

Black Singers and Folk Ballads

Songs and Stories Across the Atlantic



By Cohen Braithwaite-Kilcoyne

Photo: Will Killen

English Folk Dance and Song Society

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EFDSS creates and delivers creative learning projects for children, young people, adults and families at Cecil Sharp House, across London and around the country, often in partnership with other organisations. Learning programmes draw on the diverse and vibrant traditional folk arts of Britain and beyond, focusing on song, music, dance and related art forms such as storytelling, drama, and arts and crafts.

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The songs in this resource each has a link to their Roud number entry in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library's (VWML) online archive. A Roud number is an individual index number for English folk songs. The number makes it possible to find versions of songs even if the melody or lyrics are not identical. Please be aware that these historical materials held by the VWML may contain content considered offensive by modern standards. Teachers are advised to check these links before sharing with students as materials may need contextualising.

Resource credits

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Lord Lovel: traditional, arranged and performed by Germa Adan

Hangman Slack on the Line: traditional, arranged by Cohen Braithwaite-Kilcoyne, song performed by Germa Adan; body percussion video performed by Cohen Braithwaite-Kilcoyne

The Good Old Way: traditional, melody adapted, arranged, and performed by Germa Adan

Saylan: traditional, performed by Alison Solomon

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About this resource

This resource introduces the place of British folk songs in African American and Caribbean music traditions, showing how these songs can have currency and remain relevant across cultures.

It explores the context of music making of enslaved people in the Americas and presents four pieces; three of which are influenced by British ballads and one is an African American spiritual which is included to show how these British ballads may have fit within the context of the broader repertoire of black singers in the Americas.

All four pieces are presented first in their traditional forms, and three of them feature easy arrangements for multiple voices (suitable for youth choirs). The four songs are from the repertoires of black singers from the USA and Caribbean. They all have arrangements and activities suitable for young people in secondary schools (Key Stage 3 and above).

Along with each song are series of tasks to encourage learners to reflect on historical music making among enslaved communities and to engage with traditional songs and stories, working creatively with them and using them to create new material inspired by the tradition.

To give a picture of historical views of music making among enslaved Africans in the Americas, the final section of the resource includes several historical quotations. The quotes come from former slaves, slave owners and a white folklorist and give different views on music. These quotes can be a starting point for thinking about music among enslaved people at a time when ballads and other folk songs were very much the popular music sung by British colonisers in the Americas.

Note: It is common practice to update the words of folk songs as times, communities, and situations change - so do feel free to adapt them to suit the young people and context in which you teach. It is also common practice to change the key in which they are sung to suit voices and accompaniment. The beauty of folk songs is their flexibility and communal ownership - so enjoy making these your own!

This resource, with the accompanying audio and video, is freely downloadable from the EFDSS Resource Bank: www.efdss.org/BlackSingersFolkBallads

Black singers and folk ballads

In the early twentieth century, folklorists began seeking out folk songs in the USA believing that old songs that were no longer sung in the UK were still sung by the descendants of British immigrants. With a few exceptions however, these folklorists largely ignored African American singers due to a combination of ignorance of the presence of British folk songs in the Black repertoire and disinterest in hearing black singers. However, the African American repertoire was rich with examples of British folk songs, including songs that enslaved African Americans in the USA had adapted from British settlers and slaveowners over centuries.

The notion that these songs belonged to people of a particular background, that is British, was and remains incorrect. In reality, many of the “British” folk songs that interested these folklorists had been adopted by people from different countries and sung in a multitude of languages for hundreds of years. Their continued existence in America among European immigrants as well as American descendants from enslaved Africans was simply a continuation of this history of cultural exchange.

Since the initial interest in British folk songs in America began, there has been much discussion on how and why African American and African Caribbean singers adopted these songs as their own. Although it is impossible to fully answer these questions, we need to consider this in relation to the slave trade and its devastating impact on African people and their culture as they were forcefully brought across the Atlantic.

African American and Caribbean music making draws on a mixture of influences from African and European traditions. When considering the influence of ‘African music’ it is important to emphasise that African music should not be viewed as a single style; enslaved people in the Americas were drawn from many West and Central African cultures, with varying musical traditions.¹ This meant that as enslaved people arrived in America, they not only had to assimilate to European traditions but also to separate African traditions, ‘forging a common African sensibility from separate African practices’.²

The African American composer and musicologist Olly Wilson has argued that the fusion of European and African music traditions that came together in African American music practices was in part possible due to several shared characteristics between the music of West Africa, known to enslaved people in America, and the

¹ Kofi Agawu, ‘The Invention of “African Rhythm”’, *The Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 48.3 (1995), 380-395 (384).

² Ingrid T. Monson, ‘Forces Migration, Asymmetrical Power Relations and African-American Music: Reformulation of Cultural Meaning and Musical Form’, *The World of Music*, 32.3 (1990) 22-47 (23-24).

folk music of European settlers.³ Although we might think about African and European music, including British folk songs, as being very different, there are many similarities to how humans across the globe use and learn music. Shared characteristics of music making includes learning by ear, unaccompanied singing and the connection between music, dance, and storytelling. These were all characteristics that made cultural exchange in America possible.

As English began to replace the native languages of enslaved Africans in America, these ballads also became part of their music traditions, regardless of their origin in Europe. We can assume the often-tragic lyrics of these ballads also became a source of solace for enslaved people living very hard and difficult lives. The American abolitionist, politician and former slave Frederick Douglass described singing as a way for slaves to deal with sorrow and hardship:



“The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears.”

