

Love Is a Thing Divine and Clover leaf Song
from *Who Can Tell?* (1919)

Edward Joseph Collins, composer

Notes by Jon Becker, editor for the Collins project

Following the November 1918 Armistice, American military leaders realized they had to keep troops active while awaiting return to the USA. From Army Intelligence headquarters in Gondrecourt, France, on 31 December 1918 Collins wrote to his family:

[I] must tell you about my new job. Since the Armistice things have been very quiet and the men have had practically nothing to do. . . . So G.H.Q. thought out a new scheme. The men are to drill four hours in the morning, have athletics in the afternoon, and be entertained in the evening. Consequently athletic and entertainment officers had to be appointed in each division. My new official title is 'Division Musical Director.'

One result was *Who Can Tell?*, variously described as an operetta, musical, revue, or burlesque. The extravaganza was organized in just six weeks, with Collins composing almost all of the music.

He seems however to have had a falling out with the show's producer, Donald "Dinnie" Mac Donald. On 25 March 1919, Collins wrote to his family:

First about the show, I am into it up to my neck. Mac Donald and I cannot see each other so I made up my mind to pull out of it after I had written the music. I even went to Col. O'Loughlin and asked him to get me back to the intelligence section. I told him I did not wish to wish to be out [in disfavor] with the general [Weigel] and asked him (the Col.) to inquire discreetly if it would be possible for me to withdraw. He inquired and told me that the Gen. would be very angry if I didn't see the thing through. The next day the Gen. was at rehearsal and made a speech complimenting the men on their work and me especially on the music. He said the musical side was a world-beater and shook hands with me, etc. He has one of those good-natured magnetic temperaments, and you know human nature. I made up my mind to go through with it just because the Gen. wants it. . . . The show is great and from present indications you will see it in New York and Chicago.

The composer's biographer Erik Eriksson has written of this creative effort by Collins:

His operetta, *Who Can Tell?*, co-authored with Hal Geer, proved a resounding success. The souvenir booklet, issued by the Clover Leaf Publishing Company of Chicago, notes that "For beauty and lavishness 'Who Can Tell' was conceded to be easily the finest thing produced by the American Expeditionary Force in France. The Jewish Welfare Board, which financed the show, spared no expense in making the production a theatrical marvel.

Indeed, the nine production photos contained within the booklet show clearly the sumptuousness of the set design and costuming. Top-hatted men provide an elegant counterpoint to the numerous young ladies (interesting as this may have been an all-male cast!) who appear in a variety of regalia—from contemporary garments to period frocks with parasols. Something a little more exotic is shown for the 'Persian Scene,' and there is another tableau titled 'Show Girls.'

Who Can Tell opened in Gondrecourt, then the headquarters of the 88th Division. Playing for three weeks, during which all the division personnel attended performances, it traveled into Germany where it was performed for the army of occupation, and then was taken to Paris for eleven nights at the Champs Elysses Theatre. The booklet reveals that at one of these Paris performances—all to capacity crowds—"President Wilson and his party were among the most enthusiastic in the audience."

The Souvenir booklet, published early in the 1920s by 88th Division veterans, included three songs from *Who Can Tell* arranged for piano. Collins is credited as composer for the first two songs in the booklet, *Love is a Thing Divine* and *Clover leaf Song*.

In the 14 May 1919 edition of the Chicago Tribune, this "letter to the editor" was published, following submission from France by the newspaper's drama critic:

There have been only two things of importance in Paris since you went away—the threat of the Germans to leave the Peace Conference, and the opening Monday night at the Champs Elysees Theatre of the 88th Division Show, *Who Can Tell*. Some show, Boy, some show! It is the best amateur show I have seen on either side of the water. There are lots of Broadway shows getting three dollars that ought to be sent to warehouse to let this one in for a run. It isn't a show—it's a production. In costumes, it makes the 'Garden of Allah' look like a rookie. . . . You would never know they were doughboys until they began to sing. *Who Can Tell* is a kind of a musical burlesque with enough of a plot to keep the show in military channels for three hours. [from *The 88th Division in the World War of 1914–1918 Official History*]

Who Can Tell may indeed have been performed in the United States after World War I. On 18 February 1922, U.S. Army Brigadier General William Weigel wrote from Fort Dix, New Jersey, to Lt. Laurence Fairall, former editor of the "Camp Dodger" newsletter and Secretary of the 88th Division Association, in Des Moines, Iowa. Weigel's letter discussed the possibility of "another reunion" in the Twin Cities or at nearby Fort Snelling:

It would be great if we could get to-gether [sic] some part of the old show—"Who Can Tell" and show it in an opera house or a large tent. Collins, Gear [sic], and some of the others are in Chicago vicinity, I understand. [From the Papers of Laurence R. Fairall, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa]

A performance may have taken place in Wisconsin. In a 19 March 1922 diary entry, the composer complained:

This has been a great St. Patrick's Day: I heard that my Trio which I submitted to the Society for the Publication of American Music was rejected, also that my Festival Overture [Mardi Gras] failed to qualify for the finals in the North Shore Competition. This afternoon the cheque which Madison paid me as a royalty on "Who Can Tell?" Came back with protest fees attached. A wonderful day.

