

WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH “THE DRUNKEN SAILOR?”: SEA SHANTIES THROUGH THE GENERATIONS

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I come from a land by the sea. I should have my repertoire of sea shanties, but I do not. These days, others, especially landlubbing TikTokkers, know them far better than I. The #seashantytiktok channel, started in 2021, has nearly half a billion views. In recent years, sea shanties have become an international phenomenon: partly due to the speed of social media, and partly due of course to the songs themselves – a type of folk song that should be dead and buried, but like corpses in the ocean, or the zombie sailors of *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies, they just keep coming back, generation after generation. Fad? Nostalgia? Retro? Significantly, every generation seems to rediscover them. And more to the point for our purposes – folk song collectors have been zealous to preserve them since the late 19th century in print and on recordings – sea shanties were some of the earliest songs recorded and exist on wax cylinders from ca 1900.¹

They are not without their literature. Since steam-powered ships powerful enough to cross the Atlantic were already in operation in the 1840s, one way to read Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851) is to see it as the work of cataloguing anthropologist, describing whaling on a sail-powered ship as a specific practice in a particular time and place which he knows will soon cease to exist – interesting for many reasons, not the least of which is its multi-national, multi-racial crew. Melville includes several sea shanties in the book.

1. The Australian-born composer and folklorist Percy Grainger (1882–1961) collected shanties in the early 1900s as a young man and also recorded them on wax cylinders, housed at the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library of the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS) in London. For more information, see <<https://www.efdss.org/learning/resources/a-z/4968-sea-songs-and-shanties-for-tall-ships>>.

Musicologists were soon to take note. The first academic publication on sea shanties was “Sailor Songs” by William Livingston Alden in *Harper’s Magazine*, 1882. Alden’s article begins, “The sailor is not yet as totally extinct” (Alden 1882: 281),² but he describes sailor songs as something on the brink of extinction: “The shanty-man [...] has left no successors. [...] Singing and steam are irreconcilable.” (Ibid.) Remember, Alden is writing in the time of the mass extermination of the passenger pigeon, the American bison, and the American Indian.

What is a sea shanty? Sea shanties (or “chanties”) are sailors’ work songs, sung to keep a working rhythm and enthusiasm in the days before steam power, when sailors had to work as a team when rope-pulling to set large sails and to weigh or hoist anchor.

The two types of activities have different rhythms, hence “pulling songs and windlass songs” (Alden 1882: 282). Hoisting a sail – pulling – requires the “heave-HO!” rhythm known from “What Shall We Do with a Drunken Sailor”: literally, “heave-HO!” and “up she rises” – the “she” referring to the sail, not a male sailor – although there is a bit of wordplay here, as raising a heavy sail is about as much fun as raising a heavy, drunken sailor from the deck or bar floor. The “pulls” were originally articulated by shouts – the “Ho!” (something like the Haná “juch!”) – giving them part of their special character. According to J. H. Brunvand, these songs are still used by circus workers when hoisting their tents (Brunvand 1968: 230).

The second rhythm is the steady rhythm of walking around in a circle to wind or unwind the windlass (capstan) upon which the anchor chain is wound. Richard Henry Dana’s *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840) describes these thus:

The sailors’ songs for capstans and falls are of a peculiar kind, having a chorus at the end of each line. The burden is usually

2. Alden’s article also includes notation for 18 songs. Alden (1837–1908) was one of the leading (white) proponents for canoeing in the USA, and was also the author of a children’s book titled *The Moral Pirates* (1881) – exactly what children do not want to read about.

sung, by one alone, and, at the chorus, all hands join in,—and the louder the noise, the better. [...] A song is as necessary to sailors as the drum and fife to a soldier. They can't pull in time, or pull with a will, without it (quoted in Roud 2017: 484³).

Sea shanties were originally sung without accompaniment. As folksinger and folk song collector Sandy Ives wrote in the liner notes to his album *Folk Songs of Maine* (1959):

A few notes on the manner of singing. With one exception, all the songs I have found were sung un-accompanied. Further, I have had singers insist that this is the way they were meant to be sung, and old singers are sometimes made uncomfortable by hearing the songs sung to any accompaniment.

