“Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?”

Analyze the song lyrics and their historical resonance. Write your evaluation as though you were a critic of the period.

Music during the 1930s differed from the upbeat spirit of the Jazz Age in the 1920s. Through a minor key and wistful rhythm, the popular song "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" captured a picture life of the era of the Great Depression. The song depicts the disillusionment and confusion created by the downward spiral of the American economy, and the unemployment, homelessness, starvation, and desperation that followed it. "He's bewildered," lyricist E.Y. "Yip" Harburg says of the song's narrator. "Here is a man who had built his faith and hope in this country," he says of the character. "Then came the crash. Now he can't accept the fact that the bubble has burst. He still believes. He still has faith. He just doesn't understand what could have happened to make everything go so wrong."

The Great Depression altered the American economy and society. The lyrics of "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" begin with a reference to the American Dream. The decade prior to the Great Depression was one of prosperity and advancements, and the average unemployment in the United States loitered at an averaged 3.2% in 1929. Following the unparalleled collapse of the stock market and devastation of the U.S. economy in the next year, 8.9% of the population was unemployed. When Bing Crosby's version of "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" was publicized in 1932, the unemployment mounted to 24.1%.

The narrator of the song represents an “everyman” who worked farmland, fought in wars, and assisted in the building of the transcontinental railroad – all foundations of
pride, patriotism, and reminiscence for Americans of the early 20th century. When looking back on his sacrifice and patriotism during the war, the construction of skyscrapers and a railroad that united a nation, and agricultural work, he questions, “Why should I be standing in line / Just waiting for bread?” The bread lines outside soup kitchens are an infamous symbol of the poverty and disparity of the Great Depression. Timothy Scheurer explains that “this person has contributed to the vast bounty of the land (through his plow) and kept faith with the promise of the land by bearing guns for it in time of war. There is even a veiled allusion to the theme of manifest destiny when the narrator tries to understand how, after he has helped build a dream of "peace and glory ahead," he can now be standing in a breadline.”

The stock market crash of October 29, 1929 not only altered the lifestyle and outlook of citizens, but also provoked a worldwide depression. The economic catastrophe and bankruptcy in the U.S. affected nations around the globe. The powerful lyrics demonstrate the deficiency and despondency of the era: Oh, say, don't you remember? They called me 'Al'. It was 'Al' all the time. Say, don't you remember? I'm your pal. Buddy, can you spare a dime?”