

LOCAL BOY GOES GLOBAL: THE SEA SHANTY TO THE RESCUE

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***Abstract:** This paper will look at how the grungy, old-fashioned, lowly sea shanty has become the unlikely hero of the Covid-19 pandemic, bringing people together globally and generating both community and creativity. Sea shanties, providing comfort and entertainment for sailors while at sea, far from their loved ones, became an odd bedfellow in this current day and age, as we counted the days for normal life to resume again. This phenomenon can serve as a template for other activities of this kind, using music and performance to combat isolation and loneliness.*

***Keywords:** call and response, Covid epidemic, folk music, online entertainment, sea shanties, TikTok*

1. Introduction

“The romance of the sea is gone, and with are gone Sea Songs”
(Whall 1913: ix)

The American comedian and television host Stephen Colbert declared not long ago on his hugely popular *Late Show* that “2021 is the year of the sea shanty” (The Late Show 2021). He went on to explain this seemingly absurd statement in an obviously humorous vein: “Now before I go on with this vital story, parents, a warning. Sea shanties are a gateway to much more dangerous online, maritime influenced behavior, like wearing cable-knit sweaters and carving scrimshaw penis pics.” (ibid.). Colbert and his comedy writing staff may be giving themselves a bit too much credit, however, as an episode from season 4 of *The Simpsons* seems to have beaten them to it way back in 1992, when Homer, desperate to raise money for his new business, ponders advertising on a local cable television station and is inspired by the character of the Sea Captain selling “ninety sea shanties on three compact discs” (The Simpsons 1992). The selection includes classic sea shanties such as “Blow the Man Down” as well as some rather dubious additions such as “In the Navy” by the Village People. For those unfamiliar with advertising on local television stations at that time, they were notorious for low-budget advertisements trying to sell seemingly unsellable items. A comment below the video on *YouTube* makes reference to the legendary prophetic talents of *The Simpsons*. “If only the sea captain would've released his album in 2021, when the sea shanty trend took off, he'd be a millionaire!” (The Simpsons 1992). The *Simpsons* screenwriters are occasionally given credit for having predicted several trends and events, including the Trump presidency, the 9/11 attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center, etc. (Salem 2018). This seems to be yet another one.

Like many fellow academics, I could have used a prophecy to prepare myself for the trials and tribulations of online teaching during the Covid epidemic. In my American Folk Music class, for example, I usually require my students to sing along or even play an instrument during lessons. I found myself performing in front of my screen, hoping some were at least interested enough to keep their screen turned on. At times, however, I realized that I had to open myself up to the new possibilities this current situation provides, thinking outside of the box. I was pleasantly surprised by the responses I received from a survey I carried out among students and teachers concerning how they were coping with online teaching and learning. Although the negative aspects generally outruled the positive, many of them pointed out certain benefits, particularly for the introverts, on both sides of the computer screen. Some students actually found it easier to participate in class discussions, for example, with their screen turned off as it made them less self-conscious. As a teacher, I found myself remembering students' names since they were conveniently placed under their profile pictures. I also began asking early-comers to the zoom session polite questions as to their state of being, something I rarely do under normal circumstances. On the whole, however, I found myself mired in frustration and despondency.

I had an eye-opening moment, however, when I came across a video, originally made on the social platform *TicTok* around Christmas of 2020, by a young Scottish postman, Nathan Evans, singing a so-called sea shanty *Wellerman*. I soon learned that the song was not actually a proper sea shanty, but 'only' a sea ballad. Whatever the case, this obscure song about whaling, originally from New Zealand and dating back to around the 1870s, has become a smash hit, not only viewed by millions, but also being joined with harmonies by other users and even by a number of instruments by means of the so-called duet feature on the *TicTok* app. Ironically, very few people singing the tune actually understand what the song is about and one wonders how they would react if they actually knew. The chorus of the song "Soon may the Wellerman come/To bring us sugar and tea and rum/One day, when the touguin' is done/We'll take our leave and go." refers to the expectation of the delivery of supplies from one of the boats owned by the historical Weller family. The 'tonguin' refers to the, undoubtedly messy and gruesome, practice of cutting off strips of whale blubber to make oil (Stevens 2021). Evans, a twenty-six-year-old postman at the time, from the tiny town of Inveraray, originally recording with only his voice and fist, became a global star overnight, reaching number one on the UK charts and even signing a lucrative recording contract.