(Frederick Douglass, 1845)

Folklorist and famous recorder of African American music traditions, Alan Lomax expands on this idea, stating that enslaved people sang tragic folk ballads to speak to their own suffering without explicitly documenting it due to restrictions on their music making and fear of punishment.⁴ Singing popular ballads in English, but giving them their personal meaning, would have allowed enslaved people the kind of relief mentioned by Douglass without fear of further persecution.

³ Olly Wilson, ‘The Significance of the Relationship between Afro-American Music and West African Music’, *The Black Perspective*, 2.1 (1974), 3-22, (4; 15-17); Cecilia Conway, *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995), p.29.

⁴ Alan Lomax, *The Folk Songs of North America*, (New York, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1960), p. 447.

Although English language folk songs may have been taken up by enslaved people as a way of expressing themselves without risking punishment for performing their native music, these songs also became part of a shared music tradition.

When thinking about folk songs and folk music it is important to remember that for hundreds of years this was simply music that was widely known and sung, including by British slaveowners and settlers in America. It was the popular music of its day rather than the specific genre we know today. Folk songs adopted by enslaved Africans in America were not only tragic but as any music there were all kinds of moods and styles represented. Even songs that may seem tragic, like *Hangman Slack on the Line* in this resource, was also performed as a playful children's game, both in America and in Britain.

The three songs and the story included in this resource all have strong traditions in African American and African Caribbean folk music. *Lord Lovel* and *Hangman Slack on the Line* are long narrative ballads that have been sung in Britain as well as in many different versions across Europe. *The Good Old Way* is an African American spiritual and represents a genre of religious singing that grew out of African American communities in the USA. The structure of some of these spirituals has similarities to old ballads such as *Hangman Slack on the Line* and they have in turn inspired songs in other areas, for example as sea shanties (see our resource, *Black Sailors and Sea Shanties*). The final song and story in the resource demonstrates how people adapt stories to different formats and cultures. The Jamaican Anancy story tradition came with enslaved people from West Africa and in the story of *Saylan* this African tradition is fused with a British folk ballad which is also known across Europe.

Lord Lovel

Roud number: 48

Lord Lovel is a popular ballad with many different versions sung across Britain. The song was one of the most popular ballads in Southern USA, in the repertoire of both white and black singers.⁵ This version was sung by African American nurse, Mammy Mahaly from North Carolina.⁶



3
 Lord Lo - vel he stood at his cas - tle wall, A comb - in' his milk white
 4
 steed; La - dy Nan - cy Bell came a rid - in' by, To
 7
 wish her fond lov - er good speed, speed, speed, To wish her fond lov - er good speed.

⁵ C. Alphonso Smith, 'Ballads Surviving in the United States', *The Musical Quarterly*, 2.1 (1916), pp. 109-129 (110).

⁶ Dorothy Scarborough, *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925), pp. 55-56.

Lord Lovel

Lord Lovel, he stood at his castle wall,
A-combin' his milk-white steed;
Lady Nancy Bell came a-ridin' by,
To wish her fond lover good speed, speed, speed,
To wish her fond lover good speed.

“Oh, where are you goin', Lord Lovel?” she said.
“Oh, where are you goin'?” said she.
“I'm goin' away for a year an' a day,
Strange countries for to see, see, see,
Strange countries for to see.”

He hadn't been gone but a year an' a day,
Strange countries for to see,
When very strange thoughts came into his head
About his Lady Nancy-cy-cy,
About his Lady Nancy.

He rode an' he rode all a long summer day,
Till he came to London town,
An' there he met a funeral,
An' the people a-mournin' around, round, round,
An' the people a-mournin' around.

“Oh, who is dead?” Lord Lovel he said,
“Oh, who is dead?” said he.
“It's my lord's lady,” an old woman said,
“Some call her the Lady Nancy-cy-cy,
Some call her the Lady Nancy.”

He ordered the bier to be opened wide,
The shroud to be folded down.
An' then he kissed her clay-cold lips,
An' the tears they come trinklin' down, down, down,
An' the tears they come trinklin' down.

Lady Nancy she died as it might be to-day,
Lord Lovel he died tomorrow.
Lady Nancy she dies outen pure, pure grief,
Lord Lovel he died outen sorrow-row-row,
Lord Lovel he died outen sorrow.

Lady Nancy they buried by the tall church spire,
Lord Lovel they buried beside her
And outen her bosem they grew a red rose,
And outen his'n a brier-rier-rier,
And outen his'n a brier.

They grew an' they grew to the tall steeple top,
An' there they could get no higher.
An' there they entwined in a true lover's knot
Which all true lovers admire-rire-rire,
Which all true lovers admire.

Glossary

Steed: a horse.

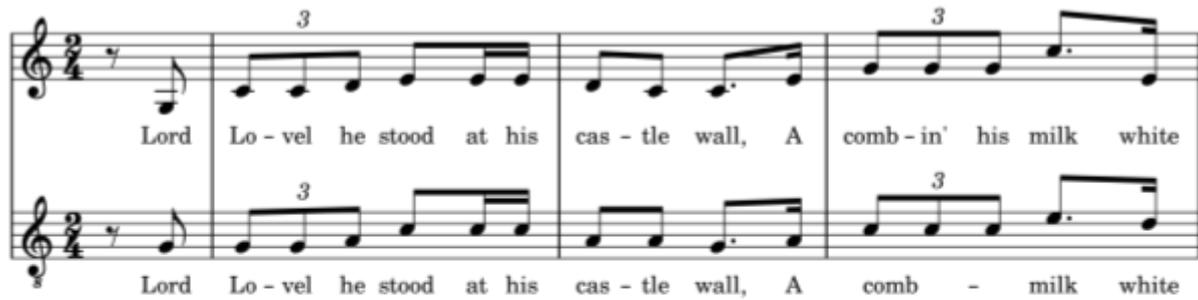
Bier: a stand for a coffin, in this case it refers to the coffin itself.

