

Reading Folk Songs – American Culture through Ethnomusicology
AMS/HST 335, Spring 2009, Professor Lavender

Musicologists study the history of musical expression, tracing editions and versions of songs and compositions over time. Ethnomusicologists do this for the equivalent of the oral traditions of music – folk songs and story-songs which are passed from singer to singer without necessarily ever being written down. Folk songs are an important source for oral traditions in part because their language is encoded through repetition and the rhythmic structures of song; because the verses are supposed to have a common metre and retain a rhyming structure, the exact terminology used in folk songs survives better than in other forms of oral traditions. At the same time, because they are less commonly written down, folk songs lend themselves to adaptation and change as the needs of the song's singers and audiences change. We will be examining the ways in which the recorded changes in a single folk song – in this case, "Tom Dooley" – illustrates these patterns of adaptation to meet cultural needs over time. We will be listening to multiple versions of the song throughout the twentieth century in order to look at the ways in which this one folk song sheds light on American culture over time.

When looking at a folk song, it is useful to remember that a song is made up of several layers of information. These include: the source material from which the song is made; the lyrics (words) of the song; the melody of the song; the performance of the song; the routes of dissemination of the song; and the reception of the song by its audience. In the case of "Tom Dooley," the source material is the 1866 murder of Laura Foster in Wilkes County, North Carolina, by a man named Tom Dula (pronounced "Dooley"). The lyrics for the song have changed over time and from singer to singer, but the common starting point for the lyrics is the musicologist Alan Lomax's 1947 transcription based on Frank Warner's field recordings of Frank Proffitt from the late 1930s, which appears at the bottom of this handout. We will be listening to and discussing the following versions of the song:

Grayson and Whittier, "Tom Dooley," Victor, 1929.

Frank Proffitt, "Tom Dooley," field recording by Frank Warner, 1940.

The New Lost City Ramblers, "Tom Dooley," 1954.

The Kingston Trio, "Tom Dooley," Capitol, 1958.

Frank Proffitt, "Tom Dooley," field recording by Frank Warner, 1959.

Curtis Hobock & The Stardusters, "Tom Dooley," radio broadcast, Dixieland Jamboree, Corinth, Mississippi, 1959.

Doc Watson, "Tom Dooley," Vanguard Records, 1964.

The Sundowners, "Tom Dooley," Bloodshot Records, 1967.

Steve Earle, "Tom Dooley," Bloodshot Records, 2002.

In looking at these songs, we will attempt to answer the following questions:

- 1) How did the performance of the song change over time? Why did these changes take place?
- 2) What did these changes indicate about audience reception and routes of dissemination of the song over time?
- 3) What did each version say about American culture in the time that produced/consumed it?

These are the lyrics for “Tom Dula” as they appear in Alan Lomax’s *Folk Song: U.S.A.* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1947) and reprinted in *Folk Songs of North America* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960).

Hand me down my banjo,
I’ll pick hit on my knee
This time tomorrow night
It’ll be no use to me

Chorus:

Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Hang down your head and cry
Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Poor boy you’re bound to die.

Met her on the mountain
I swore she’d be my wife
I met her on the mountain
And I stabbed her with my knife
(chorus)

This time tomorrow
Reckon where I’ll be
Down in some lonesome valley
A’hangin’ on a white-oak tree.

I had my trial at Wilksboro’
And what d’you reckon they done?

They bound me over to Statesville
And that’s where I’ll be hung
(chorus)

The limb a’bein’ oak, boys
The rope a’bein’ strong
Bow down your head, Tom Dooley,
You know you’re gonna be hung.

Mammy, oh Mammy,
Don’t you weep or cry
I’ve killed poor Laurie Foster
And you know I’m bound to die
(chorus)

Pappy, oh Pappy,
What shall I do?
I lost all my money
And killed poor Laurie too.

Oh what my Mammy told me
Is about to come to pass
Red whiskey and pretty women
Would be my ruin at last
(chorus)

These are the lyrics for the Kingston Trio’s version of the song recorded in 1958:

[Intro:]
Throughout history, there’ve been many songs written
about the eternal triangle. This next one tells the
story of a Mr. Grayson, a beautiful woman, and a
condemned man named Tom Dooley... When the sun
rises tomorrow, Tom Dooley must hang...

Chorus: Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Hang down your head and cry
Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Poor boy, you’re bound to die

I met her on the mountain
There I took her life
Met her on the mountain
Stabbed her with my knife
Chorus

This time tomorrow

Reckon where I’ll be
Hadn’t a-been for Grayson
I’d a-been in Tennessee
Chorus
Chorus

This time tomorrow
Reckon where I’ll be
Down in some lonesome valley
Hangin’ from a white oak tree
Chorus
Chorus

Poor boy, you’re bound to die
Poor boy you’re bound to die
Poor boy, you’re bound to die...

