Historical Background

The song "John Brown's Body" began as a jab at a soldier in the Massachusetts 12th Regiment Volunteers named John Brown because he had the same name as John Brown the famed abolitionist, who was hanged for treason in 1859 after his failed attempt at a raid on the arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia. The song soon spread to become the most popular marching tune of Union soldiers during the Civil War. Long after the soldier John Brown drowned in the Shenandoah River and his regiment stopped singing the song out of respect, forces in the Union Army continued singing the song, probably without knowing who its intended protagonist actually was.

The song is sung to a tune called “Glory, Hallelujah” or “Say Brothers will you meet us” which is generally attributed to a William Steffe (but may also be a traditional Methodist hymn). It was published as sheet music with several different versions of lyrics by a few publishing companies in 1861. In fact, in the mid-19th century sheet music and pocket songsters were the primary means of circulating songs, since many Americans played and sang music, and created new lyrics and versions of songs, in their own homes.

The song was so popular that it inspired Julia Ward Howe, after she heard troops sing the song while parading near Washington, to write her lyrics to the same melody. Her lyrics were published in the Atlantic Monthly under the name “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” in February 1862. Now, recordings of the song—made by a diverse group of musicians—draw from several of the versions created throughout the Civil War.

It is also important to understand the Civil War context in which these lyrics were originally conceived. Many soldiers—both Union and Confederate—who signed up to fight in the war didn’t enlist with a particular goal (such as freedom for slaves) in mind. And, most thought it would be short, glorious, and victorious. Furthermore, historians agree that the Union did not enter the war with the explicit purpose of ending slavery in a United States. Rather, that purpose grew only after the war had started.

It’s also important to understand the role of John Brown in both Northern and Southern popular thought at the time. When John Brown first staged the raid on the Federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, he was generally considered a terrorist. It was only after he was put to death in 1859 that people in the North especially began to think of him as a martyr. Over the years, his heroization in the North grew tremendously—especially as it became apparent that President Lincoln would emancipate the slaves if the Union won the Civil War.