Steeple: a church tower and spier.

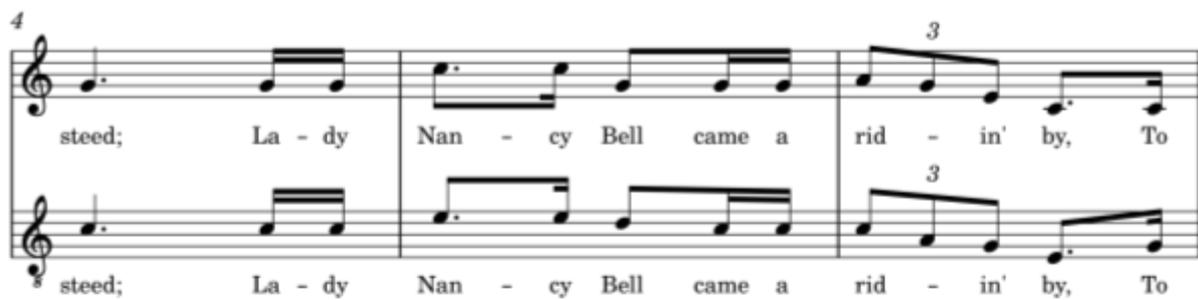
True lover's knot: a knot which combines two knots into one.

Lord Level

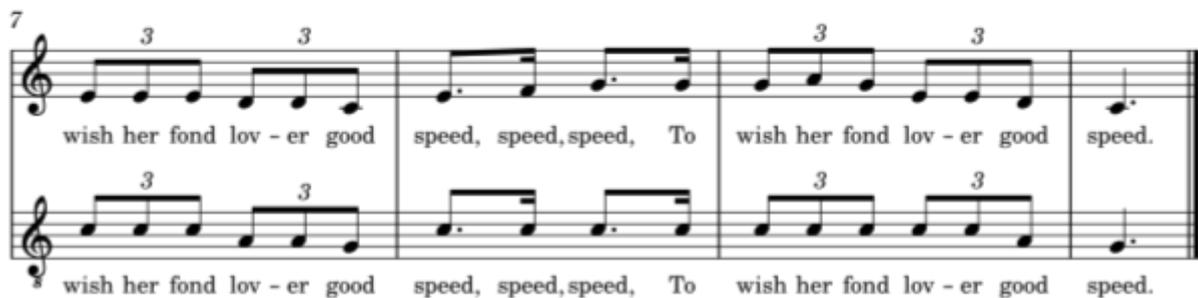
The accompanying recording also feature a basic instrumental accompaniment. The accompaniment simply consists of an arpeggiated C-Major chord. You can easily recreate this by playing the notes C, E and G repeatedly on any instrument; a fun way of adding another dimension to the song!



First system of musical notation (measures 1-3). The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The time signature is 2/4. The melody consists of eighth notes with triplet markings (3) over the first and third measures. The lyrics are: Lord Lo - vel he stood at his cas - tle wall, A comb - in' his milk white.



Second system of musical notation (measures 4-6). The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The time signature is 2/4. The melody continues with eighth notes and triplet markings (3). The lyrics are: steed; La - dy Nan - cy Bell came a rid - in' by, To



Third system of musical notation (measures 7-9). The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The time signature is 2/4. The melody continues with eighth notes and triplet markings (3). The lyrics are: wish her fond lov - er good speed, speed, speed, To wish her fond lov - er good speed.

Discussion

Folk songs are often learnt by ear without support from sheet music or recordings. Therefore, the same song can have many different variants depending on who sung it. The songs often change as people remember them differently or maybe they like specific bits of the song more than others and make changes themselves. *Lord Lovel* is a bit unusual because it tends to be rather similar everywhere it was sung, and you can find the same melody used in the USA as in the UK. We don't know why some versions of songs remain so similar.

Imagine a time where there were no recordings of music, no internet, TV, or radio, and not even any sheet music or written down lyrics.

- How do you learn a song and how do you remember it?
- What do you think could make a song change or remain the same over the years?
- Is there anything that you can think of that would make it easier to remember a long song such as *Lord Lovel*?

Activity

Long narrative folk songs like *Lord Lovel* are often know as ballads. They can have many verses, sometimes several hundred! The story the ballad tells is often more important than the melody and they are as much a kind of storytelling as a song. We are going to look at the story in *Lord Lovel* and see what we can do with it.

- What is the synopsis of Mammy Mahaly's version of *Lord Lovel*? Write a bullet point list of the key plot points.
- Read the text again and think about from whose perspective is the story told? What is the active voice - is it one of the characters, a narrator, or a mixture?

Now, try rewriting some of the verses to be from the perspective of another character in the song. You might need to adapt the story to do this and you can even add verses or change the ending if you want to. For example, from whose perspective is this verse?

