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2021-04-12

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Songs of the Sea and the Sailor: Demystifying the Mythology of British Sailing Culture

Sea shanties have generally been accepted as the main relic of the culture of British sailors: a mythology that permeates the 19th and 20th century describing the harsh, unforgiving and yet in many ways romanticized life at sea. The repertoire of this time was eventually written down and catalogued by folk music collectors such as Cecil J. Sharp, who were hoping to record and preserve the British identity. However, considering the etymology of these songs as well as the first-hand accounts of sailors, this history is significantly more complex than it seems. Many songs that appear in Sharp's collection, such as the widely-circulated shanty *Haul Away Joe*, are either reminiscent or, in some cases, directly lifted from labor songs, folk tunes and children's songs of the Americas and Africa. These are places where these sailors may have travelled, but are not indicative of their British heritage. This calls into question the authenticity of the British shanty, and the true identity of the British sailor. Considering the American and African origins of these folk songs and their eventual mischaracterization, this paper critiques Sharp's collection of repertoire, considering its broader implications in the study of musical nationalism and cultural identity.

Although "sea shanties" is now used as a general category that describes songs sung on ships in the 19th and 20th centuries, scholars have discovered both textual and musical differences between what are considered "shanties" (or chanties, interchangeably), and what scholar William Saunders (1928) defines as "sea-song[s] proper." While folk repertoire is often defined by its modal or melodic value (i.e. the actual pitches being sung), Saunders asserts that the rhythm is the most important aspect of defining a shanty. This is due to the purpose a shanty serves, which ultimately is the coordination of labor. Labor/work songs are cited by both

Saunders and Dr. Gibb Schreffler as technology, in that the origin of this method of work coordination can be traced from African American ships to the American South, and beyond that back to the African continent (Schreffler). The songs were viewed as “technology” because they contributed to the efficiency at which labor was completed. In terms of the repertoire itself, Saunders clearly states this distinction, saying “the shanty is a song of labour- a song with a real utilitarian purpose... while the sea song... has no conscious utilitarian purpose whatsoever beyond that of being a source of convivial entertainment, or purely aesthetic pleasure.” He goes on to describe that these songs of “aesthetic pleasure” are more defined by their lyrical content, something he refers to frequently as “atmosphere.” The word atmosphere ultimately refers to a level of authenticity that only a real English sailor would be able to determine from someone who is romanticizing or simulating the headspace of a sailor. Shanties have no requirement to create any sort of “atmosphere,” or to even make sense as a story or rhyme, as long as the rhythmic profile was conducive to repeated laborious activities that would need to be handled during sailing. A “sea song” on the other hand is meant to tell a cohesive story, and reflect on specific aspects of sailing life that only a real sailor would be able to articulate (Saunders). This explains how songs from slave culture in the Americas, could have been absorbed into British musical canon, ultimately without much discretion towards which songs belong to which history. These songs found themselves canonized among other British tunes simply because their structure was convenient for the sailors who decided to perform them.

Although there is a long list of songs that were absorbed into British shanty repertoire, one of the most notable examples is *Haul Away Joe*. *Haul Away Joe* emerges colloquially on ships in the mid-19th century, as British and American sailing culture is peaking simultaneously with the popularity of minstrel shows in the United States (Schreffler). Keeping in mind the

emphasis on rhythm and melody in shanty repertoire, there is a specific minstrel song, *Jim Along Josey*, that was transcribed in 1840 that shows evidence of being a predecessor to *Haul Away Joe*.

The final few measures of each piece is incredibly telling. *Jim Along Josey* ends with the line “Hey Get Along, Jim Along Joe,” whereas *Haul Away Joe* ends with “Hey Haul Away, Haul Away Joe.” (Harper Edward and Smith). Despite melodic differences, the rhythmic profile of this ending stays the same. *Haul Away Joe* simply acquired more common features of sea songs over time (Schreffler). The rhythms notated by Cecil Sharp denote an approximate



