



BURIED Treasure

Nathaniel Handy unpacks the hidden roots of sea shanties in the plantation work songs of the American South and the Caribbean

Hear the phrase ‘sea shanty’ and what comes to mind? The glory days of sail, hauling anchor and a bottle of rum? Perhaps most of all, you might picture a ‘salty dog’ (slang for a wizened old sailor) – almost certainly a white man. And with good reason. Sea shanties became common aboard the British merchant vessels of the mid-19th century, helping crews to keep time in their tasks. By the mid-20th century, they had become something of an anachronism, harking back to a folksy, unmechanised age.

Like most things retro, sea shanties have seen a revival. Think of the success of Port Isaac’s Fisherman’s Friends, who even spawned a 2019 feel-good movie of the same name, and the TikTok sensation-turned-chart topper Nathan Evans and his take on the New Zealand forebitter shanty ‘Wellerman’. Yet the distinctly British flavour of the genre has remained.

The fact that the origins of many, if not most, sea shanties lie far from Britain, among the slave populations of the American South and the Caribbean, may surprise those who consider this a quintessentially British folk genre. The emergence of many sea shanties from slavery is clearly illustrated in one of the most mournful and resonant of them all, ‘Shallow Brown’, which often

includes the verse: ‘*Master’s gonna sell me / Says he’ll sell me to a Yankee / He says he’ll sell me for a dollar / For that great big Spanish dollar.*’

Yet in much of the tradition, the links to slavery, or the African-American and Caribbean experience more broadly, is much less explicit. Jim Mageean, a folk singer from north-east England, is one of the greatest living authorities on sea

THE IMPORTANCE IN THE ORIGINS OF SEA SHANTIES LIES IN REVEALING THE TRUTH OF THE HISTORICAL RECORD, BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITE SAILORS

shanties, learning his craft from Stan Hugill, the ‘Last Working Shantyman’ and the godfather of the British sea shanty tradition. Mageean presented his findings on the subject at an English Folk Dance and Song Society conference (available in a comprehensive blog at jimmageean.co.uk/post/the-black-origins-of-sea-shanties). He reveals fascinating details such as the fact that

shanties were not sung aboard naval ships (especially during wartime, when it could alert enemies to your presence), and that while Britain was at war almost constantly from 1700-1815, the reverse was true of America. He suggests that this could be a reason for the work songs of the plantations jumping into the maritime setting in the American South. More specifically, he quotes a Captain Frank Shaw in observing that sea shanties find their origins in Black slaves being sent to the coast – either to load cotton aboard ships or to work as crews onboard – in the post-harvest season when they were expensive to keep on the plantation without work.

Mageean’s blog draws on eyewitness accounts throughout the 19th century, everywhere from British Guyana to the eastern United States. They speak of Black shantymen as the labour in cotton screwing – a demanding task which involved turning huge jackscrews to compress the cotton bales and load them into the hold of ships. The ‘shantier’ or shantyman would lead the song, while the others would join in the chorus, in the call-and-response structure so common to West African music.

One of the most famous cotton-screwing shanties – thanks to its appearance on Bruce Springsteen’s *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions* – is



Opposite page (clockwise from left): Fisherman's Friends; Jim Mageean; Clipper ship 'Three Brothers', the largest sailing ship in the world in 1875; Stan Hugill. Above (clockwise from left): Chantymen singing in rowboat in Saint Kitts and Nevis, 1962; Members of the Georgia Sea Island Singers, including Bessie Jones (center), 1960; Cornish shantyman Captain Leighton Robinson with part of his crew; She Shanties performing

'Pay Me My Money Down', which has its origins in the Black stevedores of the Georgia Sea Islands. These work songs bring to mind the *waulking* tradition of the Scottish Hebrides – work songs sung by women while rhythmically beating newly woven cloth to felt it into tweed.

"We began singing shanties with our dads," Esther Ferry-Kennington of the Whitby-based group, She Shanties, told *Songlines*. "But we're women going into a men's world." The role of women is significant. The sea shanty is – whether Black or white – often viewed as a distinctly male, even macho, genre. Consider all the fist-thumping and guttural yells. And yet, hard manual labour and the songs that accompany it have often been the preserve of poor women.

FURTHER READING

Jim Mageean's *Heave Away – A Collection of Heaving Shanties* (2020), *Haul Away – A Collection of Hauling Shanties* (2020) and *Sail Away – A Collection of Forebitters and Sea Songs* (2021)

Stan Hugill – *Shanties from the Seven Seas: Shipboard Worksongs and Songs used as Worksongs from the Great Days of Sail* (1961)

Frank Thomas Bullen – *Songs of Sea Labour* (1914)

Cecil Sharp – *The English Folk-Chanteys* (1914)

Black Sailors and Sea Shanties, Learning Resource from EFSS (2015)

She Shanties perform the American shanty 'Johnny Come Down to Hilo' on their latest album, *Lubber's Hole* (reviewed in #190). "I feel my whiteness," explains Ferry-Kennington. "We've removed the racist language, but as we explain when we perform, [these songs] speak for the experience of enslaved peoples. The trouble is, we're still singing to largely white audiences."

Stan Hugill's seminal 1961 book *Shanties from the Seven Seas* includes about 120 shanties he ascribes to African American or Caribbean sources, noting the practice of 'chequerboard crews' – the segregation of the sailors into a Black watch and a white watch. However, Mageean notes that a man named Richard Dana heard shanties sung in the 1830s by a ship's crew that was a mixture of 'English, Scotch, German, French, African, South Sea Islands plus a few Boston and Cape Cod boys.' This multicultural mix hints at the fertile exchange of songs and tunes that would inevitably have taken place in these maritime settings despite the inherent racism of the system surrounding them.

So, are shanties still sung in the American South or the Caribbean by Black communities today? "The latest shanties collected in the Caribbean were in the 1960s, as far as I am aware," Mageean tells *Songlines*. Many of these

were collected by his old friend Hugill. "Two of the Barrouallie Whalers from St Vincent (collected by Roger Abrahams) are still alive but very old now. The Menhaden fishermen of Virginia and North Carolina are still singing but only as a choir. I hope the Georgia Sea Island Singers are still performing, although their leader, Bessie Jones, must be long gone." As for Mageean's favourites from the region, he names 'Down Trinidad', 'John Dead' (from St Vincent) and 'Brandy-O' (from Turks).

Acknowledging the origins of sea shanties should not be seen as a 'culture wars' victory for Black culture over white. Its importance lies in revealing the truth of the historical record, in which we discover that the path of these shanties from the plantations of the American South and the Caribbean to the British Isles was only possible due to interaction between Black and white sailors and stevedores.

In discovering this, we are reminded that our connections make us who we are. When we come to this awareness, sea shanties become not British folk songs, nor American or Caribbean songs, but *our* work songs, collectively. As Mageean eloquently puts it at the conclusion of his blog, 'it is important that we portray them as 'world music' with a multi-ethnic background.' ♦

Jim Mageean, Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center Library of Congress. Courtesy of the Association for Cultural Equity, Alan Wilkinson