

MUSICAL TRADITIONS

Songs of the Sea

By Stewart Hendrickson

I have always had a love of the sea. Growing up in Southern California, near the ocean, I used to sail a 32-ft cutter from San Pedro to Catalina Island as a Sea Scout. Before that I had read almost every book by Howard Pease (1894 - 1974) about the sea adventures of the fictional Todd Moran aboard various tramp steamers.

Coming to Seattle after 28 years in Minnesota, I renewed my love of the sea. I discovered a maritime music community associated with Northwest Seaport and I renewed and expanded my repertoire of maritime music.

I have worked up a set of songs of the sea that I have performed at the Center for Wooden Boats, the Tall Ships Festival in Tacoma last summer, and most recently at a Pacific Northwest Folklore Society Coffeehouse Concert.

After presenting a workshop on this subject at Seattle Song Circle's Rainy Camp at the end of January, I thought I'd share some of this music with you. These are contemporary, *in-the-tradition* songs. The lyrics, music and background information are on my web site: stewarthendrickson.com/songsofthesea.html.

I am not a song writer, but I do like to set poems and other lyrics to my own melodies. One of these is "Liverpool Bay" a poem by John E. M. Sumner. I found the poem on a web site, collected by Hugh Brown, who told me, "All I can recall is an older gentleman sent me a copy from the Liverpool area some time back when I was searching for info on my grandfather (also from that area). I would think Mr. Sumner is probably from that area." The words have the ring of someone who probably worked in the old maritime sailing trade.

*The strong salt winds at Liverpool
That sweep across the Bay
Once brought the great proud ships of old
With teak from Mandalay,
With bars of gold from lands untold,
With cloves from Zanzibar,
With tea and jute from Chittagong
And rubber from Para;
Trim figurehead and snowy sail,
Tall mast and taper'd spar,
A rhythmic shanty from the waist,
The smell of Stockholm tar.*

Another song "The Old Figurehead Carver" was based on a poem by Hiram Cody of New Brunswick. It's about an old wood carver, but also about a famous wooden clipper, the Marco Polo, built in St. John, New Brunswick in 1851. The Marco Polo sailed as a packet ship for the Black Ball Line between Liverpool and Australia. The poem was put to music by Dick Swain who added a marvelous chorus.

*I have done my share of carving figureheads of quaint design
For the Olives and the Ruddicks and the famous Black Ball Line
Brigantines and barks and clippers, brigs and schooners, lithe and tall
But the bounding Marco Polo was the flower of them all.*

chorus:

*While my hands are steady, while my eyes are good,
I will carve the music of the wind into the wood.*

Songs about old wooden boats are a favorite of mine. This one, "Old Wooden Boats," was written by Mickey MacConnell who lives in southwest Ireland near Dingle. Mickey has written many great songs. There's a YouTube video of him singing this song.

*I pulled my boat to the pier at Dingle
There I met an old man long home from the sea
He caught my rope and with eyes sun-crinkled
He looked first at my boat and then at me
And he told me, Son, I've fished these waters
For eighty years, both man and boy
And I was brave, but you're much bolder
To dare to go to sea in that rich man's toy
Because that boat you stake your life on
It's fibreglass and plastic, stem to stern
It bears the beaten soul of its factory builder
For it has never known the love of a craftsman's hands*
chorus:

*But old wooden boats scold like old mothers
When you drive them through a west of Ireland sea
Old wooden boats are like no other
For they fight for the lives of fools like you and me*

Another wooden boat, almost extinct now, is the Norway yawl, a small double-ended open boat, used for fishing around the inner islands of Scotland and northern coast of Ireland. "Norway Yawl" is a song written by Bob McNeil, who grew up in Glasgow, Scotland and now lives in New Zealand. It's recorded on his CD "Ben The Hoose."

*There were men that my father knew,
Worked oars as well as a plough,
Strong men who came home like the waves on the shore,
But these old men are all gone now.
Norway yawls lie tattered and broken
On the earth where these old men now lie.
They have earned their sleep but I would keep hold
Of the life that with them has died.*
chorus:

*And there are no men left in Derry,
None in Donegal,
There are no men left on Islay,
Build me a Norway yawl.*

Here's a song about sheep. What's the relation between sheep and the sea? If you want to get sheep from A to B and there is water in between, you need to put them on a ship. Sailors hated to work on ships with animals; cattle were bad enough, but sheep were the worst. "Sheep Don't You Know The Tide" is based on some poems by W. H. Davies (1871-1940), an itinerant cowboy who also worked as an animal handler aboard ships. Jonathan Eberhart set these to music using the refrain and tune adapted from a traditional spiritual, "Sheep, Sheep, Don't You Know the Road." It's a great call-and-response song to sing with a group.

*When I was once in Baltimore
A man came up to me and cried,
"Come, I have eighteen hundred sheep
To Glasgow bound on Tuesday's tide."
refrain:*

*Sheep, sheep, don't you know the tide?
Yes, yes, we know the tide.
Sheep, sheep, don't you know the tide?
Oh yes, we know the tide.*

There are two songs by John Conolly, "Ranter's Wharf" and "Dublin Lady," that I like to sing. He's written some great sea songs, including "Fiddler's Green." Another English songwriter I like is Tom

Bliss. He wrote a great song about two famous female pirates (cross-dressing at sea!), Ann Bonney and Mary Read: “Gentle Maids On Shore.”

Another poem, “Sometime At Eve,” by Elizabeth Clark Hardy was set to music by Brian Pickell: *Sometime at eve when the tide is low / I will slip my mooring and sail away* (that should really be *tide is high*, when one usually sets sail). And recently I set to music a poem, “Christmas Night,” by Cicely Fox Smith, a prolific maritime poet who lived around Vancouver, B.C. *We shipped a sea on Christmas night, On Christmas night, on Christmas night! / From stem to stern the decks flowed white, On Christmas night till the morning!*

These are just a few of the songs I’ve been singing recently. You can find these and others on my web page: stewarthendrickson.com/songs.html.

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