Lord Lovel and I stood at castle wall,
He combed my milk white mane.
Nancy and Clover came walking by
Nancy and Lovel they spoke and spoke,
Nancy and Lovel they spoke

Hangman Slack on the Line

Roud number: 144

Hangman Slack on the Line or The Prickly Bush, as it is often known in Britain, is another ballad that was popular among African American singers. This is a very old song that has been sung across Europe and in different languages. This version was sung and acted out by African American children at school in Florida at the end of the 19th century.⁷

Hang - man, hang - man, slack on the line, Slack on the line a little while, I

5
think I see my fath - er com - ing with mon - ey to pay my fine.

⁷ Scarborough, pp. 39-41.

Hangman Slack on the Line

Hangman, hangman, slack on the line,
Slack on the line a little while.
I think I see my *father** coming
With money to pay my fine.

Oh, *father**, *father**, did you bring me money,
Money to pay my fine?
Or did you come here to see me die
On this hangman's line?"

No, I didn't bring you any money,
Money to pay your fine,
But I just came here to see you die
Upon this hangman's line.

*In subsequent repetitions of the verses *father* is replaced with
mother, brother, sister etcetera until we get to the *true love*:

Hangman, hangman, slack on the line,
Slack on the line a little while.
I think I see my *true love* coming
With money to pay my fine.

Oh, *true love, true love*, did you bring me any money,
Money to pay my fine?
Or did you just come here to see me die
Upon this hangman's line?

True love, I got gold and silver,
Money to pay your fine.
How could I bear to see you die
Upon this hangman's line?

Hangman Slack on the Line

You can listen to Germa Adan singing this three-part harmony on the accompanying recordings. Try to learn a part by ear first before looking at the sheet music.



Hang - man, hang - man, slack on the line, Slack on the line a little while, I
 Hang - man, hang - man, slack on the line, Slack on the line a little while, I
 Hang - man, hang - man, slack on the line, slack on the line a little while, I

5



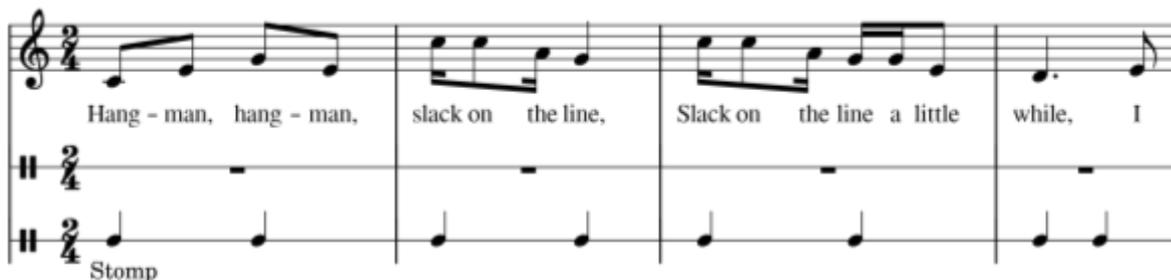
think I see my fath - er com - ing with mon - ey to pay my fine.
 think I see my fath - er com - ing with mon - ey to pay my fine.
 think I see my fath - er com - ing with mon - ey to pay my fine.

Hangman Slack on the Line

A fun way of adding accompaniment to a song is to use body percussion using foot stomps and hand claps. Follow the instructions below, listen to the recording and watch the video.

Body Percussion

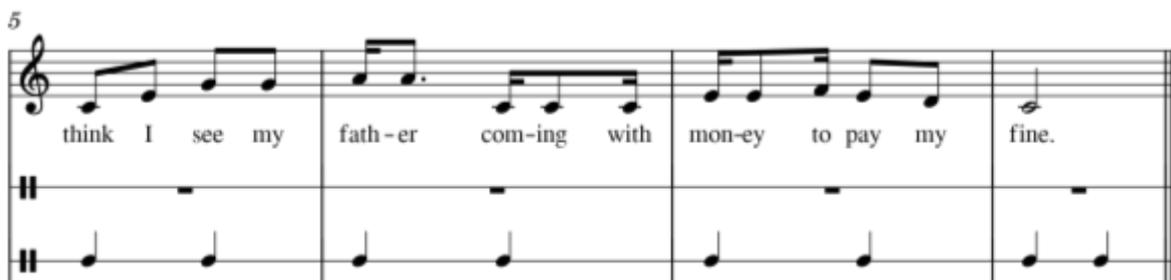
Try stamping out the beat of the song as shown below:



Hang - man, hang - man, slack on the line, Slack on the line a little while, I

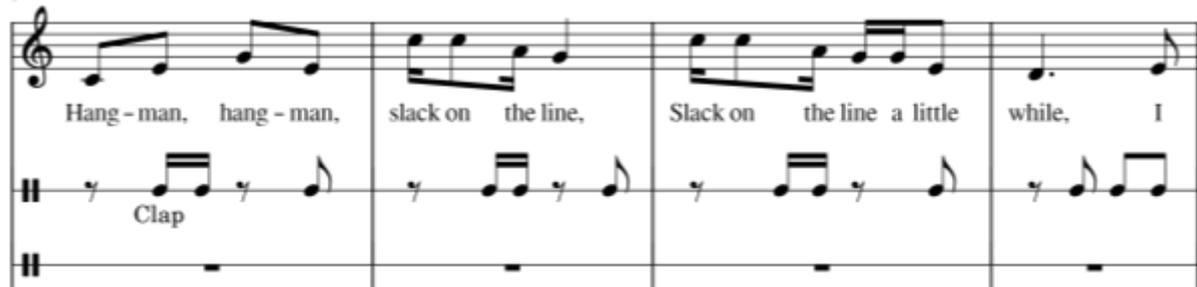
Stomp

5



think I see my fath-er com-ing with mon-ey to pay my fine.