Evans' version of *Wellerman* is actually not the first one, having been previously covered by the British a cappella group The Longest Johns in 2018. Both versions have spearheaded a remarkable interest in the sea shanty folk music genre, which has been made accessible due to the specific circumstances of Covid isolation. People have begun to experiment with online apps and programs such as *Zoom* and *TicTok* in order to share and even perform music. The most obvious takeaway from this is that singing and playing in harmony meets and has always met a very elemental basic human need for sharing, for community. Amanda Petrusich, writing for the *New Yorker* puts it very well.

It seems possible that after nearly a year of solitude and collective self-banishment, and of crushing restrictions on travel and adventure, the chantey might be providing a brief glimpse into a different, more exciting way of life, a world of sea air and

pirates and grog, of many people singing in unison, of being free to boldly take off for what Melville called the ‘true places,’ the uncorrupted vistas that can’t be located on any map. (Petrusich 2021)

This paper will consequently explore how the seemingly left-for-dead genre of the sea shanty has not only become the latest hit for a young generation of TikTokers, but has also opened up new paths and models for possible creativity and cooperation.

2. History

The sea shanty arose out of African-American slave work songs, which made extensive use of so-called call and response, technically a form of antiphony, in other words a song where the lead singer sings out certain lines which are either echoed or answered by the chorus. Classic examples of this from African-American folk music would include: *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, *Michael Row your Boat Ashore*, *Down by the Riverside*, etc. Originating in Africa, but not only there, the musical form was brought over by slaves and reintroduced on plantations while working in the fields. As with many work or military tunes, songs of this kind served several purposes. Most importantly, they helped workers pass the time, served as a way of coordinating physical labour and finally provided a sense of community and solidarity under brutal conditions.

Most ethnomusicologists argue that the sea shanty arose upon sailors (mostly from the British Isles, Ireland and North America) being exposed to the work songs of African-American and Caribbean stevedores on the docks. Whatever the case, the sea shanty is a primarily a nineteenth century merchant ship phenomenon, most famously sung by sailors in the English-speaking world.

3. Definition and themes

The word *shanty*, *chantey* or *chanty* has been the subject of a great deal of speculation as to its etymology, with no definitive conclusions. The most convincing explanation is it having its origin in the French *chanter*, although there also may be a connection with the concept of a *shantytown*. The songs had both a utilitarian and entertainment purpose. They were used to coordinate work: weighing anchor, setting sails, mopping the decks, etc. If one were to get technical, there were also specific sub-categories of sea shanties, sung for particular kinds of jobs: windlass and capstan; halliard; fore-sheet or sweating-up; bunt. The songs would be led by a so-called shantyman providing the call, while the rest of the crew or members of the team performing the particular task would answer with the response. As with folk songs in general, the lyrics were flexible to say the least, with many sea shanties consisting of so-called customary (more or less fixed, established lyrics), floating (can be moved around in the song) and improvised verses. The shantyman could therefore play with the lyrics, add new updated verses and demonstrate his virtuosity on the spot in order to receive a possible extra dram or two of rum as a reward.

The songs covered a wide range of themes: shore leave, complaining about conditions at sea, storms, battles, military heroes, dishonest dealings by shipowners, fishing, gutting, whaling, disease, exotic locations, hazing, etc. The songs frequently had bawdy content, displayed affinities with tall tales, employed sailing jargon and often used sea terminology for the female anatomy. The use of

local colour changed, of course, depending on the nationalities of the sailors. The songs displayed definite marks of so-called ‘toxic masculinity’, making their current popularity even more ironic.