Doc Watson, "Tom Dooley," Vanguard Records, 1964.

Chorus:

Hang your head, Tom Dooley
Hang your head and cry
You killed poor Laurie Foster
And you know you're bound to die.

You left her by the roadside
Where you begged to be excused
You left her by the roadside
Then you hid her clothes and shoes
(chorus)

You took her on the hillside
For to make her your wife
You took her on the hillside
And there you took her life

You dug the grave four feet long
And you dug it three feet deep;
You rolled the cold clay over her
And tromped it with your feet.
(chorus)

"Trouble, oh it's trouble
A-rollin' through my breast;
As long as I'm a-livin', boys,
They ain't a-gonna let me rest.

Steve Earle, "Tom Dooley," Bloodshot Records, 2002.

Chorus:

Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Hang down your head and cry
Hang down your head, Tom Dooley
Poor boy, you're bound to die

I met her on the mountain
I said she'd be my wife
I met her on the mountain
Stabbed her with my knife
Chorus

I took her to the river
As God almighty knows
And there beside the water
I hid her shoes and clothes

I know they're gonna hang me,
Tomorrow I'll be dead,
Though I never even harmed a hair
On poor little Laurie's head."
(chorus)

"In this world and one more
Then reckon where I'll be;
If it wasn't for Sheriff Grayson,
I'd be in Tennessee.

You can take down my old violin
And play it all you please.
For at this time tomorrow, boys,
It'll be of no use to me."
(chorus)

"At this time tomorrow
Where do you reckon I'll be?
Away down yonder in the holler
Hangin' on a white oak tree.
(chorus)

I dug her grave four feet long
I dug it three feet deep;
I threw the cold clay on her
And tramped it with my feet.
Chorus

By this time tomorrow
Reckon where I'll be
Down there in that hollow
Hangin' from a tree
Chorus
Chorus
Chorus
Chorus
Chorus

Source: E. Martin Pedersen*, "Factlore, Fakelore, or Folklore: Sorting Through Folk Song Origins," *Social Studies*, Volume 88, Number 4 (1997): 181-85.

Why exactly did Yankee Doodle stick a feather in his hat and call it macaroni? Is there some symbolic significance in that? And is the beautiful song, "Shenandoah" about a river, a valley, a kidnapping, or an Indian chief? Who was the other woman in "Frankie and Johnny (or Albert)" – Alice Flies, Miss Ruth, Alice Bly, Alice Swan, Nellie Bly, Alice Fry, Katie Fly, Ella Fry, Sara Siles, or Alkali? Does it really matter?

When background information on folk songs is needed, by a teacher, for example, or a performer, or a writer, or whoever it might be, the stories behind many traditional songs can seem to be a conflicting garble of half-truths, contradictions, embellishments, and uncertainties. There is a wealth of material in song collections, record notes, and folk song periodicals, not to mention scholarly folklore journals, aimed at rendering the truth about the origins of folk songs. Even so, the confusion continues.

Little or nothing is known about the origins of many of our best-loved traditional songs: "Banks of the Ohio," "Danville Girl," "Down by the Riverside," "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean," "Old Time Religion," "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," "This Train," and the majority of spirituals and dance tunes. These and many other authentic folk songs will never have a reliable genealogy. Then again, is not spontaneous group authorship, that is, unknown origin, a defining characteristic of a folk song?

Sometimes something as simple as a song's title can cause perplexity. Are you familiar with the ballad "The Gallows Pole"? Perhaps you know it as "The Maid Freed from the Gallows" (Child ballad 95), "The Hangman's Rope," "The Sycamore Tree," "Hangman, Slack Up Your Rope," "The Gallis Pole," "The Hangman's Tree," "Hangman Slack on the Line," or simply, "Hangman." Folksongs were not written down, so the names, as well as the texts and tunes, changed with the mood and memory of the singer. _____

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If we consider the genuine, historical setting of the folk song: sitting on the front porch, around the campfire, or on a ship's deck, it is easy to imagine discussions about where the songs came from and what they meant. The more creative storytellers would invent extravagant origin stories that later made their way into the oral tradition together with the songs. We could call this "folklore pollution," one type of folklore as an explanation for another, yarns interpreting yarns, making the determining search for factual background information nearly impossible. Folklorists call it metafolklore, that is, folklore about folklore. Although we need to recognize this phenomenon, we need not consider it negative.