Now try the following off-beat rhythm using hand claps:



Hang - man, hang - man, slack on the line, Slack on the line a little while, I

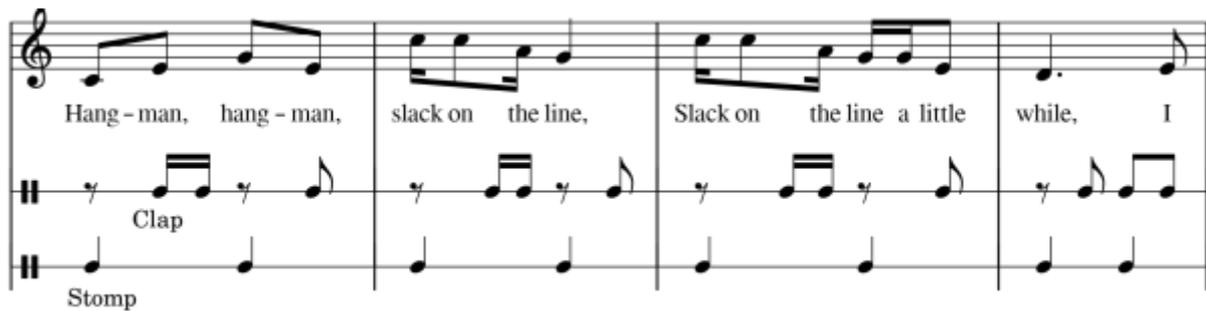
Clap

13



think I see my fath-er com-ing with mon-ey to pay my fine.

Once you are comfortable with both the stamps and claps, split the group in two, with half stamping and half clapping while all singing the verse:



Hang - man, hang - man, slack on the line, Slack on the line a little while, I

Clap

Stomp

21



think I see my fath-er com-ing with mon-ey to pay my fine.

Activity

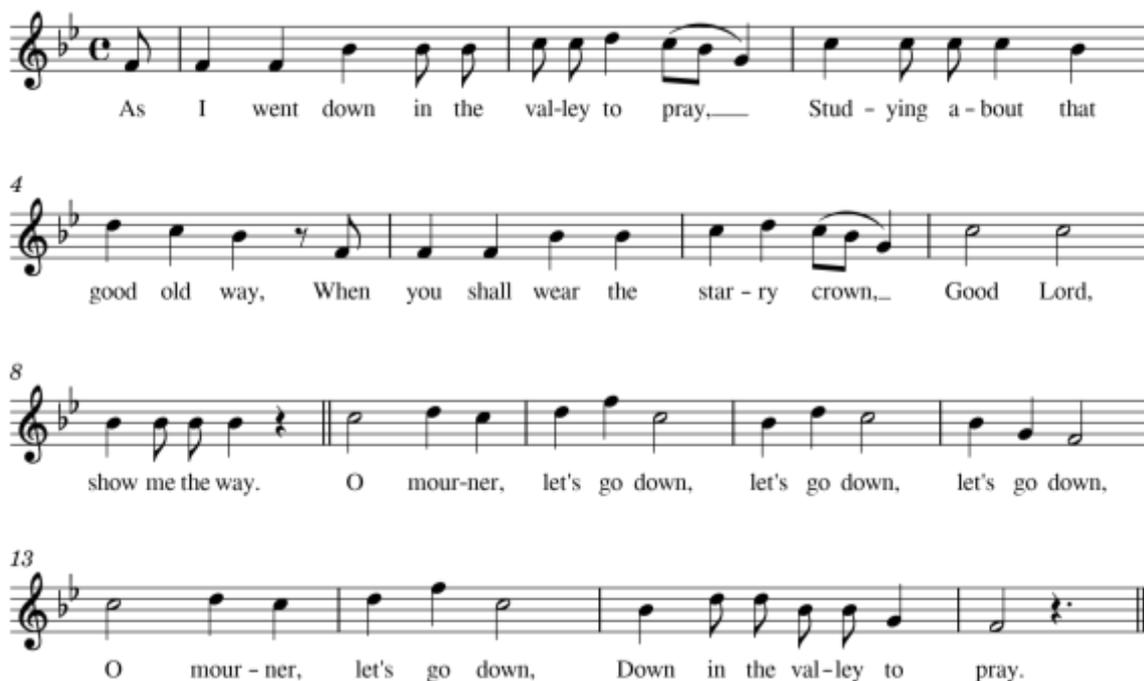
As well as being a song, *Hangman Slack on the Line* was often dramatized with different people taking turns singing verses and enacting the story.

- Using the narrative of the song as inspiration, create a short drama where you build up the story through several verses.
- To add variation to your dramatization you can use the body percussion and the harmonies provided above.

The Good Old Way

Roud number: 12041

The Good Old Way is an African American hymn or spiritual which uses a song structure similar to Hangman Slack on the Line, where only a few of the lyrics are changed in each verse. This version of The Good Old Way was published in 1867.⁸ The Good Old Way, or As I Went Down in the Valley to Pray, was featured in the film Oh Brother Where Art Thou, which contributed to a wave of interest in music from southern USA in the early 2000s.



As I went down in the val-ley to pray,— Stud - ying a - bout that

4
good old way, When you shall wear the star - ry crown, Good Lord,

8
show me the way. O mour-ner, let's go down, let's go down, let's go down,

13
O mour - ner, let's go down, Down in the val-ley to pray.

⁸ William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware and Lucy McKim Garrison, *Slave Songs of the United States*, (New York: A. Simpson & co, 1867), p. 84.

