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The Purpose of Shanties from the Time of Sailors to Musical Masters of the Twentieth Century

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***Abstract:** The folk songs of the high seas traveled across hundreds of ships, changed in sound and lyric, and ultimately became known today as maritime folk music. Although many historians choose to analyze maritime history through physical artifacts, one less-appreciated aspect of the sea is known as the sea shanty. With modern musicians paying homage to their older nautical counterparts, the revival of shanty tunes sprung forth an almost lost appreciation into the lives of both historians and musicians alike. Referenced in this essay is the James Madison Carpenter Collection, an array of recorded and inscribed sources of shanty tunes that ultimately proved to be an invaluable source for maritime historians. This essay outlines how shanties developed, types of shanties, their significance, and how the Carpenter Collection revived the public's appreciation for maritime folk music. Shanties have become an integral part of music today, adapting to modernity in the same manner that they adapted to each ship on the sea.*

An abundance of maritime history relies upon oral tradition, with no better representation of ship culture found than the elusive sea shanties from the British Isles of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One of the most comprehensive assortments of sea shanties, or chanteys, lies in the James Madison Carpenter Collection, which boasts over seven hundred and fifty fragments, songs, and recordings

of shanties.¹ From this collection, a physical record of oral tradition had been passed down directly from sailors to Carpenter. Preserving the records of an almost extinct oral history allows historians and scholars outside the realm of history to understand the complex interactive past of maritime work songs. The revival of a sung history assists modern peoples by teaching the musicians as well as the audience to value and participate in an art form almost lost to the seas.

The purpose of sea shanties had been widely disputed. The traditional sea shanty sung upon ships represented a form of work-centric unification, which lent itself to popular culture in the twentieth century and brought about a revolution of maritime music into modern day entertainment. Without the Carpenter Collection, the musical revolution of seamen work songs would be buried with the sailors who sung them. This paper defines the role of the shanty in maritime labor and explores the timeline of its use. Afterward, this paper argues that the integration of sea shanties in the twentieth century was momentous to the folk revival of maritime culture, in the sense that shanties morphed into entertainment pieces to fit the shifting paradigm of the aquatic world.

Before traditional sea shanties can be compared to their modern jovial counterparts, a closer look must be taken at their original intended purpose. The sea shanty was originally seen as a work song purely for inspiring the unification of crewmembers executing burdensome tasks upon a ship. Shanties sprung from the maritime endeavors of Scottish, Scandinavian, German, English, and African sailors and their labor

¹ Robert Young Walser. "'Here We Come Home in a Leaky Ship!': The Shanty Collection of James Madison Carpenter." *Folk Music Journal* 7, no. 4 (1998): 471-95. Accessed December 2, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4522611>.

songs.² Although sea shanties were once thought to encompass all forms of music at sea, there was a distinct difference between music aboard ships for labor and music for pleasure, noted in one theory from Harold Whates. This theory examines the key differences between sea shanties and sea songs, explaining that “shanties were sung at work and... sea songs may be defined as everything sailors sang in hours of relaxation,” which creates a clear divide between the intent behind each song.³ From this theory, it can be noted that sea shanties were developed over time as an accompaniment to a certain task that a seaman was accomplishing with his crew.

One such example of a task driven vocal cue, later to be described as an early shanty, came from William Falconer, an eighteenth-century poet. Falconer describes his work with sailors at sea when completing tasks aboard the brig, stating that the sailors “give a sudden jerk at the same instant, in which movement they are regulated by a sort of song or howl pronounced by one of their number,” which represents an early song dictating tasks.⁴ One sailor would shout an order, and others would follow suit. In this sense, sea shanties became increasingly musical as time went on, with vocal stresses being placed

² Stuart M. Frank. “Sea Chanteys and Sailors’ Songs, An Introduction for Singers and Performers, and a Guide for Teachers and Group Leaders.” *Kendall Whaling Museum*, no. 11 (2000) Accessed December 2, 2020. <https://www.whalingmuseum.org/sites/default/files/pdf/Sea%20Chantey%27s%20and%20Sailors%3B%20Songs.pdf>

³ Harold Whates. "The Background of Sea Shanties." *Music & Letters* 18, no. 3 (1937): 259-64. Accessed December 2, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/stable/727760>.

⁴ William Falconer. “An universal dictionary of the marine.” *Project Gutenberg E-Text*. (1789) Accessed December 2, 2020. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/57705/57705-h/57705-h.html>

upon certain orders to indicate when the crew was to pull ropes for the sails. Early sea shanties were a two-parted musical dance, where one sailor would call the action, and others would respond as if echoing the leader, performing their task as they sang.