Often the singers and songwriters themselves have added to the confusion. When the recorder-toting, white researcher asks the black delta bluesman if he really wrote the song that he just sang, the answer is generally, "Of course. I wrote all these songs." In a sense, he's right. Patrick Gilmore, the Irish-American bandleader who wrote "When Johnny Comes Marching Home," claimed that he had heard the melody from a black street singer, but given the Irish tone of the tune, which belongs to the "Captain Kidd" songfamily, virtually everyone considers his claim to be a put-on (Lomax 1960, 84). Informants sometimes fabricate. As Josiah H. Combs noted in *Folk-Songs of the Southern United States*, "Whenever the Highlander writes a song down, whether of his own making or not (and he seldom writes a song down), . . . [s]ometimes he writes at the end, 'Written by So-and-So' (with his [181] name); which is often confusing, but is usually understood to mean that he merely has copied the song" (Combs 1967, 38).

Almost every claim of authorship was made and disputed for reasons of fame and copyright fortunes. This seems to be especially true of the cowboy songs that often came from poems or were rewritten sailor and lumberjack songs. "Home on the Range" was the object of several gigantic copyright lawsuits. Was FDR's favorite western song written by William and Mary Weber, Dr. Brewster Higley and Dan Kelley, or C. O. Swartz, Bill McCabe, Bingham Graves, et al.? (Randolph 1945-50, 210). Probably

Higley wrote the original poem, "The Western Home," about the Kansas prairie in 1873, and Kelley, a neighbor, added the music; but John Lomax, the song's collector, claimed to have a letter proving that it was sung in Texas in 1867 (Lomax 1947 , 252). A still more curious example of conflicting song origins is pointed out by Norm Cohen in *Long Steel Rail*. Two similar songs were written about the same train wreck to the tune of H. C. Work song, "The Ship That Never Returned." Cohen wrote, "It is not unlikely that different persons should write ballads about Old 97, all independently using the same tune--even though such an occurrence would generally be taken to indicate that the different balladists borrowed from one another" (1981, 202).

Folk song scholars have various approaches to their subject matter. Some consider themselves anthropological scientists and base all their conclusions scrupulously on demonstrable facts; others venture educated guesses where no proof exists. Some use other folklore (tales, speech, etc.) to represent the context in which the song is born; still others, intentionally or not, pass on stories about the songs that are themselves folk legends. And, finally, some have, it seems, created new, imitation folk-style explanations (fakelore, a term coined by Richard Dorson in 1950) for the songs. The conflicts in folk song background accounts can be explained, in part, by the progress in the field over the last fifty-plus years (A. Warner in *Traditional American Folk Songs* [1984] often disagrees, naturally, with C. Sandburg in *The American Songbag* [1927]); but in that period, the focus of folk song scholarship has also shifted. As Carl Withers (1948) observed, "The modern folklorist . . . is more concerned with what people do with their folklore than with problems of origin and distribution" (205).

Some of the fascinating stories about the origins of folk song will illustrate the various levels (quantitative and qualitative) of background knowledge.

The facts concerning the incident that inspired the song "Casey Jones" are well known and fairly reliable. John Luther Jones, from Cayce, Kentucky, a daredevil Irish-American engineer, drove the Cannonball Express from Memphis, Tennessee, to Canton, Mississippi, and was killed in a famed wreck on the Illinois Central Line fifteen miles north of Canton, on the night of April 30, 1900. He had taken, it seems, the place of a sick engineer, and with his last words, "Jump Sim!" had saved his fireman, Sim Webb, as he plowed into

a caboose with one hand on the airbrake and the other on his distinctive six-chime whistle. Wallace "Wash" Saunders, a black helper in the Canton roundhouse, cleaned the blood off the engine after Casey Jones's crash. He reworked an older railroad ballad about the death of "Po' Jimmie Jones," the "good old porter." Later, the vaudeville duo of Eddie Newton and T. Lawrence Siebert created the bestknown version from the popular one, and theirs, interestingly, has its own folk variants. The origin is reasonably clear, so the major problem is which version to sing rather than where the song came from.

We also know the basic story behind what has been called the first indigenous American ballad, "Springfield Mountain," but the details are quite confused. On August 7, 1761, a Timothy Myrick or Timothy Mirrick or Timothy Merrick or Thomas Merrick or Thomas Merrill, aged 22, of Springfield Mountain, Massachusetts, now called Wilbraham, or Springfield, Massachusetts, died from a rattlesnake bite sustained in Farmington, Massachusetts or Connecticut. He was about to marry a Sally or Molly Curtis or Sarah Blake. The original New England folk song, identified as the creation of Nathan Torrey or Daniel or Jesse Carpenter, was an earnest, somber lamentation for the deceased. It was revived in a silly parody in the 1830s, making fun of the priggish Yankee farmer to the delight of the newly arrived Irish Catholics who gathered in the Boston music halls (Scott, 1966 , 44). With this over-choice of data, how does one put together a convincing story of the song's origin?

