

Stephen Schwartz Comments on Disney's Pocahontas

Pocahontas was Stephen Schwartz's first project for Disney. The movie featuring music by Alan Menken and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz came out in 1994. Schwartz and Menken won Academy Awards for Best Score for this movie and Best Original Song for "Colors of the Wind"

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SECTION 1 – About Pocahontas and Disney

The Disney Films

Question:

I wanted to know, how was it working on the Disney Films? Like, since Stephen was only doing the lyrics for the songs, did he have any input on the music for the songs? Plus the song me and my wife danced to at our wedding was "If I Never Knew You", how did u come up with that song?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I had a great time working for Disney, and particularly working with Alan Menken, who has become one of my closest friends (we had dinner together just last night.) I had input on the music for the songs in the way all collaborators have input on each other's work, but all the music for the two Disney animated features I did with Alan was definitely his.

The evolution of the song "If I Never Knew You" is a case in point as to how collaborators influence and help one another. I was struggling with a concept for the song, and so I wrote a long sort of stream of consciousness monologue of what John Smith might be saying to Pocahontas at that point in the story and showed it to Alan. He picked out the phrase "If I never knew you" from within the body of the monologue, and that became the title of the song. I hope it provided a lovely wedding dance for you and your wife. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Fieldtrip

Question missing

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Carol: The answer to both questions is yes. We did go on a field trip to Jamestown and, while there, to a gathering of Native American tribes. As always, being on the spot was tremendously useful for atmosphere and specific details of the lyrics, and I bought some tapes while I was there, including one called "Songs of the Virginia Company" that was very Algonkian, but probably not the same Algonkian that Pocahontas actually spoke. [the tapes were] helpful in selecting musical styles for songs like "Mine, Mine, Mine". The non-English lyrics are indeed authentic.

POCAHONTAS: "Pocahontas" insights

Question:

I'm a historian working on a research project examining Disney's take on U.S. History. As part of this project, I'm interested in the depiction of the culture clash between the English and the Native Americans during the Colonial period and of course "Pocahontas" will be part of this study. One thing the film does very well is to capture this culture clash--especially through the songs! Your lyrics in particular capture the differences in world view between the English and the Powhatan people.

Did you do any research into the history of these two groups of people before you wrote for this film? What knowledge did you have before this project in terms of the settlement of Virginia and the impact on the Native peoples of the area? Any insight you could give me would be greatly appreciated. Also, could I have permission to quote you? I would be happy to give you further information about this project should you be concerned about quotes, but I assure you, I have nothing but respect for you and your work. I feel any information you can give me would be a great--and exciting--boost to my work!

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I did a great deal of research for "Pocahontas", both about the specific period, history and location and about Native American ways of thinking and expression in general. In addition to history books, some of the books were other novels, collections of Native American poetry, etc., things to bring inspiration and immersion in the place, time, and culture. Among the titles, listed in no particular order of importance or influence, were:

The Powhatan Indians of Virginia by Helen C. Rountree
Pocahontas by Grace Steele Woodward
Pocahontas, First Lady of America by Leon Phillips
Pocahontas by Susan Donnell
Algonquin Legends by Charles G. Leland
The Indians' Book by Natalie Curtis
The Last Algonquin by Theodore L. Kaimiroff
Drawings of the Song Animals, poems by Duane Niatum
Native Religions of North America by Ake Hultkrantz
Black Elk Speaks by John G. Neihardt

There are of course books written from the English point of view, including famously by John Smith himself, and I browsed some of them as well. But for me, the most significant task was to try to channel the spirit and thinking of the Algonkians of the time and place to the extent I could.

I hope this is helpful to you with your own project. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

SECTION 2 – Colors of the Wind

Colors of the Wind Inspiration

Question:

What's the story behind the lyrics of the song "Colors of the Wind? I'm writing a report on it, and I can compare my own experiences toward the lyrics. By relating author's original meaning to mine, I can produce a great report! I love your work, keep it up! Thank you for your time.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The lyrics to "Colors of the Wind" were inspired by a famous letter written by Chief Seattle to Congress, which has been re-printed many times. In the song, I basically wanted Pocahontas to address the Eurocentrism of John Smith; so in essence, it's a consciousness-raising song. I tried to use Native American locution and imagery, and thus the specific wording was somewhat influenced by some of the Native American poetry I had been reading as research. I'm not sure if this is the kind of information you were seeking, but I hope it proves helpful. Good luck with your paper. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Colors of the Wind as first song?