In the Carpenter Collection, a distinction is made between capstan shanties and halyard shanties. Capstan shanties were used at the capstan, a rotating mechanism that wound ropes on a ship, and were more often sung to alleviate boredom during a time-consuming task. Capstan shanties were closer in style to what Whates speculates was a "sea song." Halyard shanties were utilized at halyards, which are ropes used to hoist sails upon the mast. This action required a sudden bout of strength from several sailors, hence the development of a shanty that emphasized accented words in order to coordinate actions. Carpenter directly interviewed a sailor by the name of J. S. Scott, who had sung a halyard shanty aboard the *Gilroy* in 1887. The shanty is entitled "Hoist Her Up From Down Below" and features a solo lead and a chorus following the lead's cues. Carpenter documented the halyard shanty between a leader and a crew as,

Solo: Rosa Lee she had promised me, oh,

Chorus: *Down* below, oh *ho* oh ho!

Solo: For to marry me when I come home from sea, yes

Chorus: *Hoist* her up from *down* below! ⁵

An emphasis is placed upon the italicized words to indicate when the sailors would hoist the halyard. The purpose of the chorus is to

⁵ Robert Young Walser. "'Here We Come Home in a Leaky Ship!': The Shanty Collection of James Madison Carpenter." *Folk Music Journal* 7, no. 4 (1998): 471-95. Accessed December 2, 2020.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4522611>

synchronize the crew, therefore unifying them and creating a working environment that breeds kinship.

The rhythmic and steady set of cues allows the sailors to extend their shanty and add verses as needed. Carpenter's documentation of the shanties aligns with songs written down by other scholars who recorded shanties. Although shanties typically had rhythmic, steady, and consistent lyrics, "improvisation was regarded as a hallmark of a good shantyman and was a ...necessity in work contexts where a given task could be done in varying lengths of time," which relied heavily on the conditions of the sea, the ship, and the crew on the brig.⁶ Although improvisation was important to the sailor leading the shanty, the general lyrical structure of each shanty was preserved without the modifications. The reason that shanties could be so lyrically similar between varying sources is due in part to the fact that sailors who boarded other ships carried the oral traditions and songs from their previous ships with them. Each sailor would learn to associate a particular shanty with a task and teach the new crew the shanty as they performed said task.⁷ If every sailor worked on a new ship and brought their shanties with them, the unifying factor between hundreds of working ships at sea would be their knowledge of capstan and halyard shanties.

Sailors who taught each other their individual shanties for certain tasks were essentially spreading a common culture only found

⁶ Robert Young Walser. "Here We Come Home in a Leaky Ship!": The Shanty Collection of James Madison Carpenter." *Folk Music Journal* 7, no. 4 (1998): 471-95. Accessed December 2, 2020.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4522611>

⁷ Harold Whates. "The Background of Sea Shanties." *Music & Letters* 18, no. 3 (1937): 259-64. Accessed December 2, 2020.

<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/stable/727760>.

between maritime workers. Each worker would be able to recognize songs and sing them with accuracy if they were asked to recite them, as is the case of John Carpenter's recordings of various sea shanties. From those recordings and fragments of songs, he compiled a list of common songs most recognized by the sailors he interviewed. Among those songs were "Blow the Man Down," "Shenandoah," and "Leave Her Johnny."⁸ These songs contributed to the maritime culture at sea, which in turn created a mobile, fluid, and unified littoral society. A littoral society is a maritime society with common themes, cultural aspects, economies, workforces, and values not necessarily bound to a physical location.⁹ Sailors communicated and worked effectively through song, which unified them and allowed them to work as a team and accomplish a common goal. Although sailors were not bound to their ship for life, they shared common values with those upon the brig and worked together through their use of music.

In the twentieth century, the usage of sea shanties began to die out with the rise of mechanized technology that replaced the need for manual labor. Due to the square-rigged sail ship being overturned in favor of a more modern design, the need for sailors in their traditional sense was futile. Sails no longer needed to be raised on brigs. Shanties were not used as frequently as before, and as a result, the "last shanty sung in this context was...sung aboard the *Garthpool* a few days before she was wrecked in October 1929," by Stan Hugill, a noteworthy sailor

⁸ Robert Young Walser. "'Here We Come Home in a Leaky Ship!': The Shanty Collection of James Madison Carpenter." *Folk Music Journal* 7, no. 4 (1998): 471-95. Accessed December 2, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4522611>

⁹ Michael N. Pearson. "Littoral Society: The Concept and the Problems." *Journal of World History* 17, no. 4 (2006): 353-73. Accessed December 2, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20079396>

and maritime expert.¹⁰ After Hugill sang what could be known as the last period appropriate sea shanty, all efforts to recreate the musical labor songs of the sea were no longer for work related endeavors. From the 1930's onward, sea shanties were no longer in practical use.

