

Classic American Poetry

65 Favourite Poems

Read by **Garrick Hagon** • **Liza Ross** • **William Hootkins** and cast

POETRY



	ANNE BRADSTREET (1612-72)	
1	The Author to her Book *	2:21
	EDWARD TAYLOR (1645-1729)	
2	Upon a Spider Catching a Fly #	2:01
	ANONYMOUS	
3	Navajo Mountain Song •	1:25
	PHILIP FRENEAU (1752-1832)	
4	The Indian Student #	4:08
5	The Wild Honeysuckle *	1:24
	FRANCIS SCOTT KEY (1779-1843)	
6	The Star-Spangled Banner #	2:09
	WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT (1794-1878)	
7	The Prairies #	8:07
	RALPH WALDO EMERSON (1803-1882)	
8	The Snow-Storm ◇	1:48
	JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER (1807-1892)	
9	Telling the Bees #	3:13
	HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW (1807-1882)	
10	The Song of Hiawatha from The Wooing: At the doorway of his wigwam ◇	8:34
11	My Lost Youth #	5:34

	EDGAR ALLEN POE: (1809-1849)	
12	A Dream within a Dream #	1:12
13	Annabel Lee #	2:33
14	To Helen ◇	0:52
15	The Raven ◇	8:59
	OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES (1809-1894)	
16	Old Ironsides ◇	1:06
	JONES VERY (1813-1880)	
17	The Indian's Retort •	1:36
	HENRY DAVID THOREAU (1817-1862)	
18	Sic Vita #	1:55
19	Pray to what earth does this sweet cold belong *	1:10
	JULIA WARD HOWE (1819-1910)	
20	The Battle Hymn of the Republic †	1:44
	HERMAN MELVILLE (1819-1891)	
21	The Martyr #	1:39
	WALT WHITMAN (1819-1892)	
22	Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking #	14.13
	JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL (1819-1891)	
23	Science and Poetry *	1:01
	ANONYMOUS	
24	Frankie and Johnny ♪	4:12

FREDERICK GODDARD TUCKERMAN (1821-1873)		
25	An upper chamber in a darkened house #	1:01
EMILY DICKINSON (1830-1886)		
26	A narrow fellow in the grass ◇	1:06
27	My life closed twice before its close *	0:27
28	I taste a liquor never brewed *	0:45
29	Because I could not stop for death †	1:10
30	I like to see it lap the miles †	0:43
31	The wind begun to rock the grass ¢	0:50
FRANCES E.W. HARPER (1825-1911)		
32	Bury Me in a Free Land •	1:49
SYDNEY LANIER (1842-1881)		
33	The Stirrup-Cup ◇	0:47
EMMA LAZARUS (1849-1887)		
34	The New Colossus ¢ (Inscribed in bronze on an inner wall of the Statue of Liberty)	1:00
ANONYMOUS		
35	I sometimes think I'd rather crow •	0:52
STEPHEN CRANE (1871-1900)		
36	A newspaper is a collection of half-injustices •	1:21
37	Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind ◇	1:26

	PAUL LAWRENCE DUNBAR (1872-1906)	
38	Sympathy •	1:22
	SARAH MORGAN BRYAN PIATT (1836-1919)	
39	A Lesson in a Picture *	1:50
	EDWARD ARLINGTON ROBINSON (1869-1935)	
40	Miniver Cheevy †	2:09
	ROBERT FROST (1874-1963)	
41	The Road Not Taken #	1:15
42	Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening ◊	1:03
43	The Death of the Hired Man ◊ * #	9:08
	AMY LOWELL (1874-1925)	
44	Meeting-House Hill *	2:09
	CARL SANDBURG (1878-1967)	
45	Chicago ◊	2:12
46	They all Want to Play Hamlet #	1:20
	VACHEL LINDSAY (1879-1931)	
47	The Flower-fed Buffaloes *	0:54
	WALLACE STEVENS (1879-1955)	
48	The Emperor of Ice-Cream ◊	1:01
49	Peter Quince at the Clavier #	3:18

	ELINOR WYLIE (1885-1928)	
50	Wild Peaches *	3:13
51	Pretty Words †	1:07
	ROBINSON JEFFERS (1887-1962)	
52	Hurt Hawks #	2:29
	ALAN SEEGER (1888-1916)	
53	Rendezvous •	1:18
	EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY (1892-1950)	
54	What my lips have kissed, and where, and why *	1:02
	DOROTHY PARKER (1893-1967)	
55	De Profundis †	0:19
56	Resumee †	0:19
57	General Review of the Sex Situation †	0:26
	E.E. CUMMINGS (1894-1962)	
58	anyone lived in a pretty how town †	1:53
59	somewhere I have never travelled, gladly beyond ◇	1:58
	STEPHEN VINCENT BENET (1898-1943)	
60	American Names #	2:47
	LANGSTON HUGHES (1902-1967)	
61	Theme for English B •	2:34
62	Trumpet Player: 52nd Street •	1:18