Question:

Is it true that Colors of The Wind was written before the script was in place and Disney loved the song so much that the whole film was geared to "showpiece" the tune?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

"Colors of the Wind" was the first song Alan and I wrote for POCAHONTAS, and it did influence the development of the rest of the film. But a story-board outline was in place before we wrote it. This is often the process in animation, at least as I've experienced it, where everybody works from an outline and each succeeding piece of material, whether it is a song or drawings, influences the next.

Blue Corn Moon lyric from "Colors of the Wind"

Question:

I have been trying to find what a Blue Corn Moon represents in Indian Lore. Can you please Help me with this information?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Thanks for your interest. I feel somewhat guilty to have to tell you that the phrase "blue corn moon" has no actual meaning in Indian lore. I made it up because I liked the sound of it. Its basis is this: In preparation for doing the lyrics to POCAHONTAS, I read a lot of Native American poetry. One of the phrases I came across, in a love poem, was: "I will come to you in the moon of green corn." (The Native Americans called their months "moons" and named them according to something that happened seasonally, such as the arrival of green corn.) The phrase stuck in my head, but I didn't think the lyric: "Have you ever heard the wolf cry to the green corn moon" really worked, because of the association of the moon and green cheese, plus the "ee" sound in it, etc. So I changed it to blue corn moon, which I thought had a nice resonance to it because of the phrase "blue moon" and the fact that there are things like blue corn tortillas, etc. Even though it's not authentic, and actually implies Southwestern tribes rather than the Northeastern Algonkians of Pocahontas, I used it in the lyric and it obviously served me very well. This is probably far more than you wanted to know, but that's the derivation of the phrase, for whatever it's worth to you. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Missing 1st verse in W. Williams "Colors..."

Question:

Hi Stephen: Can you tell us how it came to be that the first verse of "Colors of the Wind" is missing from the Vanessa Williams version for the Pocahontas film. What happened? Has anyone recorded this wonderful song including the first verse? Thanks.

Answer from Carol de Giere:

While Stephen is busy, I'll give a partial answer. Stephen has said that he generally has little or no control over the pop versions of his movie songs. So that might be his answer.

Or perhaps by the "first verse" you mean that the introduction to the song is missing, i.e. the part that ends, "How can there be so much that you don't know?" Intros are often left out when songs from musicals are sung out of context.

The version of the song as Stephen plays it in concerts is published as sheet music in the Stephen Schwartz Songbook. It starts with the line – "You think you own whatever land you land on." I suspect most singers start there when singing the song, except for Judy Kuhn singing it in the movie with the intro. <http://www.musicalschwartz.com/schwartzsongbook.htm>

SECTION 3 – OTHER SONGS INCLUDING CUT SONGS

Pocahontas - Steady as a Beating Drum

Question:

I was hoping you could answer a question of mine regarding the lyrics for Steady as a Beating Drum. Are the parts sung by the Native Americans a song that means something for a particular Native American Tribe? Or is it something made up by yourself? Or is it a bit of both?

Hega hega ya-hi-ye-hega

Ya-hi-ye-ne-he hega

Hega hega ya-hi-ye-hega

Ya-hi-ye-ne-he hega

Your answer to this question would help me immensely. Thanks.

Answer from Stephen Schwawrtz:

It's been a while, so I don't specifically remember what the Native American words in "Steady as the Beating Drum" mean, but the lyrics were extensively researched, so I know I did not make them up. They would be in Algonkian. They may refer to the content of the song (about continuity), or they may just be a chant I cribbed from another Algonkian song, or a combination of ones I found, and as such may not have a specific meaning beyond the rhythmic. That's the best my memory will allow me to supply, sorry I can't be more specific. All best, Stephen

Pocahontas: If I Never Knew You

Question:

One of my all-time fave Disney songs, "If I Never Knew You," was cut from Pocahontas, and we all just had to settle for the single version, sung during the credits. I still can't figure out why they animated the whole scene and THEN decided to cut it.

