

Indy 500: The surprising history of '(Back Home Again in) Indiana' & everyone who sang it

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Jim Nabors sang "(Back Home Again in) Indiana" for the last time at the Indianapolis 500 on May 28, 2014. He started singing this song in 1972 and "I never dreamed I'd be doing this 42 years later," he said. IndyStar

In 1946, opera star James Melton stepped up to the microphone on the public address system at Indianapolis Motor Speedway. It was about an hour before the drivers would compete at the Indianapolis 500, and thousands were already in the stands chattering. That soon stopped at the first strains of "(Back Home Again in) Indiana."

"Everybody fell silent because there was this glorious voice coming over the public address," speedway historian Donald Davidson said.

Accompanying Melton was the Purdue "All-American" Marching Band, which had been playing the race since 1919. The musicians had started out by marching as part of a mass band of instrumentalists before the race for free admission. And they had already become a tradition.

After the 1946 performance, people were moved enough to tell the ticket office about Melton. So they invited him back the next year and, a few years later, moved the song to just before engines start.

At the time, officials could hardly have imagined how much "Indiana" would mean or how many singers the Purdue band would end up accompanying.

Borrowing from the state song caused some issues

Anyone who performs "Indiana," as it was originally titled, is in for a formidable challenge. The Original Dixieland Jazz Band recorded it in 1917 on one of the first-ever jazz records, according to historian Ted Gioia in his book "The Jazz Standards: A Guide to the Repertoire."

"(Back Home Again in) Indiana" has been central to the Purdue "All-American" Marching Band's identity at the Indianapolis 500 and 500 Festival Parade.

James F. Hanley wrote the piece to honor his home state and the state song, Paul Dresser's "On the Banks of the Wabash." It was one of the biggest hits for the shy composer from

Rensselaer, who penned music for more than 90 movies when he worked for 20th Century Fox. Portland, Oregon, native Ballard MacDonald wrote the lyrics.

At the bottom of the original sheet music has the credit line: "The strain from 'On the Banks of the Wabash' in the chorus used by kind permission of Maurice Richmond Music Co. Inc."

Gioia, however, writes that what "Indiana" used from the state song caused plagiarism accusations that were never cleared up in court. Theodore Dreiser, the novelist and younger brother of Dresser, said he wrote part of "On the Banks of the Wabash" as well, according to "The Jazz Standards."

"Indiana" started to take off with big-name jazz ensembles about a decade later, Gioia wrote, with Eddie Condon, Red Nichols' big band and Benny Goodman playing it. Louis Armstrong made "Indiana" a staple of his performances in 1950. Nat King Cole and Count Basie recorded it with Lester Young.

Rarely is the song sung by a vocalist in jazz circles. But it sure is in Indianapolis.

The soloist wasn't always announced early

Reports indicate a band — and possibly the Purdue band — played "Indiana" for the first time at the race in 1919 when driver Howdy Wilcox wrapped up his win, John Norberg wrote in his book "Heartbeat of the University: 125 Years of Purdue Bands."

Melton returned a handful of times after his 1946 debut with the song. After that, the years are dotted with local singers and major names including Mel Tormé, Vic Damone and Dinah Shore.

But for as popular as the song was becoming, announcing who would sing "Indiana" far in advance wasn't necessarily status quo for the speedway until Jim Nabors came along in 1972, Davidson said.

"I know there were years when, on race morning, we didn't know who it was going to be," he said. "It was very often almost like an afterthought. So did they put out a press release in February or March to say who it was going to be? No."

The Purdue band, however, always kept it brushed up. The ensemble plays "Indiana" at Ross-Ade Stadium in West Lafayette and in the IPL 500 Festival Parade on the day before the race.

"It's become a very integral part of who we are as a band," said Jay Gephart, director of the Purdue "All-American" Marching Band.

The band has tailored its size and arrangement to the singer. It was gentle for Nabors' ballad-like croon with an arrangement by famed composer John Tatgenhorst. When Jim Cornelison took over in 2017, Matt Conaway, associate director of the band, created a broad, Broadway-esque arrangement, Gephart said.

Shore, who holds the record as the only woman to ever sing "Indiana" solo before the race in 1955, still stands out in Purdue history. Holding the baton before gesturing the band to begin, longtime Purdue band director Al Wright told the vocalist he'd start when she was ready.

"Oh no, maestro. It's whenever you are ready," Shore said, according to Norberg's book.

Everyone who has sung '(Back Home Again in) Indiana'

The speedway has tracked all of the soloists since 1946, the year it was officially introduced into the pre-race lineup. The Purdue band has accompanied the vast majority of these.