The rhythm is what is called *rubato parlando*, the singer moving faster or slower as the words seem to demand, holding a note unexpectedly, “hitching,” and using grace notes aplenty. The delivery is generally described as “flat” and “undramatic”, and these words are adequate as far as they go in indicating that no obvious dramatics or dynamics are used. Yet I often wish for some other words, because to hear some of these singers is to gain a new concept of dynamics and a new understanding of the dramatic. A good singer (not every singer by any means) has a feeling for the rise and fall of his story, and he builds up to the climax and moves away from it in a way that I find very exciting, even though I can neither explain nor duplicate it. (Ives 1959)

Although simple songs, sea shanties have fascinated musicologists for over 150 years. While rowing songs must have been used since time immemorial, sea shanties differ slightly (see Roud 2017: 482–483). They are more akin to African-American work songs, used by slaves to work in unison and pass the time when doing hard, drudging labor. This fact is referred to constantly in the first academic article on sea shanties, “Sailor Songs” by William

3. Available online at: <<https://guttenberg.org/cache/epub/2055/pg2055-images.html>>.

Livingston Alden (1882).⁴ Unlike African-American spirituals however, their nature is not sacral, but rather profane. Let me allow musicologist Sir Richard Runciman Terry,⁵ to explain:

Method of Singing

So far as the music was concerned, a shanty was a song with a chorus. The song was rendered by one singer, called the shantyman, and the chorus by the sailors who performed their work in time with the music. So far as the words were concerned there was usually a stereotyped opening of one or more verses. For all succeeding verses the shantyman improvised words, and his topics were many and varied, the most appreciated naturally being personal allusions to the crew and officers, sarcastic criticism on the quality of the food, wistful references to the good time coming on shore, etc. There was no need for any connection or relevancy between one verse or another, nor were rhymes required.

4. Steve Roud (2017: 483) also quotes a source (Robert Hay) from Jamaica in 1811 describing Black dockworkers singing at a capstan which Roud describes as “closer to our notion of a shanty”. My thanks to Irena Příbylová for directing my attention to this. Paul A. Gilje, in his book *To Swear Like a Sailor: Maritime Culture in America, 1750–1850* (Cambridge UP, 2016), writes: “In all probability Anglo-American merchant seamen had borrowed from free and enslaved black work songs before 1815. The years between the American Revolution and 1815 may well have been a gestation period as thousands of newly freed African Americans joined the merchant marine of both the United States and Great Britain, bringing with them their tradition of work songs that seemed to explode onto the Anglo-American maritime scene in the decades after the War of 1812.” (Gilje 2016) He cites the following as his sources: Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep the Water, Shallow the Shore: Three Essays on Shantying in the West Indies* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1974); W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); and David S. Cecelski, *The Waterman’s Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
5. Composer Richard Runciman Terry (1864–1938) was a contemporary of the Irish poet William Butler Yeats and like Yeats, his explorations of the past led him to reviving old forms and in the process similarly becoming a Modernist. Terry revived Tudor liturgical music, which then again became part of the church canon in England. But church music was not his only passion; in addition to his excellent two-volume *The Shanty Book* (1921), of particular note for Terry’s lengthy commentaries on songs’ histories and traditions of singing, he was also the author of *Voodooism in Music and Other Essays* (1934).

The main thing that mattered was that the rhythm should be preserved and that the words should be such as would keep the workers merry or interested. Once the stereotyped verses were got rid of and the improvization began, things became so intimate and personal as to be unprintable. It was a curious fact that such shanty words as lent themselves most to impropriety were wedded to tunes either of fine virility or haunting sweetness.

