

Oh, Florida, 3 songs sing of thy graces

By **GABRIELLE FINLEY**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Some may find it difficult to believe that someone who grew up in New Zealand could pen a winning song about Florida.

But Christopher Marshall, who has lived in Orlando only a year and a half, is one of three finalists in a contest that could replace Florida's state song.

It took the 51-year-old professional composer only a month to write the lyrics and come up with the tune for "My Florida Home." The winner will be determined by Internet voters during the next month.

"I'm blown away," Marshall said after state officials made the announcement Tuesday. "It's quite extraordinary."

"Old Folks at Home (Swanee River)", written by Stephen Foster in 1851, has been the state's anthem for more

PLEASE SEE **SONG, A22**

ONLINE EXTRA

Which song for Florida?

Listen to the songs, read their lyrics and vote for your favorite:
OrlandoSentinel.com/statesong

UCF composer a finalist in Florida song contest

SONG FROM A1

than 70 years.

But the song has long been a bone of contention for many Florida residents, who say its lyrics demean blacks and paint a false picture of slavery. Others are staunchly in favor of keeping the song as it is.

The ill will toward the song reached a new height when a newly elected Gov. Charlie Crist refused to play it during his inaugural celebration in January. Instead he used "The Florida Song" by jazz musician Charles Atkins.

State Sen. Tony Hill, D-Jacksonville and Rep. Ed Homan, R-Tampa, are co-sponsoring a bill to replace "Old Folks at Home."

"It's a memorable song, but it's a memory of the way Florida was, and the new song will be the way Florida is," Homan said.

Though Marshall was thousands of miles away in New Zealand, he said he remembers listening as a child to songs by Foster, including "Old Folks at Home."

"I will say it's a beautiful tune," Marshall said. "I understand the positive and negative things about the song."

Other familiar tunes by Foster include "Oh! Susanna," "Jeanie With the Light Brown Hair" and "Beautiful Dreamer."

A contest, "Just Sing, Florida" was created this year, in which a panel of six musicians and music teachers assembled by the Florida Music Educators Association, acted as judges. Marshall's song was among 243 submitted by the Oct. 1 deadline.

The judges first chose 20 songs, then narrowed them to the top three, which were announced Tuesday.

The other finalists' songs are "Florida, My Home," with words by Betsy Dixon and music by Carl Ashley of Boynton Beach; and "Florida (Where the Sawgrass Meets the

FINALISTS: PARTIAL LYRICS

'MY FLORIDA HOME' By Christopher Marshall

Weary from travel I look down below me,
Forests and lakes in the glow of the sun,
Oh, how that welcoming vision revives me,
Fires up my spirit, my traveling's done.
*Home, my Florida home,
Wherever I wander you shine in my mind,
Here's where I grow, here's where I thrive,
Under the bluest southern skies,
Home, my Florida home.*
So many travelers arriving before me
Left behind tyranny, poverty, pain,
Molded this state by their sweat and ambition,
Their faith and foresight our blessing,
our gain.
Here's to your fruitfulness, richness and beauty:
People with nature, and cultures combined,
Hearing our stories, and sharing our visions,
Land of the sunshine, by flowers defined!

'FLORIDA (WHERE THE SAWGRASS MEETS THE SKY) By Jan Hinton

Florida, where the sawgrass meets the sky.
Florida, where our hearts will ever lie.
Sitting proud in the ocean like a sentinel true,
Always shielding your own, yet giving welcome.
Florida.
Mockingbirds cry and 'gators lie out in the sun.
Bridges span southward to the Keys and rockets skyward run.
The orange blossoms' sweet perfume and fireworks fill the air.
And cultures rich, our native people share.
Florida, where the sawgrass meets the sky.
Florida, where our hearts will ever lie.

'FLORIDA, MY HOME' By Betsy Dixon and Carl Ashley

From the quaint and tropic islands,
Bordered by the sapphire sea,
'Cross the 'Glades and through the orange groves,
Softest breezes stir the trees,
Land of sunshine, Land of waters,
Land of palm trees, shorebirds wade.
Children singing, Freedom ringing,
Cheerful sunlight all pervades.

Orlando Sentinel (Page 1)
December 13, 2007

(continued overleaf)

the Sawgrass Meets the Sky)" by Jan Hinton of Pompano Beach.

The public will have until midnight Jan. 10 to submit votes online. The winner will be announced Jan. 11, and then Hill and Homan will present a bill to the state Legislature suggesting the winning song become the new state song.

Marshall, a composer in residence at the University of Central Florida, said a sudden rush of emotion for the song hit him in August while returning to Orlando from a trip to Nassau, Bahamas.

"I had an extremely rough trip, and I was coming home. And it struck me, how beautiful it looked," Marshall said. "I had the strongest feeling that this was home."

"Eventually the words came to me, and the tune, and I went with it."

The song speaks of Florida pioneers who left behind "tyranny, poverty and pain" and created the state with "foresight and ambition."

Marshall, who has composed music since he was a boy, said it takes months, sometimes even years before he finishes a piece of music, making "My Florida Home" one of the quickest he has ever written.

"It flowed very quickly," he said. "And it expresses my genuine feelings."

Marshall, who didn't know about the contest, told friend Gregory Ruffer, who directs The Orlando Chorale, a community chamber chorus, about his song.

Ruffer suggested he enter.

The chamber chorus sang the song during a rehearsal, and the recording was sent to the judges, Marshall said.

"I always feel honored and privileged when people perform my music," Marshall said.

To vote for your favorite, go to JustSingFlorida.org.

Gabrielle Finley can be reached at gfinley@orlandosentinel.com or 407-420-5507.