	OGDEN NASH (1902-1971)	
63	You Bet Travel is Broadening ◊	1:59
	HOWARD NEMEROV b.1920	
64	September, the First Day of School #	2:20
	ALICE WALKER	
65	How Poems Are Made/A Discredited View ▸	2:10

Total Time: 2:31:41

Garrick Hagon # Liza Ross * William Hootkins ◊ Kate Harper †
James Goode • Alibe Parsons ▸

Classic American Poetry

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in a lecture in Manhattan in 1842, wrote 'poets are liberating gods'. This visionary proclamation became a credo for America's poets. In the early years of the country, American poets learned to liberate themselves from the content and style of their English forebears. Later, led by Emerson and the Transcendentalists, the poets sought to liberate themselves from a narrow, earth-bound vision of themselves and to grasp at the Universal. Walt Whitman saw his mission as liberating verse from antiquated poetic forms in order to speak the vibrant, democratic language of the common man. The native American, the African-American and women poets sought a language to liberate themselves from the constraints they suffered in society. **The Star-Spangled Banner** rang with patriotic fervour against the British foe in the war of 1812 and **The Battle Hymn of the Republic** in the Civil War spoke of God's blessing on the battle for the abolition of slavery. Emma Lazarus, grateful for her relatives' experience of being liberated by America from the oppressions of Europe, wrote **The New Colossus** to be inscribed on the Statue of Liberty. In this recording we have tried to capture some of this liberating spirit and in

doing so perhaps to liberate poetry from the printed page.

In his Preface to 'Leaves of Grass' in 1855, Walt Whitman said that 'The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem'. A bold statement, but glorious in its self-assertion. The poems in this collection speak of the breadth of America, its diversity, its natural beauty, its history and the growth of its national consciousness.

The poetry of America did not develop in isolation. The first major North American poet, Emily Bradstreet, the daughter and wife to two of the first governors of Massachusetts, looked to England for poetic inspiration and example, as did her colonial successors Edward Taylor and Philip Freneau. Taylor's **Upon a Spider** is a witty meditation on man's sin much in the fashion of John Donne and the English Metaphysical poets; Freneau, nationalistic in his politics, was, in his verses, tied to the English tradition. And the major poets of the early nineteenth century, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Edgar Allen Poe, also adhered to English techniques and verse forms. Poe, who was classically educated for five years in England, was deeply influenced by Coleridge and the English Romantics.

In spite of their English poetic roots, Longfellow and his fellow New England poets, James Russell Lowell, John Greenleaf Whittier and Oliver Wendell Holmes (often called the 'schoolhouse poets' because of their privileged backgrounds and Harvard College education), used material which became increasingly American. Longfellow's paean to the spirit of native America, **The Song of Hiawatha**, written in the Tennysonian narrative style, became a national epic.

The cultural influences between England and America travelled both ways across the ocean: Longfellow was greatly admired in England and on his death was memorialized alongside Chaucer and Milton in Westminster Abbey; the dark, often macabre and lyrical poetry of Edgar Allan Poe, with its haunting sense of mood and masterly musical technique, was greatly admired by Baudelaire and the French Symbolists. Poe's **The Raven** remains today one of the most popular poems in both America and France.

William Cullen Bryant, from the same New England background as Longfellow, was the first poet to sound a distinctly American note. He opens his panoramic vision of **The Prairies** with the description of 'The unshorn fields for which the speech of England has no name'. This nature,

Bryant proudly asserts, is distinctively American.

Drawing from nature a vision of universal truth became a dominant theme of American poetry. Emerson and Thoreau meditate upon nature and use it as a way of transcending egotism and becoming part of the Universal. It is this personal effort at transcendence which permeates Thoreau's 'I Am a Parcel of Vain Strivings Tied'. Only by the side of Walden Pond was Thoreau able to find the peace he sought.

William Cullen Bryant in **The Prairies** was also visionary in predicting the ruin of the countryside by the 'advancing multitude'. This theme is echoed by many of the poets on this recording. There is a strong sense of nostalgia for the rural life in Whittier's **Telling the Bees**.

