Birthday to You”

We all know the song,
but few know its history.



Happy Birthday to You

It is a time honored tradition – the birthday cake is lit and the group joyfully sings “Happy Birthday to You” (HBTY) to the guest of honor. This simple song that takes only 12 seconds to sing is a firm part of our culture.

The “Guinness Book of World Records” states that it is the most sung song in the English Language. By one estimate it is the most profitable song in history as it has brought in royalties estimated at \$50 Million over the years.

How it all began :

Around 1890 two sisters from Kentucky, Patty and Mildred Hill, together wrote songs for Patty’s Kindergarten class. Patty wrote the words and Mildred wrote the music. They created dozens of songs. In 1893 they decided to put their songs into a book of sheet music they entitled “Song Stories for the Kindergarten”. They exhibited this book at the World’s Fair in Chicago that year. In that book one of the short songs was “Good Morning to All”. The original intention was that it was a classroom greeting from teachers to students. The words were:

Good morning to you

Good morning to you

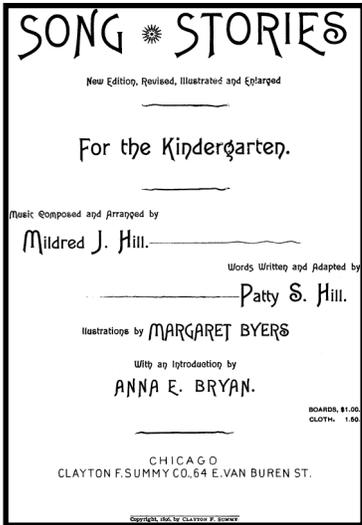
Good morning dear children

Good morning to all

This tune gained popularity spreading to other schools and into other states as *Song Stories for the Kindergarten* would go on to have over 20 editions.

The song’s words were later adapted to be from the students, to the teacher, as opposed to the other way around.

Then somewhere, at some time, somebody changed the lyrics from a morning greeting to a birthday wish. The words “Good Morning to You” became “Happy Birthday to You”. And the Birthday version spread throughout the country.



When were the words changed to "Happy Birthday" ?

It could have been soon after the original song was written as classrooms regularly celebrated kid's birthdays and the adaption of the song seems natural. Written evidence begins in 1901 when the exact words to HBTY appeared at the end of a published poem. But here there was no reference to the song being sung. More evidence comes from the same year (1901) as two school journals made a reference to a song called "Happy Birthday to You", but here no specific lyrics were printed. The earliest we find "sheet music" with the words and music as we know them today is 1911.

In the early 1930s "Happy Birthday to You" started to appear in films and a Broadway play. So in 1935 the Hill family decided that they needed to secure a copyright for their song and together with a publishing company secured a copyright. That meant that anytime the song was used in a money-making capacity the user would have to pay royalties. It was no longer a freebie. Thus over the years movies and television have thought twice about using HBTY as the cost varied from \$1,000 to \$10,000. But it still has been used in over 100 movies.

The royalty fee also explains why restaurant chains have had their staff sing some hokey homemade birthday song to the birthday guests as opposed to HBTY. It's because they wanted to avoid paying royalties.

There is now hope that these cheesy homemade birthday songs at restaurants will soon disappear. It started in 2015 when a film maker who was making a short film about the history of "Happy Birthday to You" was charged \$1500 to include the song in her documentary. As she did her research she learned that the copyright that she had paid for was on shaky ground. For no one knew who wrote the revised birthday words and that 1935 copyright for some reason was just for a specific piano arrangement of the song. She took her case to court and a judge agreed with her and ruled that the existing copyright on "Happy Birthday to You" was not valid. HBTY could now be used for free in movies, television and (thank god) by restaurant employees when singing to customers.

About those Hill Sisters who started it all over 125 years ago. In life Patty Hill was no "One Hit Wonder". She had a career of distinction in kindergarten education. Many of her teaching methods and ideas were adopted by other teachers. She lived long enough to see her song become a classic. She passed away in 1946. But Mildred Hill, who died in 1916, did not live to see their song become famous.

In 1996 Mildred and Patty Hill were honored posthumously by the "Song Writers Hall of Fame" with the "Towering Song Award" which celebrates songs with lasting cultural impact.

For eighty years HBTY has been a part of most every birthday in this country. No competition has ever emerged nor is it likely that any will. It's a safe bet that our great-grand kids will still be singing "Happy Birthday to You".

Till next time.

Bruce Dooley



The Hill Sisters
Mildred and Patty
Created a timeless classic



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