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World Music

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### The History of Sea Shanties

Sea shanties are not in fact just Irish, but come from all around the world, such as England, the Americas, New Zealand, and Australia. Sea shanties are songs sung by sailors while completing their various tasks aboard a ship. Over centuries they have become very popular, and played outside the context of sailors living on a ship. While sea shanties are rarely still sung by sailors working on boats, their unique rhythmic qualities have made their way into mainstream Western culture heavily within the past few years. People listen to them often in social settings, and their chant-like nature has recently become favored by the younger generations. Nathan Evans, a famous DJ, has made remixes of sea shanties; his most famous is the remix of the New Zealand shanty, “Wellerman,” which has over 300 million plays on Spotify. Also, within the past 50 years or so, popular bands have made covers of sea shanties that they perform at concerts and record in albums. The song that Andre, Fraser and I performed, “Go To Sea Once More,” is an example of a shanty that has been reproduced by many different bands since the 20th century.

The musical tradition of sea shanties have been traced to merchant and military ships from at least the 15th century, and likely far before this estimate. Even though these types of sea songs have been around for hundreds of years, the actual term “sea shanty” did not arise until the 18th century, with many different spelling variations such as “chanty” (Johnson). Some historians think that the name could have come from the French word “chantar,” which means to sing. It could also simply derive from the English word, “chant,” because of their call and response nature (RMG). Another interesting theory about the name comes from lumberjacks.

Lumberjacks would occasionally transport their logs down to the docks to be loaded onto ships; here, they interacted with lots of sailors. During the wood-cutting season, lumberjacks would live in bunks called “shanties,” where they also sang working songs to pass the time. Some historians think that the lumberjacks introduced their tradition of work-music to the sailors, who in turn named it “sea shanties” after the lumberjacks (Winick). Finally, Winick argues that the word could come from the “West Indies, where similar work songs are sometimes used while building and moving small houses or shanties” (Winick). There is the possibility that all of these theories have some truth to them, or none of them, however it is important to note the common musical traditions of work songs and their influence on each other.

Most people think of a sea shanty as a song sung by sailors, but their meaning is actually more specific. Sea shanties are classified as work songs, or songs that are sung during physical labor tasks upon ships. If the song is not sung while completing labor, then it can not be considered a shanty. For example, if sailors on board a ship are recreationally singing a song while on a break or during a meal, it would not be a sea shanty; Sailors called these recreational songs foc’sle songs or off-watch songs. Foc’sle or off-watch songs generally are more narrative based, telling stories of other sailors or events, while shanties are more specific to the actual jobs on the boat.

The song that Andre, Fraser, and I performed is called “Go To Sea Once More.” The version that we sang was recorded by a band called the Dubliners in 1968 as part of their album, “At it Again,” where they titled it, “Go To Sea No More,” with some slight modifications. However, the true title of the song is in fact, “Go To Sea Once More,” and has been around for hundreds of years. It has been traced back to sailors in the English Merchant Navy, from the earliest as the 18th century. Since then, numerous bands have released their own versions of the

song, all slightly contrasting in pacing and tempo, as well as with differently worded titles. The song is about a sailor who goes to shore in Liverpool after being at sea for a while. There, he gets drunk and finds a prostitute who ends up stealing his clothes and money. Even though the sailor vowed that he would never go on a ship again, the circumstances forced him to take a job on a ship bound for the Arctic, for which he had no warm clothes. In the song, he warns against heavy drinking and a life on the water. He suggests that people take the safe route and settle down and get married instead. While this song has been named a sea shanty by other artists and was sung by sailors about a sailor, it is actually technically not a shanty because it was not sung during labor. “Go To Sea Once More” would fall under the category of sailors’ “off-watch” songs.

While sea shanties come from a variety of cultures and places around the world, they have technical aspects that stay uniform throughout. For example, they are “call and response,” which means that there is a person leading the song, the “shanty-man,” and the rest of the group responds with the chorus. The shanty-man was usually self appointed and another regular sailor on the ship; there was not a hierarchy, and they also took part in usual tasks on the ship. However, if the shanty-man was reputable, they would be respected and celebrated. Shanty-men also did lyrical improvisation between the choruses, which highly resembles other musical styles such as the blues or jazz. With Andre’s piano solo at the end of our video, we wanted to replicate the improvisational nature of sea shanties and shanty-men.