Vachel Lindsay, one of the midwestern poets of the 'Chicago Renaissance' in the early twentieth century, compares the dreadful loss of the 'flower-fed' buffalo to the destruction of the great Indian nations. After the second world war, Robinson Jeffers in **Hurt Hawks** writes bitterly that man has wreaked so much damage upon nature that the poet would rather kill a man than a hawk. Jeffers' outlook is a long way from Longfellow's romantic idealisation of nature in **Hiawatha**.

Longfellow's Indian hero is a descendant

of Rousseau's 'noble savage'. The Navajo Mountain Song as translated by Nathalie Curtis in 'The Indians' Book' of 1905, a large collection which expertly catalogued Indian rituals, poems and artifacts, is a more authentic Indian voice. Some early American poets expressed concern about the Native Americans: Freneau's **The Indian Student** in a sophisticated and humourous way, and Jones Very's **The Indian's Retort** much more vehemently: 'The White man came! he stole the woods, the hills, the streams, the fields, the game', Very argues, much in advance of his time.

Many poems protesting against the social inequities of the developing country were written during the great upheaval of the Civil War and afterwards. In this collection, Herman Melville's **The Martyr** speaks of the danger of intolerance, and Frances Harper, a huge force in the movement for equality, wrote **Bury Me in a Free Land** as a proclamation of the Black American's rights. Paul Lawrence Dunbar, a popular poet and theatrical entertainer for the white society of his day, describes himself in his poem, **Sympathy**, as a voice crying out in private like a caged bird.

The great outpouring of African American poetry in the first half of the twentieth century used authentic African American dialect, rhythms and humour to

express a new racial awareness. Among the poets of this so-called Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes is a powerful voice: **Theme for English B** tells of Hughes' growing sense of social awareness, and in **Trumpet Player** he salutes, in jazz tempo, the Negro musician who, as he plays, leaves his troubles behind.

Walt Whitman, perhaps the most original and innovative voice in American poetry, took all of nature as his territory, indeed all of America. The son of a poor father of British descent, and a Dutch mother, largely self-educated, farmer, teacher, journalist and hospital worker, Whitman frequented the poor sections of a nascent Brooklyn, and his free verse, with its symphonic scope and rolling Biblical cadences, extolled the beauty of the commonplace, the dignity of the physical. He sent Emerson his first edition of 'Leaves of Grass' with the assertion that the greatest poet should change the character of the reader or listener, and Emerson acclaimed him as being the poet who could do just that for America.

In her own way, Emily Dickinson, writing from her father's secluded home in rural New Hampshire, was also forging a new language for American poetry, a poetry of assonance and off-rhymes, economical, witty and passionate. Using sharp, often

shocking images and phrases drawn from everyday life, she spoke with deep psychological insight of life and love and death. Nature in her delicately-crafted poems is both comforting and deadly as a snake.

Dickinson is the first of a long line of original and strong women poets which America has produced, some of whose poems are represented here: the vivid **Meeting-House Hill** by the radical Amy Lowell, the foster-parent of the Imagist movement; the lyrical, more domestic poem by Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt commenting on her daughter's suitor; a reflective, sardonic love poem in conventional sonnet form by Edna St. Vincent Millay, darling of the Greenwich Village bohemians in the 1920s; a down-to-earth, Puritanical view of nature in **Wild Peaches** by Elinor Wylie; and the sophisticated epigrams of Dorothy Parker, famous wit and writer for the New Yorker. The tone of these women poets is direct and personal, as is the popular ballad of 'tough love', 'Frankie and Johnny'. It is fitting too that Alice Walker ends the recording with a personal view of poetry as 'leftover love'.

Like Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost used nature as metaphor, often disguising his erudition and Harvard College urbanity by adopting the dialect and attitudes of the

rural New Hampshire where he lived and farmed. He moved to England for three years in 1912, published his first modest volume of poems there (borrowing the title 'A Boy's Will' from Longfellow's poem) and achieved recognition for his original use of the cadences of vernacular speech, what he called 'the sound of sense', often the sense of darkness and deprivation among the farm workers, as in the dramatic poem **The Hired Man**.

Frost once wrote of Edward Arlington Robinson that 'his life was a revel in the felicities of language'. Robinson could be called the originator of modern American poetry, discovering in the early part of the century a use of robust everyday speech, humour with a free verse style that was to influence many future poets, in much the same way that Mark Twain in 'Huckleberry Finn' caught the dialect of ordinary southern America and bequeathed it to all future American writers.

Carl Sandburg inherited Robinson's colloquialism and made it even more robust and powerful. A larger-than-life Mid-western journalist, biographer (of Lincoln) and poet, Sandburg dismissed the over-refined sensibilities of the 'nature' poets and celebrated instead the masculine, democratic vigour and commercial success of his native Chicago.