The Good Old Way

As I went down in the valley to pray,
Studying about that good old way,
When you shall wear the stary crown,
Good Lord show me the way.

*O Mourner**, let's go down,
Let's go down, let's go down,
*O mourner** let's go down,
Down in the valley to pray

*In subsequent repetitions of the verses *father* is replaced with *mother, brother, sister* etcetera

The Good Old Way



As I went down in the val-ley to pray,— Stud - ying a - bout that

As I went down in the val-ley to pray, Stud - ying a - bout that

As I went down in the val-ley to pray, Stud - ying a - bout that

4
 good old way, When you shall wear the star - ry crown,— Good Lord,

good old way, When you shall wear the star - ry crown, Good Lord,

good old way, When you shall wear the star - ry crown, Good Lord,

8
 show me the way. O mour-ner, let's go down, let's go down, let's go down,

Show me the way. O mour-ner, let's go down, let's go down, let's go down,

Show me the way. O mour-ner let's go down, let's go down, let's go down,

13
 O mour - ner, let's go down, Down in the val-ley to pray.

O mour - ner, let's go down, Down in the val-ley to pray.

O mour - ner, let's go down, Down in the val-ley to pray.

Discussion and Activity

In *The Good Old Way*, the verse remains the same on each repetition, with the only change being the person to whom the chorus is addressed- mourner in the first chorus, sister in the second, and additional family members in subsequent verses, in a very similar manner to *Hangman Slack on the Line*.

This kind of song structure is not uncommon in African American hymns, and some have argued that this is one reason why ballads such as *Hangman Slack on the Line* were particularly popular among African American singers in the USA.⁹ This may or may not be true as there can be many different reasons as to why a song becomes popular.

- What are the benefits of this song structure?
- This is a religious congregational song, could you think of other contexts where this kind of song structure could be useful?

In our online resource [A Sailor's Life](#) there is another example of a song (*A Drop of Nelson's Blood*) with connections to African American spirituals, where the same song structure is used as a sea shanty.

Listen and Watch

- If possible, watch the film *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou* or listen to the soundtrack where country singer Alison Krauss sings *The Good Old Way*.
- There are many recordings of *The Good Old Way* that you can find online. Try to listen to the version recorded by the African American quartet Big Delta Four, *Moaner, Let's Go Down in the Valley*.

⁹ Smith, 118.

Jamaican Anancy Stories and ‘Saylan’

Folk ballads such as *Lord Lovel* and *Hangman Slack on the Line*, are not only songs but a form of storytelling. The themes and events in folk ballads often relate to hardship and difficulties that people all over the world can relate to and many ballads sung in Britain have versions across Europe. Storytelling exists in every culture across the world and when different storytelling traditions meet new ways of telling stories can emerge. This happened among enslaved people in Jamaica when West African tellers of Anancy (or Anansi) stories had contact with European folk ballads.

Anancy stories are a form of folk story found in the Caribbean influenced by both African and European traditions.¹⁰ The stories generally focus on the Anancy character - a trickster spider with human characteristics, although in some (including the example explored here) the character is not explicitly referenced.¹¹ Anancy stories, with their focus on trickery and surviving perilous situations, served as a tool for teaching children survival skills and have been described as offering ‘hope and relief to a disempowered population’.¹² Many of the stories take the form of a *Cante Fable* where the story is told through a mixture of spoken prose and sung verse and it is through these sung verses that we can see fragments of well-known folk songs.

An example of an Anancy story which incorporates a folk ballad is *Saylan*¹³ which features verses from *Hangman Slack on the Line*.¹⁴ In this Jamaican version of the story the main character is a young woman, Saylan, who is falsely accused of killing a horse.

Saylan is written in Jamaican Patois, a language which is similar to English but has its own grammar and vocabulary. The story can be understood with careful reading and listening; however, a glossary has been provided for some of the less obvious words and phrases.

¹⁰ Alice Werner, ‘Introduction’, in Walter Jekyll, *Jamaican Song and Story*, (London: David Nutt, 1907), pp. ix-xi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

¹² Virgil Henry Storr, ‘How Britain Underdeveloped the West Indies (with apologies to Walter Rodney)’, *The CLR James Journal*, 16.1 (2010), 168-188 (180).

¹³ Jekyll, pp.58-59.

¹⁴ Lucy E. Broadwood, ‘English Airs and Motifs in Jamaica’, in Jekyll, p. 287.

Saylan

There was a man have two daughter. One of the daughter belongs to the wife an' one belongs to the man. An' the wife no love for the man daughter, so they drive her away.

An' she get a sitivation at ten shillings a week, an' the work is to look after two horses an' to cut dry grass for them.

An' every night she put two bundles of dry grass in the 'table.

An' the mother was very grudgeful of the sitivation that she got.

An' one night she carry her own daughter to the pastur' an' they cut two bundles of green grass. An' they go secretly to the horse manger an' take out the dry grass an' put the green grass in its place.

So the horse eat it, an' in the morning they dead.

An' the master of that horse is a sailor.

The sailor took the gal who caring the horse to hang her.

An' when he get to the 'pot a place to hang her he take this song:—



Mourn, Saylan, mourn oh!

Mourn, Saylan, mourn;

I come to town to see you hang,

hang, you mus' be hang.

An' the gal cry to her sister an' brother an' lover, an' they give her answer



Sis - ter, you bring me some sil - ver? No, my child, I bring you none.