For ‘pull-and-haul’ shanties the shantyman took up his position near the workers and announced the shanty, sometimes by singing the first line. This established the tune to which they were to supply the chorus. For capstan shanties he usually did the same. He frequently sat on the capstan, but so far as I can learn he more usually took up his position on or against the knightheads. The importance of the shantyman could not be overestimated. A good shantyman with a pretty wit was worth his weight in gold. He was a privileged person, and was excused all work save light or odd jobs. (Terry 1921: x)

Those days are long gone, but sea shanties have not run out of their own steam. I myself became aware of sea shanties not because I come from Maine (an American state on the Atlantic famed for seafaring – there is a sailor on our flag) but because of film and television media when I was growing up in the 1960s and 1970s: the most popular afternoon television show in my youth was *Gilligan’s Island* (1964–7, although it ran in syndication for decades), the theme song of which is sung like a sea shanty.⁶ That was a century after the steam-powered ships replaced the whalers. And I am not alone: at the same time, on a different continent, far from the sea, Waldemar Matuška had a hit with a pop version of “What Shall We Do with a Drunken Sailor?” in Czechoslovakia: “*Čert ví (kdy kotvy zvednem)*”.⁷ Due to

6. “The Ballad of Gilligan’s Isle”, lyrics by Sherwood Schwartz, music by George Wyle, 1966. See “The Ballad of Gilligan’s Isle.” *YouTube* [online] [accessed July 6, 2024]. Available from: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=epl77NyoS1o>>. According to the website *Fandom*, this ballad is “considered the most famous and most recognized TV theme song in television history” (https://gilligan.fandom.com/wiki/The_Ballad_of_Gilligan%27s_Isle).

the international make-up of ship crews, sea shanties were always an international phenomenon – they have since gone global.

Recently they have gone from global to viral: during the Covid epidemic, a TikTok performance of “The Wellerman” by Scottish postman Nathan Evans (b. 1994) also went viral on YouTube (currently around 400 million views), making him rich enough to quit his day job. It has spawned countless “singalong” mash-ups on TikTok (a tiktoxication called “ShantyTok”) and other social media, making sea shanties a bona fide “trend”.⁸ David Livingstone, one of the contributors to this book, has written ingeniously that Covid lockdown and the life of a sailor are on par, so that sea shanties as a “viral” sensation are a natural fit for a viral pandemic (see Livingstone 2023).

Before Covid, sea shanties made a resurgence through the *Pirates of the Caribbean* film series (2003–2017. Johnny Depp, the star of the series, a musician himself, co-produced with Hal Wilner two albums of them: *Rogue’s Gallery: Pirate Ballads, Sea Songs and Chanteys* (2006) – a double-CD of 43 sea shanties, sung by performers such as Sting, Nick Cave, Lou Reed, and Patti Smith – followed by another double-CD, *Son of Rogues Gallery* (2013), with 36 more contemporary interpretations. The *Pirates of the Caribbean* films are based on the animatronic ride of the same name at Disneyland, featuring a sea shanty, which opened in 1967.

In the 1970s and 1980s, sea shanties were adopted by the punk movement (such as the Sex Pistols, see below). They formed the inspiration for the English-Irish band The Pogues’ best album, *Rum Sodomy & the Lash* (1985) containing actual sea shanties and other songs in the vein of sea shanties, including Ewan MacColl’s “Dirty Old Town”.

7. Waldemar Matuška, “*Čert vi (kdy kotvy zvednem)*”. 1970. *YouTube* [online] [accessed July 6, 2024]. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYmec-t9eBe>>. Highly recommended.

8. Nathan Evans, “Wellerman (Sea Shanty)”, 2021. Available from: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qP-7GNoDJ5c>> [accessed July 6, 2024]. To hear a “pure” version, I recommend the Maine folk song collector and writer Gordon Bok’s “Soon May the Wellerman Come” (1990, with Ann Mayer Muir and Ed Trickett). Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6U-VKN_GTmc> [accessed July 6, 2024].



Sea shanties have never been out of style, as witness Capt. Allen Swift singing *Popeye's Favorite Sea Shanties* (RCA Victor, 1959)⁹. Also in the 1950s, the Warner Brothers' film *Moby Dick* (1956) was released, featuring a sea shanty performed by the English folksinger and folk song collector A. L. "Bert" Lloyd, who often sang and recorded with MacColl.