- **1946-1948: James Melton.** Vocalist who moved between the New York Metropolitan Opera, radio and movies. Famous as an antique car collector.
- **1949: Frank Parrish.** Well-known Indianapolis tenor who starred on radio station WIRE.
- **1950: James Melton.**
- **1951: Frank Parrish.**
- **1952-1953: Morton Downey Sr.** Father of talk show host Morton Downey Jr. and popular singer who was nicknamed "The Irish Nightingale."
- **1954: James Melton.**
- **1955: Dinah Shore.** Sang hits like "Blues in the Night" and "I'll Walk Alone." TV host for "The Dinah Shore Show," among others.
- **1956: Brian Sullivan.** Tenor who sang major roles with the Met for more than a decade.
- **1957: Jerome Hines.** Six-foot-six tall bass who set a record singing 41 years at the Met.
- **1958: Brian Sullivan.**
- **1959: Purdue Varsity Glee Club.** Men's vocal ensemble founded in 1893 that has performed all over the world, at presidential inaugurations and met Queen Elizabeth II.
- **1960: Dennis Morgan.** Actor and tenor known for starring in "The Great Ziegfeld" and "Kitty Foyle" with stars including Ginger Rogers.
- **1961: Mel Tormé.** Celebrated jazz singer, nicknamed "the Velvet Fog," who co-wrote the famous "Christmas Song" with the lyrics "Chestnuts roasting on an open fire." Versatile actor, drummer, composer, pianist and author.
- **1962: David Cochard.** Purdue student and part of the leadership of the Varsity Glee

Club.

- 1963: **Brian Sullivan.**
- 1964: **Vic Damone.** Polished singer who recorded "On the Street Where You Live" from "My Fair Lady" and had, according to Frank Sinatra, "the best pair of pipes in the business."
- 1965: **Johnny Desmond.** Lead singer for Glenn Miller's swing band and actor in films and Broadway musicals, including "Funny Girl" with Barbra Streisand.
- 1966: **Ed Ames.** Starred alongside Kirk Douglas on the New York stage before playing Mingo on TV series "Daniel Boone." Known for famous appearance on "The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson."
- 1967: No information is available for this year, according to Davidson and the speedway.
- 1968: **Purdue "All-American" Marching Band.**
- 1969: **Mack Shultz.** Purdue student and part of the leadership of the Varsity Glee Club.
- 1970: **Saverio Saridis.** New York City policeman-turned-vocalist known for "Love is the Sweetest Thing." Appeared on the Ed Sullivan and Merv Griffin shows.
- 1971: **Peter DePaolo.** Won the Indy 500 in 1925 and was the first Indy winner to go over 100 mph — and sing "Indiana."
- 1972-1978: **Jim Nabors.** Played goofy Gomer Pyle on "The Andy Griffith Show" and spinoff "Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C." Became an Indy 500 icon by lending his rich, ballad-friendly voice to "Indiana."
- 1979: **Peter Marshall.** Starred in the London production of "Bye Bye Birdie" and Broadway shows including "La Cage aux Folles" before he hosted the popular game show, "The Hollywood Squares."
- 1980: **Richard Smith.** Soloist in the Purdue Glee Club, according to Indianapolis News archives.
- 1981: **Phil Harris.** Musician, radio personality and movie star. Voiced Baloo the bear in "The Jungle Book" and did voice work in "The Aristocats" and "Robin Hood."
- 1982: **Louis Sudler.** Chicago-based baritone who became a businessman and helped financially stabilize the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in the 1960s and 70s.
- 1983-1984: **Jim Nabors.**
- 1985: **Walt Disney World Singers.**
- 1986: **John Davies with 74th U.S. Army Band.** Davies was artist-in-residence with the Indianapolis Opera Co., and the band was from Fort Benjamin Harrison. Race moved back because of a double rainout, and the Purdue band and soloist couldn't make it.
- 1987-2006: **Jim Nabors.**
- 2007: **Race Fans and Purdue "All-American" Marching Band.** During a year when Nabors was sick, the crowd stood in, Davidson said.
- 2008-2014: **Jim Nabors.**
- 2015: **Straight No Chaser.** Male a cappella group that started as an undergraduate

ensemble at Indiana University.

- **2016: Josh Kaufman with Indianapolis Children's Choir.** Indy-based singer and winner of the sixth season of "The Voice." Accompanied by the choir that was founded in 1986.
- **2017-2019: Jim Cornelison.** Indiana University alum known for singing "The Star-Spangled Banner" at Chicago Blackhawks games.