E.E. Cummings too had an ear deftly tuned to common speech. He embraced nature and naturalness but combined it with a fine sense of whimsy, as in his gentle chronicle of 'anyone' in a 'how town', and great emotional depth as in the love poem, **somewhere I have never travelled, gladly beyond.**

Among American poets, it is perhaps Wallace Stevens who probed deepest into the nature of language and imagination. Known as the Hartford, Connecticut insurance executive who hid his poetic talent from associates, he spent his off-work hours examining the aesthetics of poetry and its relation to the profoundest problems of human existence. Drawing images from

classicism, the Bible and from nature, Stevens created a poetry whose end, he believed, is to mediate between 'the mind and the sky'. But his focus is on humanity: the craftsman Peter Quince making music on the clavier; Susanna bathing in her 'still garden'; the 'horny feet' of the woman on her deathbed. Stevens refined the natural idiom, mixed it with British verse forms, and left an inheritance for the American poets who followed him.

Poetry, Whitman believed, is the voice of the nation, expressing its deepest concerns, ambitions and longings. We hope the poems recorded here exemplify that voice.

Notes by Garrick Hagon

The music on this recording is taken from the NAXOS and MARCO POLO catalogues

GROFE Grand Canyon Suite Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, William T. Stromberg	8.559007
GERSHWIN Three Preludes Leon Bates, piano	8.550341
MACDOWELL Piano Music Vol. 1 James Barbaglo, piano	8.223631



Garrick Hagon has appeared in many films including *Batman*, *Star Wars*, *Cry Freedom*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, and *Fatherland*. His television credits include *A Perfect Spy*, *The Nightmare Years*, *Henry V*, *The Chief* and *Love Hurts*. On London's West End he played Chris Keller in *All My Sons*, and he is a frequent story reader for the BBC. He also reads *The Sea-Wolf* and *The Call of the Wild* for Naxos AudioBooks.



Liza Ross has appeared on stage in the West End and in repertory across the country, including *Wings* and *The Front Page* at the Royal National Theatre. She has made many TV appearances including *After the War*, *Poor Little Rich Girl*, *Two's Company* and *The Month of the Doctors*. Her film work includes *Batman* and *The Shadowchasers*. She has worked extensively as a voice artist, and has recorded *Gone With The Wind* (unabridged). For Naxos AudioBooks she has recorded Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* and *Anne of Avonlea*, Louisa M. Alcott's *Little Women*, as well as Harriet Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.



William Hootkins' numerous readings for the audiobook industry include novels, best sellers, poetry, drama, political satires, comic thrillers and short stories; as well as the original novels of *Psycho* and *On The Waterfront*. He is best known for the award-winning Paul Theroux travel books and classics of American literature.



Kate Harper – A founder member of the Magic Theatre of San Francisco, Kate Harper has appeared on the stage in the UK and the USA with credits that include *Lost in Yonkers* and *Fatal Attraction*. TV appearances include *Inspector Morse* and *Poirot*. Film appearances include *Batman* and *Stiff Upper Lips*.



Alibe Parsons is a familiar American voice on radio, audiobooks and TV narrations. She is equally at home on the UK stage, with numerous credits in both Shakespeare and modern plays for the RSC, Manchester Royal Exchange, Hampstead Theatre and London's West End. Her TV and film credits range from *Aliens* to *Dr Who* and *Coronation Street*.



James Goode's theatre credits include *The Wind in the Willows* and *The White Devil* (Royal National Theatre), several world tours of celebrated productions of Shakespeare and Chekhov as well as numerous plays at theatres throughout Britain. Television credits include *Shelley*, *South of the Border* and a spell as a presenter on the successful children's programme *Watch*. He has also appeared in countless radio plays and voice-overs.

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George J. Firmage for **anyone lived in a pretty how town** and **somewhere I have never travelled, gladly beyond** by E.E. Cummings.

Curtis Brown for **You Bet Travel is Broadening** by Ogden Nash.

Margaret Nemerov for **September, the First Day of School**, by Howard Nemerov.

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Poetry, Whitman believed, is the voice of the nation, expressing its deepest concerns, ambitions and longings, and that is certainly true of the great classic poetry of America. This wide-ranging anthology – from the earliest poets of the 16th century to the present day – reflects the changing preoccupations and visions of Americans.

Here are 65 poems by the leading classic figures, including Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Edgar Allen Poe, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Robert Frost and E.E. Cummings, as well as popular anonymous works such as Frankie and Johnny which are an integral part of American consciousness.

“A magnificent anthology; thoughtful and varied; the juxtaposition of the poems artful and the readers effectively contrasted.”

THE INDEPENDENT

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