Every word of the song "Yankee Doodle" may not be clear (macaroni? tarnal? pockily? deuced? swamping gun? a nation louder?), but the story behind the song is a historically revealing one. Since the days of Oliver Cromwell (1650s) verses were made up to the English tune, "Fisher's Jig." During the French and Indian War (1754-63), a version was circulated in the colonies, probably the work of Dr. Richard Shuckburgh, a British army medical officer, that satirized the poor, untrained Yankee militia. It expressed the friction growing between England and its American

colonies and was a favorite of the patronizing British during the period preceding the Revolution. After the Battle of Bunker Hill, the former insult was sung with pride by the Americans, expressing their new, united spirit. The lively tune was played by the victorious troops at Cornwallis's surrender at Yorktown, and earlier, during the fighting, the Americans struck up the tune as they marched the British soldiers off to prison. "They even enticed away the British band," says Marjorie Barstow Greenbie, "hired it themselves, and had it playing the obnoxious song" (Downes and Siegmeister 1943 , 67).

Many songs have double meanings. According to song-collector Irwin Silber, the Civil War anthem and marching song, "John Brown's Body," was originally written about another John Brown altogether – a sergeant in the Massachusetts Volunteer Militia (Silber 1960 , 11). [182]

Soldiers in his company made up the song to the tune of a revival hymn; getting a kick out of the confusion with the famous martyr who was hanged the year before. The song spread quickly throughout the North and, obviously, was sung in reference to the fiery abolitionist who had daringly charged the Harper's Ferry arsenal only to be captured by Col. Robert E. Lee. The incongruity, then, assuming Silber is right, becomes a diverting curiosity, but that does not alter the significance of the song.

Even when the facts of a song's history are known, they are often conflicting and confusing to the amateur researcher. To form a clear, coherent origin story sometimes one must choose which facts to believe and repeat, thereby distorting the truth a bit and adding a touch of personal selection--which is the folk process.

When the facts are less than clear, we enter fully into the realm of folklore or metafolklore. D. K. Wilgus (1959) in *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898* explained,

The more widespread and popular the ballad and the more it resembles older balladry (as "Frankie and Albert" and "John Henry"), the more difficult the problems. Despite much investigation and many reports, the historicity of "Frankie and Albert" is almost as conjectural as that of "Lord Randall." The problem of "John Henry" involved merged ballads, lack of documentary

evidence, and widespread but conflicting popular reports. (287)

The timeless tale of a love-triangle murder, "Frankie and Johnny," (formerly "Frankie and Albert," possibly from "Frankie Silver") can give even the best song detectives their money's worth. Some believe it is based on the murder of Charles Silver by his wife Frankie in December 1831, at Deyton Bend on the Toe River in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina. (She was convicted and hanged at Morgantown, N.C., in July 1833.) On the other hand, the song could refer to the murder of Allen Britt by Frankie Baker in St. Louis in 1899, as she later insisted, or it could refer to the story of Mammy Blue, a blues singer at Babe Connor's bawdy house in St. Louis, probably in the early 1890s. Thomas Beer says that the song was known on the Mississippi river in the 1850s and chanted by Federal troops besieging Vicksburg in 1863. A copy was made by a young officer and preserved, but the famous "Beers manuscript" has never been produced. Randolph mentioned others who put forth different facts about the song, such as Natchez, 1840 s (Hough); 1908 (Henry); known on the Mississippi and railroads from 1888 (Sandburg); pre-Civil War, St. Louis (Williams); definitely pre1899 (Milburn); positive origin--Little Rock, Arkansas (Bradford) (Randolph 1946-50 , 124). Lomax dated the song in probably the only reasonable way--1849 to 1890--and understated that "the facts of Frankie's case are somewhat obscure" (Lomax 1947 , 367). It is useless to expect to get a really succulent song origin story from this jumble, but it could also be superfluous because the story in the song text itself is such a gem.

