

ASHOKAN FAREWELL

This song is the haunting melody in Ken Burns' historical documentary *The Civil War*.

My husband Glenn Becker and I watched every segment of this Emmy Award-winning Civil War mini-series. ASHOKAN FAREWELL, with its haunting, mournful, hopeful, beautiful melody is the de facto theme song of *The Civil War*, which premiered 30 years ago.



[Listen to the tune](#)

[Here it is as music set to a scene from the documentary](#)

When we listened, this music never failed to evoke in us both the deep sadness and the seriousness of the Civil War. It touched many the same way, those who were scholars of that era as well as those who knew nothing about it or who knew only what they learned in history class in school. It evokes the sadness and reality of the deaths of so many Americans. Out of such sadness began a movement toward emancipation.

At first President Lincoln maintained that the war was about restoring states' rights, but it was actually about abolishing slavery. He was waiting for the right time to make that public. That goal was made official with the Emancipation Proclamation, declared on September 22, 1862. Freedom for all slaves was declared officially on January 1, 1863.

“Ashokan Farewell” was not, as both its tune and the miniseries that made it famous would seem to suggest, written in the 19th century. It was written instead at the tail end of the 20th. And it wasn't a Southern waltz; it was composed in the style of a Scottish lament—and in celebration of a town, and a reservoir, in upstate New York. By a guy from the Bronx.

In the early 1980s, Jay Ungar and his wife and fellow musician, Molly Mason, were running the Ashokan Fiddle & Dance Camp, a summer arts school specializing in fiddle and dancing, at the Ashokan Field Campus of SUNY New Paltz. Ungar composed the tune to commemorate the conclusion of the 1982 session of the camp. Ungar had traveled through Scotland earlier in the summer, he told me, and he wanted to compose a tune in the style of a Scottish lament—something that would capture the sense of sadness that the camp, and all the camaraderie and community and joy it represented to him, would be ending. For many years it served as a goodnight or farewell waltz at the camps run by Ungar and Mason, who gave the tune its name.

~Roberta Wain-Becker