

THE SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT IN SONG

Centennial of Suffrage Concert Program Tells the History of Women's Suffrage Through Vintage Music

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News Hook: Singer, historian and author Cecelia Otto commemorates the anniversary of the women's suffrage movement with a concert program of songs from the era, *Centennial of Suffrage*, which she performs in both live and virtual settings.

One hundred years ago, the United States ratified the 19th Amendment, officially granting women the right to vote. Portland-area singer, composer and historian Cecelia "Cece" Otto is marking this milestone with an all-new American Songline® program, *Centennial of Suffrage*, which tells the story of women's fight for the vote through the songs that reflected the struggle as it was being waged, opening an entertaining and illuminating window on a critical moment in American history.

History that Entertains and Inspires

Like all American Songline programs, this concert transports modern-day audiences to a time before television and computers, when Americans largely entertained themselves and when popular songs played a vital part in communicating their longings, hopes and dreams.

Created by Cece Otto, An American Songline is an ongoing project dedicated to preserving and sharing the story of America through unique, experiential musical performances. American Songline performances entertain, educate and delight thanks to Otto's unique ability to engage modern audiences with the songs and stories of a simpler time.

"Bringing history to life through music is my calling," she says. "You can learn so much about a place and time through its songs, and the songs people sang during the suffrage movement really evoke the urgency of that struggle for the audience."

Songs of Struggle and Courage

Centennial of Suffrage consists of more than a dozen songs that reflect the fight to secure the right to vote for American women. Otto performs each song with its full original lyrics as it would have been heard at the time it was composed, interspersed with commentary that frames each song in the wider context of the suffrage movement.

"The earliest song I sing in the program is 'Let Us All Speak Our Minds if We Die for It,'" she says, "which was published right in the middle of the Civil War — and sounds like it could have been written today. By the time we reach the 20th century, Tin Pan Alley is in full



About Cecelia Otto

Cecelia Otto (AKA "Cece") is a classically trained singer, composer, historian and author who performs and lectures around the country. In 2013, she completed her cross-country musical journey An American Songline, performing 30 concerts of vintage music along the Lincoln Highway. She wrote a book and recorded an album based on her travels in 2015. She released her second album, *The Songs of World War I*, early in 2017, and was recognized for her efforts by the World War I Centennial Commission. She is also an in-demand crowdfunding consultant and the author of *The 10 Commandments of Crowdfunding*.

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swing, and you see the issue reflected in the songs of the day. Pop songs were like newspaper editorials set to music, and I wanted the program to reflect all perspectives, both for and against. So I perform 'I'm Going to Be a Suffragette' as well as 'The Anti-Suffrage Rose.'"

While professional composers churned out new tunes, suffrage activists often found it useful to repurpose old ones. "For the women involved in this struggle, maintaining morale was crucial," says Otto. "Having a song to sing while marching or protesting kept everyone's spirits up, and it made sense to recycle tunes everyone already knew. So you have 'America, the Beautiful' re-written with pro-suffrage lyrics, or 'Keep Woman in Her Sphere' — actually a pro-suffrage song — which is sung to the tune of 'Auld Lang Syne.'"

A Vintage Music Performer Is Born

Singing vintage music is nothing new to Otto. In 2013, she created An American Songline as an outlet for the singer to perform,

What Is a Songline?

A songline is a trail followed by Australian Aborigines, who follow these paths singing songs that they believe bring their ancestors back to life. Cecelia Otto learned of songlines and wanted to adapt the idea for America. She created An American Songline in 2013 and in 2016, was granted a trademark for the term.

travel, write and share historical music across the country. That year, the classically trained vocalist and composer celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Lincoln Highway, America's first cross-country road, by traveling it from one end to the other, performing concerts in every state along the way.

Songs of a Nation at War

Once her debut book and album were complete, Otto cast her sights about for her next project. It didn't take her long to come up with the right idea. "The songs of World War I just fit perfectly," she says. "I learned a lot about singing the music of that era for the original American Songline project, so it was right up my alley. And I've really come to see myself as someone who uses music to bring history to life, and I think the story of World War I is something all Americans should know about." Otto performed *The Songs of World War I* throughout the country in 2018–19 and recorded an accompanying album of songs from the concert program. In March 2018, the program was officially endorsed by the United States World War I Centennial Commission as part of its ongoing efforts to commemorate America's involvement in the conflict.

A Live Performer Goes Virtual

Centennial of Suffrage debuted in late 2019 and was slated to be performed throughout the country

The Battle for the Right to Vote

The fight for women's suffrage had its roots in the reform movement of the 19th century, and had been going on for decades when the 19th Amendment — guaranteeing all women the right to vote — was passed in June 1919. It took more than a year for the amendment to officially become law, which finally occurred when Tennessee became the 36th state to ratify it on August 18, 1920.

when the COVID-19 pandemic struck — but Otto does not let it slow her down. "I miss performing live as much as any musician," she says, "but until it's possible to do that safely, American Songline continues via livestream to audiences around the country and the world."

What's Next?

"The next major historic milestone America is facing," Otto explains, "is Prohibition, which went into effect early in 1920, and which is so relevant to the substance abuse issues this country is still facing today. I am hard at work developing a full program that talks about Prohibition from many different perspectives." Otto plans to launch her Prohibition program to live audiences later in 2021 or early 2022.

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