Figure 1: Last 3 measures from *Haul Away Joe*, transcribed by Cecil Sharp

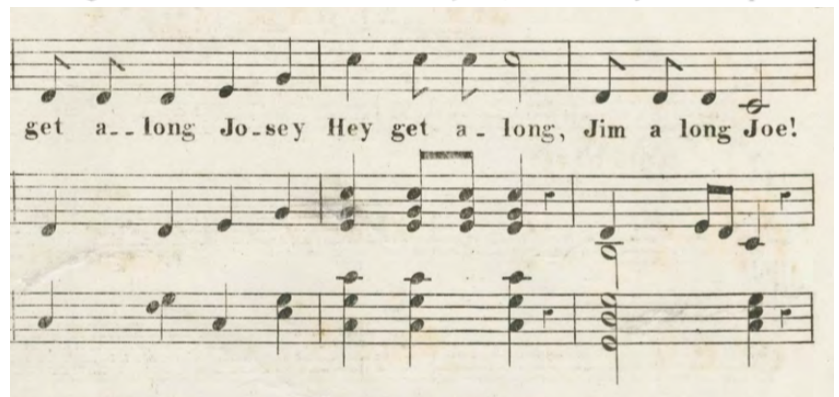


Figure 2: Last 3 measures from *Jim Along Josey*, from the Historic Sheet Music Collection at Connecticut College

interpretation of “swing” rhythms that are derived from African music and would have been heard at minstrel shows or from American sailors. Such swing rhythms with their triplet feel were described as being particularly conducive to ship labor (Saunders). The lyrics are also slightly adapted to sailing themes, with references to hauling, and there is a modal shift into Dorian, which was common in other shanties of the time (Pickering, Robertson and Korczynski). Songs derived from minstrelsy (such as *Jim Along Josey*) were often nonsensical because they were created for an entirely different context and did not directly apply to a seafaring life. Despite other lyrical changes that occurred through oral transmission, these are just melodic and rhythmic variations on the same tune (Schreffler). Shantymen were also known as improvisers,

and therefore it was common to hear variations of the same tune across various ships, leading to the entirely new songs such as *Haul Away Joe* (Saunders). When considering the extent to which these songs would have been orally transmitted from American shores to a multitude of ships, it comes as no surprise that the song took on a new form when it was later published in England in the early 20th century. *Haul Away Joe* was not the only tune to be acquired this way, but when considering Saunders' point regarding what makes a "true" sea song, it is important to consider that there are really two distinct repertoires that were collected from this era: reflections and laments of hardworking sailors, and irreverent work shanties that helped pass the time and make the intense and laborious demands of running a ship slightly easier.

Musicians in the 20th century have disagreed regarding the origins of both of these shanty repertoires. Cecil J. Sharp (1859-1924), an English musician and folk song collector spent a large portion of his career seeking out folk repertoire, codifying it with piano accompaniment, and then redistributing them in the form of larger scale song collections, notably "English Folk-Chanteys" in 1914 (*The Musical Times*). "English Folk-Chanteys" features a variety of sea shanties. Some, like *Haul Away Joe*, were likely derived from slave songs in the Americas which others have lyrical and musicological characteristics of English folk music (Schreffler). While Sharp was made aware of these inconsistencies by sailor and folk collector Frank Bullen who explicitly states that "the majority of chanties are [African American] in origin," Sharp flat out denies this. Sharp claims *Haul Away Joe* is "devoid of [African American] characteristics." Then he backpedals to say that "sufficient material has not yet been amassed upon which to found a sound theory of the origin of the chantey-tune." This contradicts his earlier claim where he says that he only wanted to include songs that are of [English] folk origin. In his endnotes, Sharp further complicates his stance by commenting on which songs may have rhythmic or melodic

elements that could be derived from African American music. These blatant contradictions speak to a larger narrative - although Sharp cannot unequivocally deny any influence at all, he clings to the idea that any songs from the mouths of British sailors are to be claimed as Britain's heritage, regardless of any presented information that suggests otherwise. While Michael Pickering, Emma Robertson and Marek Korczynski, authors for the Folk Music Journal of the English Folk Music and Dance Society point out that shanties mainly existed for utilitarian reasons rather than pleasure, Cecil Sharp spends extensive time praising shantyman and romanticizing the living conditions of ships. He says explicitly that "to the sailor the chief attraction of the chanty was that it infected his work with the spirit of play" (Sharp). While he briefly mentions utility, he speaks for several paragraphs about the "singer's powers of invention" and how they "riveted the attention of the workers." While this may be true, the emphasis on this aspect of the shanty, especially from someone who personally never sailed, suggests cloying for a reason to continue codifying and valuing this culture. As a collector of folk music and therefore preserver of England's national identity, the mythology of British sailors provides an adventurous and exciting identity for someone like Sharp to capitalize on, despite how much or little connection that culture may have to the English.

