

Now close yo' eyes

Art song version of an aria from Scene II of
Daughter of the South (opera in one act and two scenes) [1939]

Edward Joseph Collins, composer

Notes by Jon Becker, editor for the Collins project

Daughter of the South, Collins's only opera, is set on a Southern plantation during the USA's Civil War (literally: dramatic action commences on the day the war begins and ends on the day when peace is declared). *Now close yo' eyes* is an aria from this "opera in one act and two scenes."

Collins had an unusual passion for the Civil War, noting in his journal that just hearing the name "Stonewall Jackson" had had a strong effect on him since boyhood. Elsewhere in his journals, he took time to write of seeing Civil War veterans in Joliet parades, and of reading books about the war or novels set during it, including *Gone with the Wind*.

In Scene I of *Daughter*, plantation owner Col. Edmond Randolph celebrates in song that his daughter Mary Lou, the "Daughter of the South," plans to marry a Northerner named Robert. The start of the Civil War forces Robert to flee to the North, where he enlists in the Union's forces. At the opening of Scene II, four years later in the drama, Mary Lou sings "Again the Year," bemoaning Robert's absence and his unknown fate, as well as the profound effects of the war on her home.

This is followed by the aria "Now close yo' eyes." A lullabye of sorts, it is sung by Melda, an African-American slave, to calm Mary Lou. Earlier in the opera, during Scene I, Melda sings of her devotion to the daughter of slave-owner Col. Randolph, for whom she has cared since the death of Randolph's wife.

Based on Edna Ferber's 1926 novel, the history-making *Showboat* opened on Broadway in 1927, and was made into a film in 1936. Although there is no mention made of this American musical in the writings of Collins, it is almost certain that he was familiar with its music, composed by Jerome Kern, including its perhaps most popular song, "Ol' Man River."

About twenty-five seconds into this aria, when the words "ole man ribber flowin' along" are sung, there is a deft tip of Collins's melodic hat to "Ol' Man River." Kern's song, by its gentle syncopations and modal melodic material, was meant to be evocative of rural black music. Thus Collins's paraphrase here could perhaps be described as a "twice-removed" nod to African-American music.

The "art song" version of *Now close yo' eyes* was extracted from Collins's piano-vocal score for *Daughter of the South*.