5
Bro - ther you bring me some gold? No, my child, I bring you none.

9
Lov - er, you bring me some sil - ver? Yes, my dear, I bring you some.

13
Lo - ver, you bring me some gold? Yes, my dear, I bring you some. I

17
come to town to see you save, save, you mus' be saved.

Sister, you bring me some silver?
No, my child, I bring you none.
Brother, you bring me some gold?
No, my child, I bring you none.
Lover, you bring me some silver?
Yes, my dear, I bring you some.
Lover, you bring me some gold?
Yes, my dear, I bring you some.
I come to town to see you save,
save you mus' be saved.

An' the lover bring a buggy an' carry her off an' save her life at last.

An' the mumma say:—"You never better, tuffa."

Jack Mantora me no choose any.

Glossary

Sitivation: Situation, i.e. position of employment

You never better: You will never be good for anything

Tuffa: Sign of contempt or disgust - meant as an imitation of spitting

Green grass: Too much wet green grass can be harmful for a horse.

Gal: Girl

Pastur': Pasture, a meadow where grass grows.

Buggy: a small horse drawn cart

Jack Mantora me no choose any: A nonsense phrase meaning that the storyteller takes no responsibility for the story told

Discussion

- What happens in the *Saylan* story? Write a bullet pointed plot summary.
- What roles do the sung verses play?
- What are the similarities and differences between the *Saylan* cante-fable and *Hangman Slack on the Line*?

Activity

Using either *Lord Lovel*, *Hangman Slack on the Line* or *The Good Old Way* as a basis, create a cante-fable using a mixture of prose and sung verse.

- Select a verse or two from one of the above songs as a starting point.
- Make up a story to go either before, after, or either side of the verse.

This story can be a direct retelling of the narrative of the song, or it can be a completely new story inspired by a verse of the song.

Voices from the Past

The songs in this resource were collected from black singers who had either been born slaves themselves or whose parents and grandparents had been enslaved. Although slavery was abolished in the USA and in Britain's Caribbean colonies during the 19th century, there was still a huge divide between black and white populations remaining into the 20th century. It is impossible to neglect the impact of racism on the documentation of songs among black communities in the era when the songs presented in this resource were recorded. The mostly white collectors of folk songs who visited these singers rarely had any interest in the singers themselves. Only one of the songs presented here, *Lord Lovel*, has the name of the singer preserved and, in that case, it is not her full name. Although we do not know much about the lives of these singers, this resource demonstrates that the songs we nowadays think about as part of a largely white rural British heritage were also very much part of a black tradition across the Atlantic.

The period when the songs in this resource were widely sung in Britain also overlaps with the era of the transatlantic slave trade. This section of the resource will give you some context on different views about music making among enslaved Africans in the Americas. This music both fascinated and worried slave owners and in some cases music making was banned, or only European music allowed. The following accounts from both former slaves and the slave owners ranging from the 17th to the 20th century gives valuable first-hand insights into African music making during the era of slavery. Each quote is presented on a separate page so that you can read them separately or divide them up in a group to stimulate discussion. Below are a few questions to get you started:

- What do these quotes tell us about the role of music among enslaved Africans in America?
- Do they tell us anything about the type of music performed?
- Are there any clear differences between the accounts of former slaves?

These people lived during different historical eras although the slavery they refer to was ongoing from the 16th to the 19th century. We can learn a lot about this period through the lives of people who had personal experience of slavery.

- Find out a bit more about the life of Olaudah Equiano, Harriet Jacobs or Frederick Douglass. You will be able to find articles about all of them online (for example on Wikipedia) or in an encyclopaedia at your local library.

Slave owner

Richard Ligon

Richard Ligon (c. 1585-1662) was an English writer who owned a sugar plantation and slaves in Barbados in the 17th century. There are no pictures of Richard Ligon but he wrote a book about the history of the islands where he also mentions music making among slaves:

*In the afternoons on Sundayes, they have their Musick, which is of kettle drums, and those of several sizes; upon the smallest the best Musitian playes; and the other come in as Chorasses: The drum all men know, has but one tone; and therefore variety of tunes have little to do in this musick; and yet so strangely they varie their time, as 'tis a pleasure to the most curious ears, and it was to me one of the strangest noises that ever I heard made of one tone.*¹⁵

Richard Ligon used an older style of spelling but most words will become clear if read out aloud. Here are some of the less obvious words and terms you might not recognise:

Musitian: Musician.

Chorasses: Chorus.

Kettle drum: a drum with a skin on one side only and closed at the bottom.

“Varie their time”: play different rhythms .

¹⁵ Christopher D.S. Field, 'Musical Observations from Barbados, 1647-50', *The Musical Times*, 115.1577 (1974), 565-567.

Former slave

Olaudah Equiano

Olaudah Equiano (c. 1745-1797), also known as Gustavus Vassa, was a man from the Eboe region (present day Nigeria) who was sold into slavery in the Caribbean. He was later able to buy his freedom and became a trader, writer, and abolitionist. Here he describes the place of the arts in Eboe culture:

*We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets. Thus every great event, such as a triumphant return from battle, or other cause of public rejoicing is celebrated in public dances, which are accompanied with songs and music suited to the occasion.*¹⁶



¹⁶ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano*, [ninth edition] (London: O Equiano, 1794), p. 7.