Collectors like Cecil Sharp who disregarded the true lineage of commonly sung shanties created a rift between their romanticized portrayal and real sailors' harsh and unforgiving seafaring lifestyle. American Sailor Isaac Allen published one of the first known articles regarding sea shanties and their role in sailing culture in 1858, when he was able to experience this life firsthand. Allen speaks at length about how rigorous and demanding life at sea could be, even with the aid of shanty singing. He describes scenarios where his crew would work for long hours without food or water, and how shanties temporarily helped maintain morale amidst the

plaintive and lonely sailor's life. When describing the sea itself, Allen calls it a "solemn, terrible reality, not to be sentimentalized or sung about." Rather than focusing on the adventure, this description of seafaring life describes in great detail how heartwrenching and difficult it was for sailors to leave their loved ones to work in such an environment.

"But isolated as the sailor is from society, he is still a man, and when in the dog-watch, after viewing the glorious sunset fade into darkness, he sits down on deck with his shipmates, and each one in turn gives his 'song or yarn,' one song will often strike a chord of remembrance, and the tear will fall un-hidden as he thinks of the almost heartbroken mother, mourning for her runaway sailor boy, or of some loved ones far away, who 'are thinking of me as I roam' and perhaps praying that 'amid peril and storm, may God protect him!'"

Isaac Allen, Oberlin Students' Monthly Vol 1, 1858.

Although this is not exactly in contrast with the portrayal of sailing by William Saunders and Cecil Sharp, both non-sailor shanty enthusiasts seem to highlight the more romantic or adventurous qualities of sailing, having not lived it themselves. It was less convenient for "land folk" to focus on the moments which Allen described. Even as Saunders recognizes the importance and emotions of true sea songs, his description of the legacy of British sailors does not seem to acknowledge this level of sadness and emotion. Saunders' description of the sailors who sang songs from this repertoire highlights some of the romanticization that occurs regarding sailors soon after this culture had already become irrelevant due to industrialization.

"There is no characteristic that marks out the true-born Briton from the natives of all other nations more distinctively than his inherent and ineradicable love of the sea, and of all that is associated with it. The sea in all probability has little enough love for him, but that makes no difference. He will brave the terrors of sea-sickness, time and again, for no other reason than the

very joy of riding the waves with a good ship under his feet, as his Norse and Danish ancestors did for generations beyond the memory of man before him.”

William Saunders, *The Musical Quarterly* Vol. 14, No. 3 (Jul., 1928)

The picture painted by Saunders, someone who never personally sailed, suggests a much more perfect view of life at sea than Allen, a man who lived through that experience. Referencing “sea-sickness” as a “terror” of the sea, rather than their physical or mental exhaustion displays how the sailors’ depiction becomes less grounded over time. Saunders’ work was published in 1928, compared to Allen’s writing which was published seventy years earlier in 1858. Also, mention of the Norse and Danish suggests another level of romanticization: that this mythology has now been warped to retroactively extend into the past as well as, supposedly, the future. Sharp’s oversights, whether intentional or not, wove English culture together with foreign stories, ideas, and music acquired through the travels of sailors. The Industrial Revolution and advent of the steam engine replaced labor forces, making coordinated labor songs obsolete and allowing Sharp to use his discretion to alter this history for all of posterity (Pickering, Robertson and Korczynski).

When most European countries in the Romantic period began using folk music to construct a national identity, England was lacking in musical material. Therefore, arrangers like Sharp saw this void as an opportunity (Schaarwächter). The rich and magnificent stories of sailors as adventurers brought new life to an otherwise stagnating British identity. Much in line with the imperial endeavors of the British throughout this time period, Sharp’s stance on shanties actually ended up muddling the truth about the British identity rather than solidifying it. As Britain worked to expand its borders and lay claims across the map, they neglected to address the boundary between colonial cultures and what belongs to Britain. This raises the question of what

a national identity even is constructed or intrinsic? By claiming songs of American and African origin as their own, collectors like Sharp unleashed a domino effect that impacts all British art that followed. The works of Elgar, Grainger and Vaughn Williams that draw inspiration from this time period are all built on a mythology and repertoire that may be true to some sailors at the time, but do not reflect the collective heritage of the British Isles. If national identity is only defined by the works of those who originate from a certain culture, this is problematic. If the acquired cultures become part of the whole, then this could be considered to be synthesis and growth. Because those composers and countless other artists since that time period have continued to create and synthesize new art, especially in the use of shanties in film and media through the 20th and 21st century, does this change how we attribute this repertoire retroactively? Although the modern United Kingdom is much more diverse today, the ethnic makeup of Britain at the time did not reflect this kind of synthesis, and therefore does not fully accurately represent the culture and “folk” identity of the time. Ultimately, in a repertoire that has been treated in such a Eurocentric way, it is important to acknowledge its roots, even when celebrating its evolution and contributions to future artistic endeavors.

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