When the Warrior Returns

Earlier song by F. S. Key to same melody as future anthem
December 1805

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Words by Francis Scott Key
Music by John Stafford Smith

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(B-flat Major • Medium Voice)
Edited by Mark Clague and Andrew Kuster
When the Warrior Returns, 1805
Lyric by Francis Scott Key (1779–1843); Music by John Stafford Smith (1750–1836)

Historical Note
Key wrote the lyric “When the Warrior Returns” in late 1805 for an “entertainment” (probably in Washington, D.C.) given by grateful citizens to honor U.S. naval heroes Stephen Decatur, Jr. and Charles Stewart, the leaders of a daring 1804 raid that destroyed the previously captured USS Philadelphia and thus helped turn the tide of the Tripolitan War in North Africa. According to Boston’s Independent Chronicle, 1 Key wrote the words on “an hour’s notice,” while the Maryland Gazette noted that the song was “prepared” and “sung by” Key.2

The lyric’s five stanzas welcome “the warrior” and “a band of your brothers” to claim their reward of gratitude. Key, as he would for “The Star-Spangled Banner” nine years later, prefers patriotic sentiment to topical detail and never mentions Decatur or Stewart by name. Instead his language rises to the abstract in praise of the bold sons who endured, fought, and fell in “the blaze of their glory.” The third stanza establishes another trope that would return in Key’s future anthem. He signals victory using flag imagery observing in his poetic eye that the “light of the Star Spangled flag of our nation” had obscured the Ottoman Crescent. Key undoubtedly saw the victory in religious terms as well, calling America’s foes “infidels” in the fourth stanza. Yet, the closing couplet of each stanza indicates Key’s vision that patriotic heroism (the laurel) and peace (olive) are intertwined. The closing rhyme of “wave” and “brave” in each verse again anticipates “The Star-Spangled Banner” as does the verse-three phrase “war’s desolation.”

Published as a song lyric to be sung to the melody of the London musicians’ club anthem “The Anacreontic Song,” Warrior contradicts claims by others, such as Ferdinand Durand and Key’s own brother-in-law and Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger Taney, that they had first connected the lyric of “The Star-Spangled Banner” to its English melody. They may have noticed independently, but Key already knew because he had created his lyric specifically for this singular tune. Nine years earlier, Key demonstrates familiarity with the tune and its unique eight-line, nine-rhyme stanzas. Key even reveals poetic insight into the song’s original English lyric. In its mixture of “laurel” and “olive,” Key’s text parallels the symbolic entwining conceit of “myrtle” and “vine” from the original 18th-c. lyric. Published in the 1857 posthumous collection of Key’s poetry, the text here has been changed in stanzas two and three for clarity and precision. It remains uncertain but is likely that Key himself made these corrections.

Performance Suggestions
As a song of celebration in praise of military heroes based on an upbeat tune, Warrior should be performed more quickly and with a lighter overall emotional color than today’s hymn-like anthem performances. Key’s 1805 text should be declaimed clearly with a rolling triple feel and emphasis on beats 1 and 4. Originally each verse would have been sung through completely by a male soloist (mm. 1–20) with a chorus—probably made up of the party’s guests—echoing the final line (mm. 17–20), probably in unison or with a few improvised harmonies. There is no keyboard introduction in the original source but the chorus (mm. 17–20 with pickup) can be used for this purpose. According to one source Key’s original performance was accompanied by a pair of clarinets, but any keyboard instrument can be used.

Sources
The text of this edition is from the 1857 collection Poems of the Late Francis S. Key, ESQ. (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers), pp. 34–36. The music is from the original 1779 imprint of “The Anacreontic Song” by Broderip in London.

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2 Poet’s Corner, Maryland Gazette, Annapolis (December 19, 1805), C.
When the Warrior Returns

In honor of Stephen Decatur, Jr. and Charles Stewart on their return from the war with the Barbary pirates.

Lyrics set to Smith's arrangement of The Anacreontic Song, this score a whole step lower than the source.

1805

Music

John Stafford Smith
(1750–1836)

Lyrics

Francis Scott Key
(1779–1843)

[Con spirito]

1. When the warrior returns, from the battle afar, To the home and the country he nobly defend-ed, O! warm be the welcome to claim the reward of your hearts' warm emotion, When your cause, when your honor, urged loud be the joy that his perils are end-ed: In the onward the bold, In vain frowned the desert, in vain raged the ocean: To a splendor obscured By the light of the Star Span-gled flag of our nation. Where glad-den his ear, And loud be the joy that his perils are end-ed: In the...
When the Warrior Returns

full tide of song let his fame roll a-long, To the feast-flow-ing board let us
far dis-tant shore, to the bat-tle's wild roar, They rush, your fair fame and your
each ra-diant star gleamed a me-teor of war, And the tur-baned heads bowed to its
-un-phant they rode o'er the won-der-ing flood, And stained the blue wa-ters with
full tide of song let his fame roll a-long, To the feast-flow-ing board let us

grate-ful-ly throng, Where, mixed with the o-live, the lau-rel shall wave, And
gate-ful-ly throng, Where, mixed with the o-live, the lau-rel shall wave, And

Chorus
form a bright wreath for the brows of the brave. Where, mixed with the o-live, the
form a bright wreath for the brows of the brave. Then, mixed with the o-live, the
form a bright wreath for the brows of the brave. Now, mixed with the o-live, the
form a bright wreath for the brows of the brave. How, mixed with the o-live, the
When the Warrior Returns

When the Warrior Returns

lau - rel shall wave, And form a bright_ wreath for the brows of the brave.

lau - rel shall wave, And form a bright_ wreath for the brows of the brave.

lau - rel shall wave, And form a bright_ wreath for the brows of the brave.

lau - rel shall wave, And form a bright_ wreath for the brows of the brave.

lau - rel shall wave, And form a bright_ wreath for the brows of the brave.