

Sea Shanties



SEA SHANTIES

Recent visitors to the Historic Quay in Hartlepool, where HMS Trincomalee is docked, will most likely have been greeted by the sound of sea shanties emanating from speakers attached to a quayside building. Historically though, shanties were not usually sung ashore, and were working songs. As the sailors toiled at repetitive tasks, the rhythm of the song served to synchronise the movements of the sailors. Shanties were not allowed on ships of the Royal Navy, as it was believed that they would adversely affect the crew's discipline, however merchant ships had many shanties in use.

The word 'shanty' is derived from the French word 'chanter', 'to sing', and from at least the fifteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century shanties flourished. Most surviving shanties date from the nineteenth century and, less commonly, the eighteenth century. As sail gave way to steam the practical use of shanties went into abeyance.

Shanties may be divided into rough categories, reflecting the jobs they were sung to which would determine the rhythm of the music. Six such categories follow. Most shanties are 'call and response' songs, with the 'shantyman' singing the line and a chorus of sailors bellowing the response.

Long-haul (also called 'halyard' or 'long-drag') Shanties - These were sung to accompany hauling on a line which was expected to last a long time, e.g. raising and lowering sails. With the canvas and wood, sails could weigh between 1,000 and 2,500 pounds. In order to set a sail a crew member would climb the rigging to loosen the canvas, and on deck the crew would take hold of a line called the halyard (for haul + yard). There are usually two pulls per chorus as in 'WAY, hey, BLOW the man down!'

Short-haul (also called 'sheet' or 'short-drag') Shanties - When the job of hauling on a line was expected to be quick but require great force, for example trimming the sails or raising the masthead, a short-haul shanty was sung. These have one strong pull in each chorus as in 'Way, haul away, haul away JOE!'

Capstan Shanties - These are anchor raising shanties to be sung as sailors turned the giant winch, winding the rope around it attached to the anchor. Since no pulling was required they are usually more 'smooth' sounding than the other shanties and usually told stories because of the length of time (which could be hours) it took to raise the anchor. They often have a full chorus in addition to the call-and-response verses, e.g. 'John Brown's Body' adapted from the army marching song, and 'Rio Grande'.

Stamp-'n'-Go Shanties - On ships with large crews many sailors would take hold of a line with their backs to the fall (where the line reaches the deck from aloft) and march away along the deck singing and stamping out the rhythms. These shanties tend to have longer choruses similar to Capstan Shanties, a well known example being 'What shall we do with the Drunken Sailor?'

Pumping Shanties - All wooden ships leak, and in ships this leaked-in water (the bilge) would collect in the bilge hold. Frequently the bilge water had to be pumped out with a two-man pump before steam power took over from sail. An example is 'Barnacle Bill the Sailor'. Particularly after the adoption of the Downton pump, which used a capstan rather than pump handles moved up and down, many Capstan Shanties were used as Pumping Shanties and vice versa.

Fo'c's'le (Forecastle) Songs , Forebitters and Ceremonial Shanties - These were sung for pleasure in the fo'c's'le where the sailors slept or, in fine weather, where they gathered near to the forebitters (large posts on the foredeck). They usually told stories of famous battles, romance or of their longing for home, quite often they were just plain funny songs. Ceremonial shanties were kept for times of celebration, for example when they crossed the equator.

The above categories are not absolute, sailors might take a song from one category, and, with necessary alterations to the rhythm, use it for a different task. However one rule was generally observed, in that songs that spoke of returning home were only sung on the homeward leg, and songs that sung of the joys of voyaging were only sung on the outward leg.

In the twenty first century sea shanties are mainly performed as popular music, sometimes by large choral groups, particularly in Poland and the Netherlands, or in smaller groups as folk music. However they have made their way into the classical repertoire – for example, the main theme from the first movement of Shostakovich's Piano Concerto No. 2 in F major mimics the shanty 'What shall we do with the Drunken sailor? Also most years a medley of sea shanties is performed in front of Royalty in London at the Royal Albert Hall, Sir Henry Wood's Fantasia on British Sea Songs being a regular feature of the Last Night of the Proms.

One version of the Drunken Sailor:

What shall we do with a drunken sailor?
What shall we do with a drunken sailor?
What shall we do with a drunken sailor?
Early in the morning?

Way-hay, up she rises
Way-hay, up she rises
Way-hay, up she rises
Early in the morning.

Put him in the long boat 'til he's sober
Pull out the bung and wet him all over
Put him in the scuppers with the deck pump on him
Heave him by the leg in a runnin' bowlin'
Tie him to the taffrail when she's yard-arm under

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