I noticed that Disney is releasing a whole heap of "Gold Edition" videos and D.V.D.s this year, and Pocahontas is among them. Is there any possibility of the removed scene being included as a special edition-type thing? – Pete J.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I believe the DVD release of POCAHONTAS will include "If I Never Knew You." The song was cut from the theatrical release after a couple of preview screenings, during which it was clear that we were losing the audience, particularly the younger members of the audience, during it. Sometimes songs work better out of context than in the show where they were originally intended, and this seems to be one of them.

SONGWRITING: Controversial Lyrics/Requested Changes

Question:

Sometimes in Musicals (Disney or not) there is Controversy with the lyrics in that some people feel its stereotypical, vulgar, mis interpreting (you name it). One of the songs in Pocahontas is "Savages", why which a part of it went like this...

What can you expect/ from filthy little heathens?/ Their whole disgusting race is like a curse!

But I read that the song was tested and many people were upset and thought that the lyrics were "inflammatory", having said that it was changed to...

What can you expect/ from filthy little heathens?/ Here's what you get when the races are diverse!

So I'm wondering, is it hard to change lyrics to a song that you write even though you worked so hard on it and even it gets the point across about how the character feels?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Thanks for the question. I would never change a lyric to something I felt was inferior, but if it means another way of getting the point across, I am accustomed to rewriting and revising and don't have a problem with it. In the case of the specific line from "Savages" which you cite, I don't remember the specific reason for the change, but I'm happy with the line that was ultimately used and actually think it is superior to the original in some ways. I appreciate your interest, best, Stephen Schwartz

Questions about Pocahontas Formula

Question:

Dear Stephen, There was a question about song placement in Pocahontas as well, and this raised a question in my mind, most of the Disney musicals have a certain structure (i.e Little Mermaid onwards) that has the "I want" number very early on normally just after the opening number...(eg. Belle Reprise, Part of Your World, Out There and Go The Distance) with Pocahontas the "comedy" number (Guy Like You, Gaston, Under The Sea, Friend Like Me) seems to be Mine Mine Mine. But this is more of a character exposition song, and isn't that "in your face funny" was this a conscious decision to make the film seem more realistic or was it simply that the characters of the crew would have had to be mor prominent for any full throtle number to be written? It's not a gripe but I always wonder when I watch it.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

It's not really that there is a "formula" for these things, but I have learned over the years that pretty much any successful musical you can name has an "I Want" song for its main character within the first fifteen or so minutes of the show. I can think of exceptions, but frankly I feel that the lack of such a moment is a weakness in most of those cases. "Just Around the Riverbend" may not be a classic "I want" song, because the character doesn't really want anything that strongly until she meets John Smith, but it sets up her sense that she has another destiny to pursue than the one laid out for her by her father and society and her desire to go after it. Its closest equivalent in musical structure terms is probably "Something's Coming" from WEST SIDE STORY -- not surprisingly, since that's another Romeo and Juliet story. The third number, "Mine Mine Mine", was basically supposed to introduce the antagonist, Ratcliffe, and what HE wanted, so that the central dramatic conflict could be established. Obviously, I tried to write his lyrics in a comic way (and I'm still pretty proud of getting "with all you got in ya, boys, dig up Virginia, boys" through the Disney hierarchy), but the storytelling purpose of the number was more important than its "production number" value. Thanks for asking, Stephen Schwartz

Cut Songs from Pocahontas/Hunchback

Question missing

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

There were many songs written for both projects, as well as for PRINCE OF EGYPT, that didn't make it into the film. Of course "If I Never Knew You" from POCAHONTAS and "Someday" from HofND are well-known. The three songs from HofND you're referring to were called "In a Place of Miracles" and "As Long as There's a Moon" (both essentially love songs for Esmeralda and Phoebus witnessed by Quasimodo) and another called "More Than Love" which took place in the bell-tower when Esmeralda brought Phoebus there and basically was the same event. I kept trying to musicalize it! We have finally succeeded in doing so in the stage version, where a song called "Out of Love" does the job (we tried "In a Place of Miracles" again, and it didn't work on stage either.)