In the 1940s, Alan Lomax wrote the liner notes and produced an early LP album of sea shanties by the Almanac Singers (Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Millard Lampell, Lee Hayes), called *Deep Sea Chanteys and Whaling Ballads* (Commodore Records 1941 – what else would you buy for your new hi-fi?). There are myriad 78 RPM recordings of sea shanties from the 1920s, and not only in English, as witness the Swedish disc "På Livets Ocean / Vind För Våg" by Winters Dansorkester (His Master's Voice, X 2665,

9. Capt. Allen Swift, *Popeye's Favorite Sea Shanties* (RCA Victor LBY-1018, 1959). Available from: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6n0HnKEL20&list=PLxGOrRXwi00mslp5awm8is-zwStR0j6Vy>> [accessed July 6, 2024].



1928).¹⁰ As mentioned, sea shanties have been recorded since the dawn of recording equipment.

The genre is also replete with song books/anthologies. I can recommend the following (chronologically):

- Davis & Tozer’s *Sailor Songs or ‘Chanties’*, 1887,
 - Richard Runciman Terry. *The Shanty Book. Parts 1 and 2 – Sailor Shanties*, 1921,
 - W. B. Whall, *Sea Songs and Shanties*, 1927,
 - W. M. Doerflinger, *Shantymen and Shantyboys*, 1951,
- and last but certainly not least,
- Stan Hugill’s monumental *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, 1961 (640 pages).

A good online overview of musicologists’ texts about sea shanties and musical notations of sea shanties is also available at the website Traditional Sea Shanties (traditionalshanties.com).

10. Found on a sample list of 1920s sea shanty recordings at *Discogs* [online] [accessed July 6, 2024]. Available from: <https://www.discogs.com/search/?style_exact=Sea+Shanties&-decade=1920>.

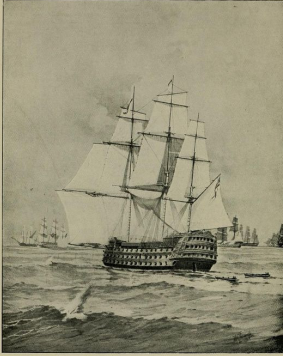
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H.M.S. "VICTORY" GOING INTO BATTLE AT TRAFALGAR.

*Refrains made up by wharfe,
No lovers along the deep
The march is out the mountain masts,
Her bows it on the deep.*

See page 6.



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1913

- For some on-line examples of shanties collected by musicologists (these come from Stephen Winick's excellent overview for the US Library of Congress, "A Deep Dive Into Sea Shanties"),¹¹ listen to:
- "Hanging Johnny", sung by Capt. Leighton Robinson et al., 1931. Recorded by Sidney Robertson Cowell in Belvedere, California,¹²
 - "Greenland Whale Fishery", sung by Asel N. Trueblood, 1938 (who said he heard it in 1888). Recorded by Alan Lomax in Charles, MI and Mackinac County, MI, USA,¹³
 - "Pay Me My Money Down", sung by the Georgia Sea Island Singers, 1959. Recorded by Alan Lomax in Saint Simons, Glynn County, Georgia, USA.¹⁴

11. See Winick 2021.

12. Listen here: <<https://www.loc.gov/item/2017701734/>>.

13. Listen here: <https://www.loc.gov/item/afc1939007_afs02325a>.

14. Listen here: <<https://archive.culturalequity.org/field-work/southern-us-1959-and-1960/st-simons-island-i-1059/pay-me-my-money-down>>. Later a live favorite of Pete Seeger's and Bruce Springsteen's.

There is another area of authentic sea shanties mentioned by R. Terry which has not received much critical attention: bawdy songs, likely because the lyrics are “unprintable” (Roud 2017: 479). Interestingly, Alden in his pioneering essay also makes a point of mentioning them:

It can not be gathered from the insufficient data at our command whether or not the act of “hiloing” was commendable in a sailor, but from the frequency with which the fair sex was exhorted in song to “hilo”, it is evident that it was held to be a peculiarly graceful act when executed by a young girl.

(Alden 1882: 285)

Sailors will be sailors. In spite of (or I would argue, rather, because of) the fact that the lyrics are unprintable, the oral folk tradition has preserved at least the celebrated bawdy sea shanty cycle (in limerick form!) known as the “Good Ship Venus”. It revels in nauseous descriptions of various grotesque sex acts and their repercussions, in rhythm and rhyme.¹⁵ An abbreviated version of this song cycle was also used for the animated opening title sequence of the Sex Pistols’ film *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle* (1980).¹⁶ A ship has its rules: apparently, sea shanties were the one medium where sailors were allowed to vent abuse not only upon fellow members of the crew, but also the ship’s officers, and the officers were not allowed to take offence (Roud 2017: 478). Additionally (according to Roud), lewd songs were not allowed to be sung when passengers were on board (ibid.: 479).