Slave owner

Sir Hans Sloane

Hans Sloane (1660-1753) was an Anglo-Irish medical doctor, scientist, and plantation owner whose collections of items from around the world became the foundation of the British Museum. His diaries contain gruesome accounts of how slaves were treated on plantations and in this quote he describes restrictions to music making of enslaved people on Jamaica:

They formerly on their Festivals were allowed the use of Trumpets after their Fashion, and Drums [...]. But making use of these in their Wars at home in Africa, it was thought too much inciting them to Rebellion, and so they were prohibited by the Customs of the Island.¹⁷



¹⁷ Hans Sloane, *A Voyage Vol I*, (London: BM, 1707), p. lii.

Former slave

Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass (c. 1818-1895) was an African American born into slavery in Maryland. Douglas escaped slavery in 1838 and became a key abolitionist. He was an important campaigner and politician who wrote much about the horrors of slavery. Below is one of his descriptions of music making among slaves. Some words have changed meaning since the 19th century, and “pathetic” meant sad or sorrowful.

*The slaves [...] would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out – if not in the word, in the sound [...]. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone.*¹⁸



¹⁸ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, (Boston: The Anti-Slavery Office, 1845) p. 13.

Folklorist

Dorothy Scarborough

Dorothy Scarborough (1878-1935) was an American folklorist. She was born after the abolishment of slavery but was the granddaughter of plantation owners and spent much of her life around former slaves. The following comments from her book about African American folk songs describe her childhood in the late 1800s:

I can project myself into the past and hear the wailful songs at [African American] funerals, the shouting songs at baptizings in the creek or river, old break-downs at parties, lullabies crooned as mammies rocked black or white babies to sleep, work-songs in cotton-field or on the railroad or street-grading jobs. All sounds of human activity among [African Americans] used to be accompanied with song.¹⁹



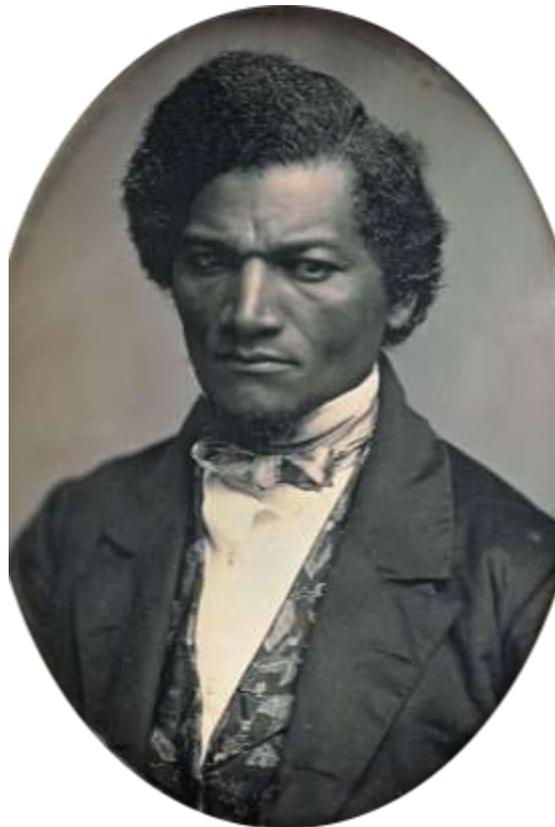
¹⁹ Scarborough, pp. 9-10.

Former slave

Frederick Douglass (2)

White writers and slave owners often described music and song as a proof that slaves were happy. This second quote from abolitionist campaigner, politician and former slave Frederick Douglass (c. 1818-1895), shows that this was not the case:

I have often been utterly astonished [...] to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears.²⁰



²⁰ Douglass, pp. 14-15.

Former slave

Harriet Jacobs

Harriet Jacobs (c. 1815-1897) was an African American woman born into slavery in North Carolina. Jacobs escaped and became an important voice in the abolitionist movement. In this quote she describes how people misunderstood the emotions of slaves singing African American spirituals in a church service:

If you were to hear them at such times, you might think they were happy. But can that hour of singing and shouting sustain them through the dreary week, toiling without wages under constant dread of the lash?²¹

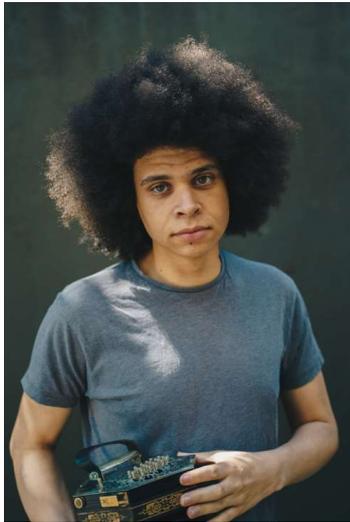


²¹ Linda Brent [Harriet Jacobs], *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, (Boston: Harriet Jacobs, 1861), p. 109.

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(Photo: Will Killen)



Germa Adan is a Birmingham-based singer, musician, composer, and educator. As a music educator, Germa leads and supports music in schools and community groups, with a specialist interest in folk music from around the world and the exploration of music from one's doorstep. She writes and performs folk music influenced by her Haitian heritage and American and British folk influences. In addition to affiliation with the English Folk Dance and Song Society, Germa has performed with organisations such as the Nest Collective, Moseley Folk Festival, Sidmouth Folkweek, at Cecil Sharp House and various venues around the country.

(Photo: Stephen Kopec)



Alison Solomon is a multi-commissioned storyteller, poet, performance poet, and Jamaican and British folklorist. She is also a multi-commissioned creative artist, artist documenter and educator working in the museum, heritage and learning sectors. She is well known for her work in professional theatre and film, casting top professional actors, theatre-makers, and writers so that they can tell their own stories and the stories of other creative people too.

(Photo: courtesy Alison Solomon)

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