...The best song cut from POCAHONTAS was a duet for her and John Smith called "In the Middle of the River". The other song we kept trying to come up with and failing for POCAHONTAS was a number for Grandmother Willow -- the best of these was called "The First to Dance" and the worst, a song Alan and I still make fun of to each other, was called (I'm embarrassed to admit) "Knock Wood". I consider it a mercy that no tape is available of that! Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

"In the Middle of the River" ...[Song cut from Pocahontas]

Question:

I love this song, but I can't make out the lyric Pocahontas sings near the very end. The commentary says that it means something about meeting in the middle of the river, in a Native American Language... I'm just wondering what the word actually is so I get it right when I'm singing along. Also, I was wondering if there's anywhere to find sheet music from that song or from the songs that were cut from HoND? I don't necessarily mean the versions in the stage musical (Though I'd love to have music for that, too!) I would really, really like to use the version of "Someday" that starts out like God Help the Outcasts for an audition...

Answer from Michael Cole:

I checked with Stephen and he doesn't remember the lyric to this song. It used to live somewhere on his computer, but it's been lost. He has no access to the cut songs from the two Disney movies as they own the songs. I much prefer it when I can deliver good news, but in this instance I can't. Let us know if we can help you in any other way. Best, Michael

Please tell us about "Knock Wood"

Question:

Mr. Schwartz, I read on this forum you and Alan Menken wrote a song called "Knock Wood" for POCAHONTAS and it didn't make it into the final film. Could you give us a sample of the lyrics from that song? Or say why the song wasn't working? I love learning about cut songs from projects because they can help better understand the message of a show by what it's NOT supposed to be. You know what I mean? Thanks a lot! - Jack

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Hi Jack: Alan and I wrote a few songs for POCAHONTAS that didn't wind up being used in the movie, a couple of which were pretty good in my opinion, but "Knock Wood" does not fall into that category. In fact, "Knock Wood" is probably the worst song Alan and I ever wrote together, a totally aberrant

attempt to write something amusing and kind of "down home" for Grandmother Willow. What were we thinking? Fortunately, it has been forever consigned to obscurity, and I don't want to do anything to change that situation. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Cut and Shifted Songs

Question:

In Pocahontas, the song "If I Never Know You" got cut from the final film. I would like to ask if you did work in other deleted songs for Pocahontas? I heard about an alternative prologue for "Savages" and songs called "Powerful Magic", "Middle of the River" and "First to Dance". And do you think that "Pocahontas" is better without "If I Never Know You"?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

It is very common when one is writing a musical, be it for stage or animated feature, for songs to be replaced or cut. It's simply part of the developmental process as one is learning more about the characters and story structure. My two favorites of the cut songs from POCAHONTAS are "In the Middle of the River", which was to be sung by Pocahontas and John Smith in the scene before they are discovered together by Kokoum, and "(Someone's Got to be) The First to Dance", which was to be sung by Grandmother Willow in more or less the same spot. The decision to cut "If I Never Knew You" was a mutual one, made more or less unanimously by the creative team after a couple of previews of the film, where it became clear that the song was straining the attention span of the younger viewers and slowing the story-telling to close to the end of the film. I was in favor of cutting it, though I am not sorry it has been restored for the DVD version, where the need for story-telling speed is less severe.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Pocahontas cast and other movie data

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114148/>

"Defying Gravity: The Creative Career of Stephen Schwartz, from Godspell to Wicked" includes the story of Stephen Schwartz's work for Disney on *Pocahontas*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and *Enchanted* – the three movies for which he wrote lyrics for Alan Menken's songs. It includes quotes from interviews with Schwartz and Menken about their collaboration, as well as photographs. It also includes a copy of Schwartz's handwritten notes for "Colors of the Wind."

<http://www.DefyingGravityTheBook.com>

For DVD, CD, sheet music, etc.

<http://www.musicalschwartz.com/disney-movies-pocahontas.htm>