Every shanty also has a chorus, which allows the crew to all sing together at a certain part. Another aspect that all sea shanties share is an unwavering tune and rhythm. Even though “Go To Sea Once More” is not technically a shanty, it still holds the technical aspects that shanties do. There are many different versions of this song that have evolved throughout its history, but each version still holds unwavering tempo and and tune. This unwavering tempo is to

help the sailors fall into a rhythm of their labor, especially if they are working as a group. The unchanging tempo of the singing helps to coordinate their actions which in turn makes their work easier and safer. For example, on older merchant and military ships, a “capstan shanty” was sung while the anchor was raised or lowered, and a “halyard shanty” was sung when hoisting the sails. There are about a dozen different types/genres of shanties relating to distinct tasks, and within these genres, many individual songs. These numerous tasks could be dangerous and had little room for error, so singing the shanty to organize the sailors was essential to a smooth completion of each task. Classically, each of the functions on the boat had its own song, and by the sailors singing it, the need for the specific job was communicated to everybody. Plus, singing the songs while working added a level of enjoyment to tasks that could prove long and tedious for the sailors.

While sea shanties were present in different navies, historian Kate Jamieson argues that they were more prominent on merchant ships. This, she thinks, is reflected by the large amounts of whaling, and other types of industry-themed lyrics (RMG). Some historians also believe that sea shanties can be connected to influences from African Culture. A common element of African music is call and response, which is the most important function of a sea shanty. According to RMG, African sailors and slaves were present on British ships over 450 years ago, which is why historians believe in this connection of musical tradition. British ships recruited their sailors from all of their colonies which brought together many different types of people. These multicultural crews of sailors undoubtedly brought with them their own musical backgrounds and shared them with each other to create new styles of singing. Historians also make comparisons between sea shanties and songs sung by African American slaves in the Southern United States when they loaded cotton onto ships (EFDSS). British and American people would have observed enslaved

Africans working in the Caribbean and in the Southern US. Many sources indicate that those who observed were captivated by the Africans' use of song while they worked. While the exact events of the history surrounding the creation of sea shanties are unknown, there is no objection to the clear influence African sailors and slaves had in their creation. Sea shanties could be seen as a type of creolization that occurred between traditions of British-born sailors, and Africans that became a part of the British colonies.

While the prominent language for sea shanties was English because of the British Empire's heavy maritime influence, other countries also developed shanties in other languages. The most popular shanties outside of English were in Swedish, French, and Dutch, other powerful maritime powers during the 18th and 19th centuries, the height of the sea shanty era. The cultural prime of sea shanties, however, is only thought to be around 50 years (RMG). While they have been around for hundreds of years, it is believed that they did not reach the form and style we know them by until the mid 19th century. During the American Civil War, the tradition of shanties was in its prime, however afterwards, saw a steep decline as steam ships came along. With the birth of steamships, sailors were no longer needed to perform as many specific and time consuming tasks, which took away their need for singing. While this singing style may have declined on ships, it was brought to the mainland and lived on.

Shanties are attributed to contributing to different forms of music in the Americas, Ireland, Australia and Britain. For example, "What Shall We Do With The Drunken Sailor," quite possibly the most famous sea shanty of all time, shares a melody with, "Óró Sé Do Bheatha 'Bhaile," a popular Irish folk song (McNeela). Folk music is not the only musical genre to be influenced by shanties. Some rock music also has elements of sea shanties, including artists such

as Bruce Springsteen. Finally, some classical composers, such as Percy Grainger, have also drawn from the melodies of sea shanties.

Although shanties are not commonly used nautically anymore, their performances still live on throughout the world. Their revival in Western culture has been seen through sing-alongs, concerts, and even festivals during the 20th and 21st centuries. Even at the Griswold Inn in Essex, Connecticut, they have hosted weekly sea shanty sing-alongs. In England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, local pubs also host sea shanty nights where people can go and listen to performers. Sea shanties are definitely more celebrated in coastal areas that were common stops on old shipping routes. However, mostly older generations participated in these types of events. It was not until the app Tik Tok was released that younger generations started to gain interest in sea shanty culture. In 2020, when Nathan Evans uploaded a video of himself singing the shanty, “The Wellerman,” it went viral through the app (RMG). As of today, many kids have made their own versions of “The Wellerman” and other shanties by playing instruments or creating new electronic versions, and sharing them via Tik Tok.

In conclusion, sea shanties have been a very influential musical mechanism throughout the past several hundred years. Their story likely began with the influence of African musical traditions that were spread on ships that traveled throughout the British Empire. As more sailors traveled around the world, they began to witness and learn other laborers’ forms of work-music, as well as developed their own. The period right before the industrial revolution was the sea shanty hay-day, when their technical means of guiding labor was put to use. Since their necessity has faded in the sailor world, their influence has remained and contributed to music across the world. Their popularity will continue to flourish as the younger generations have continued interest in creating their own versions of shanties.

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