Bordering on the brink of extinction, maritime historians and musicians alike rushed to preserve what remained of the fleeting oral history of the sea. Once the sailors who had sung shanties on ships began to die out, their knowledge of the craft began to die as well. The themes of unification between workers, human conflict with changing technology, and cultural consolidation between ships faced eradication when Hugill's last song was sung. From this, the modern maritime world began to unfold an array of historical preservers in an attempt to encompass the folk art of labor songs. Although Carpenter's Collection was released to the public in the 1970's, and later digitized, others looked to revive the culture by recreating shanties with a musical troupe. *The Northwest Musicians* released an album in 1989 entitled "Victory Sings at Sea," where several traditional shanties as well as their own are sung acapella in the exact style of their original tune. These shanties include "Blow the Man Down," "Ranzo Ray," and "Santy Anno," which all appear on Carpenter's list of most popular shanties among sailors.¹¹ The mesh of modern and traditional songs on

¹⁰ Robert Young Walser. "'Here We Come Home in a Leaky Ship!': The Shanty Collection of James Madison Carpenter." *Folk Music Journal* 7, no. 4 (1998): 471-95. Accessed December 2, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4522611>

¹¹ Northwest Musicians, *Victory Sings at Sea*, Victory Music VMRC-503. 1989, compact disc; Walser, Robert Young. "'Here We Come Home in a Leaky Ship!': The Shanty Collection of James Madison Carpenter." *Folk*

their album created a bond that sparked interest in the folk art and culture of sailor's songs due to their crisp voices, ease of listening, and culturally accurate melodies. *The Northwest Musicians* brought to life an art that was almost entirely gone after the sailors aboard working ships from the British Isles passed away. By creating music that was easily accessible to the public, the average person could tune in to a part of history that had almost disappeared, perhaps without knowing that they were active participants in the musical revival. This revival is important to the musical culture of the modern era because a small piece of relatively unknown history had been brought back to life.

Even though the original purpose of a shanty was to provide guidance during the backbreaking tasks of shipwork, modern musicians were able to translate the original vocal cues as well as the cultural value of shanties. The rebirth of shanty music impressed upon historical listeners as well as a non-scholarly audience the rich traditions of a lost art. Participating in oral history keeps niches of history relevant, as the stories and livelihoods of sailors are celebrated long after their deaths. Carpenter's own death in 1983 rendered him unable to witness the cultural revival of sea shanties, which was the original purpose of his Collection's project.

As the entertainment industry rules over much of the modern world, sea shanties had found their place within many forms of media. Take, for example, the popular video game *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, a game released by Ubisoft in 2013. The sailors of the British Isles would have never been able to predict that their songs would be kept alive and inspire a new generation to sing folk labor songs. *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* features an operable ship and a responsive crew

Music Journal 7, no. 4 (1998): 471-95. Accessed December 2, 2020.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4522611>

that sing halyard and capstan shanties as they complete their tasks. The game features a number of traditional shanties such as “Ranzo,” “Leave Her Johnny,” and “Whiskey Johnny,” which also appear on Carpenter’s list of most popular shanties.¹² The inclusion of traditional shanties in a popular game made for a younger generation further exemplifies the reach that Carpenter’s Collection had on modern media and the entertainment business. By creating a playable example of a littoral society, Ubisoft brought to the attention of a younger audience the importance of an oral history. Surely, without Carpenter’s research, both *The Northwest Musicians* and *Assassin’s Creed IV: Black Flag* would not exist in the same capacity that they do today.

Understanding the complex history of maritime workers allows for modern day societies to appreciate smaller parts of history that oftentimes go unnoticed. This appreciation of detail in history applies to the lives of both historical scholars and musicians alike by creating a bond between what the world understands as cultural art and modern entertainment. Creating an awareness surrounding maritime history can better educate the world to appreciate music not only as a historical tool, but also as a cultural tool for understanding the struggles and labors of an entire unrepresented workforce. The significance of these shanties had changed from a tune of necessity in the past to a song of entertainment in modernity. This shift in significance brings about a greater importance of traditions almost lost to time. The maritime world

¹² Ubisoft Montreal, *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*. Ubisoft. Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 3, Playstation 4, Xbox One, Xbox 360, WiiU. 2013; Walser, Robert Young. "'Here We Come Home in a Leaky Ship!': The Shanty Collection of James Madison Carpenter." *Folk Music Journal* 7, no. 4 (1998): 471-95. Accessed December 2, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4522611>

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may have been much more poorly understood by scholars without the multitude of shanties discovered and remembered in the Carpenter Collection.

The revival of traditional sea shanties brought to light a growing importance placed upon oral history and the role that music plays within said history. The unification of sailors through music allowed for a kinship to grow not only on their ship, but to other ships as each crew disbanded and spread their songs. The cultural consolidation between ships created a littoral society that united all sailors by their experiences on board a maritime vessel. Once modern ships overtook the market, sailors were no longer required to operate in the same ways that they previously had, as machinery accomplished tasks without the need for vocal cues. James Madison Carpenter's Collection is the foundation for the revival of maritime folk music and oral history. With modern interpretations of shanty music being released across various media, a revival of maritime culture resurfaced from the depths of the sea to the lives of millions of historians and musicians alike.

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