Fragments survive of the copyist's manuscript score for *Love is a Thing Divine* and for *Modern Gypsy Rag*, an Act II instrumental number, both scored for symphonic band: D-flat Flute (two); E-flat Clarinet; Solo and 1st–3rd B-flat Clarinets; Alto, Tenor and Baritone Saxophones; Solo and 1st–3rd B-flat Cornets; four E-flat Altos [Horns]; three Trombones; Baritone; Basses; and, Drums.

Although the two songs from *Who Can Tell* included on this CD are decidedly the most minor of all Collins's works, they reveal something of the composer. Later in life Collins attended bawdy music revues in Chicago that he wrote were a pleasant reminder of Paris revues from his military years.

Some fragments survive of burlesque-type songs that were sketched by Collins for the entertainment of his fellow Cliff Dwellers, habitués of the legendary Chicago club, such as poet Carl Sandburg. Once located atop the home of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, in 1996 the Cliff Dwellers Club moved to a nearby building's penthouse. The Club at Symphony Center now occupies the top floors of the CSO's building.



The naïveté of the *Who Can Tell* songs can be misleading. The 88th Division faced real dangers, although in letters home Collins downplayed these, probably to reduce family worries. This 23 September 1923 diary entry is revealing:

It is very entertaining to look back over your life and pick out incidents responsible for your present predicament or prosperity. I find that the most casual encounters shaped the course of my life. For instance . . . the afternoon at Camp Dodge when I played for the regimental doing next door . . . and discovered Holmes Cowper who had me transferred to division headquarters where I took the test for interpreters and was commissioned instead of going to Camp Travis with my outfit and then overseas where most of my buddies were killed or wounded.

The outbreak of war in 1914 ended an emerging trend toward internationalism, with effects still felt today. The Great War also profoundly influenced Collins's own life, including his professional work. The mobilization of Germany abruptly ended Collins's brief engagement as an assistant conductor at Bayreuth's Wagner Festival. Forced to flee with opera diva Ernestine Schumann-Heink and her accompanist, his sister Kate Hoffman, via Switzerland, Collins would never again hold a conducting appointment.

Once back in the USA, Collins could no longer rely on the largesse of the benefactors who had funded his European education. He began performing solo recitals, earning critical praise in major cities. The Windy City's leading music institutions competed to recruit him for studio teaching. Still, making a living must have been challenging during the early years of the war. Poverty was a real concern for Collins's Irish immigrant family.

On 5 June 1917, following initiation of the United States draft for the war, Collins registered for military service. Subsequent letters make clear that his military salary was important to the future composer's family, with checks regularly sent home to Joliet.



Collins joined the regular Army, thinking he would thus better gain the respect of career officers. During Infantry training at Fort Dodge in 1918, he survived both the handling of bayonets and grenades. Collins also survived the Spanish Flu epidemic. The most devastating pandemic ever, "La Grippe" caused more deaths in a single year than did four years of the Black Death Bubonic Plague in the 1300s.

The 1918 influenza strain was particularly deadly for people aged 20 to 40. A first wave of sickness emerged early that spring at U.S. military camps, but went mostly unnoticed. Of the estimated 43,000 deaths eventually suffered by mobilized American troops, not a few occurred at Fort Dodge.

Troop mobilization likely spread the virus, which continued killing after the Armistice. In January 1919, the American President Woodrow Wilson travelled to Paris, where he delivered his Fourteen Points during the Peace Conference. Collins, who happened to be in the City of Light with a fellow 88th Division officer, sent a letter home with the following report:

. . . when we were in Paris we drove the past the foreign ministry where the peace conference was going on. It was about 4 P.M. and Pres. Wilson was just making his speech about the League of Nations.

Wilson returned just months later to negotiate the Treaty of Versailles. He caught the flu, which likely contributed to a stroke suffered in the USA later that year:

The stroke was a turning point for Wilson's presidency and, many argue, the world. Wilson collapsed Oct. 2 in the White House after a national tour seeking support for the Treaty of Versailles and America's entrance into the League of Nations. He went into seclusion for the remainder of his presidency. The treaty he had so strongly championed was rejected by the Senate in March 1920. — Michael Alison Chandler, *Washington Post*, 3 February 2007.

About half of U.S. soldier deaths in Europe were due to influenza. An estimated 675,000 Americans died, ten times as many as in the Great War; worldwide, the pandemic may have killed 20–40 million people. Others who died as a result of the Spanish Flu pandemic included British composer Sir Hubert Parry (7 October 1918), American pianist Felix Arndt (16 October 1918), and American composer Charles Tomlinson Griffes (8 April 1920).