

The Story of the ‘Washington & Lee Swing,’ As Told by Its Tunesmith

BY THORNTON W. ALLEN, B.A., 1910

IT WILL BE GOOD NEWS to Washington and Lee alumni to know that the popular football song of our Alma Mater, the “Washington and Lee Swing,” has now spread its melodic wings over the entire country and is being sung, played and danced to in every important city from coast to coast. Over fifty of the best known universities and schools have adopted the melody, including such widely separated ones as the University of Arizona, University of Florida, Tulane University and Swarthmore College. Bands and orchestras everywhere are playing it and the phonograph



records and player-piano rolls are equally popular.

While to M. W. Sheafe goes the credit for the title and a few bars of the music, “The Swing,” as it is

played and sung today, is largely my own work. I was particularly anxious to write a song that would be truly our own and Clarence A. Robbins, who was still in college at the time, consented to write words for my new melody. Through the band and orchestra it grew in popularity and toward the end of the year 1910 the first published edition was placed on sale.

For several years after leaving Washington and Lee I was obliged to neglect “The Swing” entirely, for lack of time and money. Later, however, at the insistence of numerous

Very Incomplete “W&L Swing” Discography

Hal Kemp and His Orchestra, 1925, 1928, 1940
[B-side: “V.M.I. Spirit”]

Jan Garver and His Orchestra, 1928

Bob Crosby’s Bob Cats, 1929, 1958, 1983, 1993

Count Basie and His Orchestra, 1929

Rudy Vallee and His Connecticut Yankees, 1930

Tex Beneke and the Glenn Miller Orchestra, 1947

Pee Wee Hunt, 1955

Muggsy Spanier, 1956

Red Nichols, in the movie “The Five Pennies,” 1959

Louis Armstrong and the Dukes of Dixieland, 1960

Pete Fountain, 1963

Al Hirt, 1965

Louis Armstrong with Al Hirt, 1967

Pee Wee Russell, 1977

N.B.: “The Swing” was parodied as “The Dummy Song,” written by “Birth of the Blues” composer Ray Henderson and partners. “Dummy” was recorded by Louis Armstrong, Louis Prima and others, and is heard in the movie *You’ve Got Mail*.

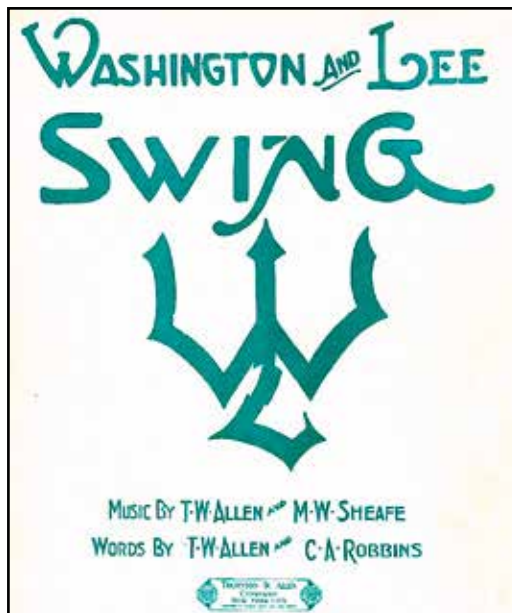
friends, and with their help, I was able to publish a new edition and spent considerable money to popularize it outside of Lexington. Now, almost ten years later, it is actually achieving the national popularity for which I had hoped. It will interest Washington and Lee alumni to know that thousands of enthusiastic John W. Davis supporters throughout the country are using "The Swing" melody with appropriate words as a pre-election song. [Davis, of W&L's

classes of 1892 and 1895, was the unsuccessful nominee of the Democratic party for U.S. president in 1924.]

The popularity of "The Swing" encouraged me to write some of the music for what I believe was the initial production of W. and L.'s first dramatic club. These three songs, "My Little Dixie Queen," "Only You," and "A Girl to Call Your Own," were re-published later and enjoyed an excellent sale.

Every college and school should boast at least one song of its very own. With this idea in mind, I have made a specialty of college songs, and have written, arranged or published the Alma Mater or football song of nearly a dozen universities.

The "W&L Swing" was recorded by every dance and swing band of significance. Today all three men — Allen, Robbins (class of 1911) and Sheafe (1906) — are jointly credited with its authorship. Adapted from the W&L Alumni Magazine, November 1924.



Come cheer for Washington and Lee,
We're going to win another victory!
The White and Blue we will ever wave in triumph
For the University. RAH! RAH! RAH!
Fight to the finish we are with you,
Break through the line on every play;
Rush the ball on down the field
And we will win this game today.

When Washington and Lee's men fall in line,
We're going to win again another time;
For W&L I yell, I yell, I yell,
And for the University, I yell, like hell!
And we will fight! fight! fight! for every yard;
Circle the ends and hit that line right hard!
And we will roll those Wahoos on the sod!
Yes, by God! RAH! RAH! RAH!