Sea shanties gradually died out in the late nineteenth century with mechanization and the rise of the steam-powered ships. In the foreword to the classic collection of sea shanties, *The Shanty Book*, Sir Walter Runciman (who played an ignoble role in the development of the Munich agreement of 1938) was premature in pronouncing the definitive end of the genre:

It is sometimes difficult for old sailors like myself to realize that these fine shanty tunes – so fascinating to the musician, and which no sailor can hear without emotion – died out with the sailing vessel, and now belong to a chapter of maritime history that is definitely closed. They will never more be heard on the face of the waters, but it is well that they should be preserved with reverent care. (Terry 1921: iii)

For a number of years, the songs (with some exceptions) were mostly known only to ethnomusicologists, and only began to experience an upswing and consequent popularization with the folk scene of the 1940s, centred in New York City. One of the key recordings was *Deep Sea Chanteys and Whaling Ballads* from 1941 by the Almanac Singers, which at that time included not only Pete Seeger, but also Woody Guthrie. The album included the classic sea shanty *Blow the Man Down*, in their version with Guthrie as ‘shantyman’ and the other three members providing the chorus/response. Although not truly a cappella (a recorder is used at the beginning and the end, and banjo and guitar are strummed in subdued fashion through the rest), the Almanacs were obviously attempting to achieve a certain legitimacy. Their interest in the genre sprang from their left-wing politics, of course, with an angle on the working-class, immigrant experience. Starting in the mid 1950s, bands such as The Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem, originally from Ireland, began to draw increased attention to the genre, once again politicizing it somewhat by bringing the focus on the recognition of the contributions of minorities to American/British cultural history. The old sea shanty *Leaving of Liverpool*, also known as *Fare Thee Well My Own True Love*, for example, became an international hit in their version. Arguably the greatest propagator of sea shanties, again with often a socialist twist on things, was the British folk singer-songwriter Ewan MacColl.

There are a number of contemporary a cappella groups whose repertoire almost exclusively consists of sea shanties. Quite a few of them are surprisingly from Poland, for example *Banana Boat*, which has pioneered the genre of neo-shanties, with their repertoire being a mixture of traditional shanties and new compositions. Sea shanty festivals are popular in a number of countries and have received a new burst of interest after the forced hiatus of the Covid epidemic and the rise of the online shanty phenomenon. The current sea shanty tradition is, of course, gentrified, no longer wild and woolly, and, instead, displays definite aspects of the ‘hipster’ approach to working-class professions and traditions.

The previously mentioned *Blow the Man Down* manifests many of the traditional sea shanty features. There are a number of variations of the song, not surprisingly, but the most popular version is as follows:

As I was a walking down Paradise street
To me way-aye, blow the man down
A pretty young damsel I chanced for to meet
Give me some time to blow the man down

The lines alternate between the shantyman and the chorus. The song takes place, at least initially, on shore leave and involves an encounter with a young lady who seems to be working ‘in cahoots’ with a local ship desperate for seamen. Her body is described with euphemistic sailing jargon, which would undoubtedly amuse the listeners:

She was round in the counter and bluff in the bow
 To me way-aye, blow the man down
 So I took in all sail and cried ‘way enough now’
 Give me some time to blow the man down

The naive sailor is tricked into joining a ship in dock, only to be knocked on the head and ‘shanghaied’ or abducted. The song ends with words of warning to younger sailors not to fall into the same trap:

So I give you fair warning before we belay
 To me way-aye, blow the man down
 Don't never take heed of what pretty girls say...
 Give me some time to blow the man down

The phrase “blow the man down” apparently refers to a ship partially capsizing at sea, perhaps expressing the sailor’s wish for the ship, and its captain, to meet with a just punishment for their misdeeds. The line describing the attack on the gullible sailor, “The mate knocked me down with the end of a spar”, is practically identical to a line from the African-American stevedore work song *Pay Me My Money Down*, which testifies to the fluidity of these types of folk songs and a possible earlier, land origin.

What Shall We do With a Drunken Sailor is arguably the most famous sea shanty of all time, having been covered by a wide range of bands in varying genres. Its format once again typifies the genre with possible call and response and endless verses lending themselves to improvisation, often of a bawdy nature. Another classic shanty, *Roll the Old Chariot*, also known as *A Drop of Nelson’s Blood*, begins with the lines of the first verse, “A drop of Nelsons blood, wouldn’t do us any harm”, this being a euphemism for, not surprisingly, rum. Additional lines make reference to “Oh, a roll in the clover, wouldn’t do us any harm” as well as other sexual escapades.