Despite musicologists’ claims, sea shanties are very much alive. This is not music for the quarantined, but just the opposite: people are coming out in droves, enough to populate an ocean full of whalers. Sea shanty festivals have been running non-stop

15. So obscene, even by 2024 standards, you will have to find it for yourself.

16. Sex Pistols, “Friggin’ in the Riggin’”, *The Great Rock ‘n’ Swindle* (1980, film written and directed by Julien Temple). Lead vocal by Steve Jones. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dh_i7nZT_Qs> [accessed July 6, 2024]. According to Wikipedia, it was the Sex Pistols’ biggest-selling single (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good_Ship_Venus).

for generations and are massively popular. The annual Falmouth International Sea Shanty festival (UK), for example, boasts upwards of 65,000 visitors, and it had these numbers before the TikTok craze (Smith 2019).

The list of maritime musical festivals on Wikipedia is surprisingly long and self-admittingly “incomplete”, listing festivals rimming the Atlantic in North America and Europe. However, the longest-running festival (since 1981) is in the land-locked town of Kraków, Poland – the “Shanties” festival.¹⁷ To get an idea of the popularity and the passion of these festivals – the “vibe” – look at a clip from the much smaller Portsmouth Maritime Folk Festival (NH, USA) from 2010. There ordinary people – non-performers – are singing in the town’s streets and even imitating the movements sailors would use to haul ropes.¹⁸

In terms of professional and semi-professional bands, there is an amazing repository of contemporary shanty music on the French-Canadian website Bordel de Mer by Jean-François Blais (2006–2020; bordeldemer.com) – archiving an incredible 304 hour-long podcasts over fifteen years. I counted: 233 bands/performers are represented here, from France (138), UK (25), Canada (18), the Netherlands (17), USA (15), Poland (8), Belgium (4), Norway (2), Australia (2), and Ireland, Italy, Spain, and Germany (1).

Why the popularity? Partly these locales’ maritime heritage, partly nostalgia and reverence for the past, but mostly, people like to sing. You don’t have to be a fine solo singer to sing a sea shanty; these are group songs, everyone sings along, usually in a limited range and a minor key with an easily remembered chorus.

The sail-powered whaling ships are gone, TikTok fads come and go, but – as this author can attest, after having been woken at up in the Náměšť nad Oslavou Folkové prázdniny campsite at 3 am by

17. See “List of maritime music festivals.” *Wikipedia* [online] [accessed July 10, 2024]. Available from: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_maritime_music_festivals>.

18. “David Coffin Market Square.mp4”. *YouTube* [online] 2010 [accessed July 6, 2024]. Available from: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMfZWfpusVlk>>.

rousing choruses of “Jasný jak facka” (As Clear as a Slap in the Face) and “Hej! Kapitáne!” – sea shanties are here to stay.

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Summary

Sea shanties are sailors’ work songs, sung to keep a working rhythm and enthusiasm in the days before steam power, when sailors had to work as a team when rope-pulling to set large sails and to weigh or hoist anchor. Those days are long gone, ending roughly in the 1870s. But sea shanties are alive and well: Nathan Evans’ version of the “Wellerman” has nearly half a billion views on YouTube. Nor is their popularity limited to a social media fad – annual sea shanty festivals attract tens of thousands of visitors, and the “Bordel de Mer” sea shanty website features more than 200 contemporary bands singing sea shanties. Punk bands such as the Sex Pistols and the Pogues included them in their repertoires. Fad? Nostalgia? Retro? Significantly, every generation seems to rediscover them. And more to the point for our purposes – folk song collectors have been zealous to preserve them since the late 19th century in print and on recordings – sea shanties were some of the earliest songs recorded, and exist on wax cylinders from ca 1900.

Key words: sea shanties, bawdy songs, *Two Years Before the Mast*, Melville, Good Ship Venus