One of the most famous pseudo-sea shanties *Fifteen Men on a Dead Man’s Chest* with its classic lines

Fifteen men on the dead man’s chest—
 ...Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!
 Drink and the devil had done for the rest—
 ...Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum! (Stevenson 1912: 7)

is unfortunately not really a sea shanty, but was invented by Robert Louis Stevenson in his legendary adventure novel *Treasure Island*. Yet another classic which is often confused with a sea shanty is the pornographic *Good Ship Venus*, which had been covered by the punk legends The Sex Pistols, among others. The first verse, which exists in a number of variants, provides a graphic picture of the ribald content and style.

'Twas on the good ship Venus,
 By Christ you should have seen us,
 The figurehead
 Was a whore in bed,
 And the mast a rampant penis.

Other classic sea shanties and naval songs have been popularized by films, for example, *Spanish Ladies* in *Jaws* or *Don't Forget Your Old Shipmate* in the film *Master and Commander*, based on the books of English novelist Patrick O'Brian. Last but not least, the phrase "heave ho", used to pull something in unison, was introduced to 'landlubbers' by shanties such as *Yeo, Heave Ho!*, a so-called capstan shanty, originally sung by sailors when hoisting anchor (Boni 1947: 134-135).

4. Theory

As mentioned earlier, I have personally been forced, practically kicking and screaming, to make use of new technologies in my teaching, when presenting at conferences and even when performing music. Nathan Evan's version of *Wellerman*, along with many other examples, has inspired me to rethink some of my suspicions and prejudices toward online formats for both education, and art and entertainment. A recent article by Tom Maguire, although not focused on music, but on theatre, and in relation not to *TicTok* but to *Zoom*, is very much relevant to the present discussion. Maguire makes extensive use of the concept of 'liveness' developed by Philip Auslander (2008). Maguire, in relation to two theatre 'plays' performed online via *Zoom*, argues for not only the blurring between traditional views of live and recorded art, but also for the merits of experimental online performance.

I propose that liveness might be experienced and conceptualised less as a binary between live and non-live and rather as a continuum. The experience of liveness along this continuum has the potential to create bonds *between* people, something of particular value during the enforced isolation to preserve life and health during the pandemic. (Maguire 2022: 42)

The *TicTok* layered songs by Nathan Evans, The Longest Johns, and others demonstrate not only the potential for shared musical, theatrical and educational performances and projects, but also the remarkable possibilities for bringing people together from all over the world, free of charge and without moving from one's own home. On the negative side, however, one wonders if this new technology might be used as an excuse to cancel or at least cut back on traditional (more costly) concerts and performances or, in my particular case, teaching and conferences.

Sea shanties are not, of course, the only musical genre or even activity which have experienced a revival due to the move online. Ian Youngs (2020), in an article for the BBC, discusses various approaches to mediating performances during Covid: "Beyond music, lockdown may turn out to be a tipping point for activities like quizzes, choirs, and exercise, yoga and cookery lessons, which have found new leases of life online (despite the inevitable loss of the human touch)". Who knows what will be next, the sky (or better said, the Internet) is the limit.

5. Conclusion

There is an obvious parallel between isolation on boats in the middle of the ocean and the forced seclusion which arose from the Covid epidemic. Many of the symptoms are shared: claustrophobia, sick of your family/shipmates, missing your partner/friends, missing freedom/movement, sexual tension. While sailors missed their families, however, we often had too much of them and them of us. Shanties provided and are now making possible relief, solace and even community. In addition, the *TicTok* format and additional online musical sharing allow both professional and amateurs to participate. The approach is very much democratic, as an original sea shanty would have been, with even the worst singer given the opportunity to join in on the response to the shantyman/lead singer.

Many of the songs make reference to the attractions of the land or are actually even set on shore. The ‘landlubber’ life, with all of its comforts and familiarity, is something to be desired, but only for a certain amount of time; like summer holidays for schoolchildren. The attraction of the land is heightened, because it is something rare and perhaps our return to normativeness should also be viewed in this fashion; as something to be cherished, because it could be so easily taken from us.

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