"John Henry" is our most frequently recorded folk song and perhaps our best-loved folk hero. It is also a perfect example of the fusion of fact and folklore. John Henry, as things now stand, is the mythic hero of a folk legend. Almost certainly there was a real steel driver named John Henry; probably he worked on the Big Bend Tunnel in West Virginia; and possibly he was killed there around 1870, conceivably after a contest with a steam drill. Louis W. Chappell , in *John Henry, A FolkLore Study* (1968), and Guy

B. Johnson , in *John Henry: Tracking Down a Negro Legend* (1929), did an admirable job of trying to separate out the facts of John Henry's story, but it could be that their statements are only the less fantastic, more probable elements of the folktales. Maybe John Henry did swing two twenty-pound hammers in a nineteen-foot arc, but the scientific provability or disprovability of the particulars of the story (really many stories) seems out of place when dealing with a legend. The folk story of John Henry represents the tragic conflict of man versus machine and shows the dignity and courage of the working man. Therein lies the strength of the tale and song of John Henry.

Another song from a real event that soon became legendary is "Tom Dula" (changed to Dooley for easier singing). To point out the nature of these song explanations, here are three variant accounts in paraphrase: The first is by the Great Smokey Mountain singer and musician (and storyteller) Doc Watson, whose grandparents and great-grandparents knew the Dula family and lived nearby at the time of the murder and trial. The other comes from John and Alan Lomax, premier folksong experts, who recognize the frequent inseparability of fact and lore. A third story, more balanced and reliable, is a note in the recent Sing Out! magazine songbook, *Rise Up Singing*, edited by Peter Blood-Patterson.

Watson's Version

Tom Dooley lied about his age to get into the Confederate army and was a hero in the Civil War. He courted both Laura Foster and Annie Melton, as did Mr. Grayson, the sheriff. The general opinion was that Annie Melton stabbed Laura Foster in the ribs and hit her on the head. Tom Dooley buried her, and when he was seen with Melton at Foster's funeral, both were suspected. Miss Melton, in jail, bragged that her neck [183] was too pretty to put a rope around. Sheriff Grayson later married Annie Melton, who, on her deathbed, confessed to the murder and to letting Dooley hang. Grayson was so upset that he took his family and moved to Tennessee (Watson 1971 , 20).

The Lomax Version

Tom Dula had several rivals for his girl (unnamed), one of whom was a

"dad-burned, impudent Yankee schoolteacher." Tom and the girl went for a walk in the woods, and the girl didn't return. The Yankee schoolteacher grew suspicious and began investigating, eventually finding the girl's grave. When Tom heard about that, he fled, and his brother led the posse in the other direction. Near the Tennessee border, the schoolteacher caught him coming through a pass. The next day, in jail, waiting to be hanged, Dula wrote the ballad as a confession of his crime, which he sang and played on the fiddle on his way to the gallows (Lomax 1947 , 358).

Blood-Patterson's Version

Thomas C. Dula was hanged in Wilkes County, North Carolina, on May 1, 1868, for the murder of Laura Foster after one of the most sensational murder cases of the mid-nineteenth century. The State Supreme Court concluded that Dula had courted both Foster and an Ann Melton. He contracted a venereal disease, he assumed from Foster, and passed it on to Melton, who was believed to have been an accomplice in the purported revenge against Laura Foster (Blood-Patterson 1988 , 104).

Several of the choice song origin stories in folksong collections are found in only one source, and no references are given. That would encourage the suspicion that they might fall into the fakelore category. Although recognized as being of dubious credibility, even as authentic folktales, they can, at the same time, be appreciated and enjoyed as fine stories.

James Warner, a noted photographer, in *Songs That Made America*, explains that "Black is the Color" comes from the story of Barton Fink, an emotionally disturbed, crippled youth from Sedberg, England, who was used as an errand boy by factory bosses. He was blamed whenever one of the workers was caught stealing--they said he "finked" on them. In love with a beautiful girl, he wrote her poems and songs. The girl's brother found out and beat him to death. The girl found a scrap of paper in his hand with "Black is the Color" on it. She wrote the tune for her

mandolin, and the song spread throughout the world (Warner 1992 , 98).

John Wesley Work, in *Folk Song of the American Negro* (1915 , 76-88; retold by Theodore Raph in *The Songs We Sang* [1964 , 353]) told the wonderful story of the origin of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," written, according to him, by a slave, Sarah Hannah Sheppard, and based on the legend of a huge chariot swinging out of heaven to carry the oppressed souls over Jordan (the ocean) to "home," that is, Liberia. Mrs. Sheppard, on hearing that she was to be separated from her baby and sold from Tennessee to a new owner in Mississippi, went to the river to drown herself. There she met a prophetess who told her, "Wait! Let the chariot of the Lord swing low." The woman also said that the baby was destined for greatness; to stand before kings and queens. Sarah Sheppard was impressed and allowed herself to be sold. Her daughter, Ella Sheppard Moore, grew up and enrolled in Fisk University, becoming a pianist for the Jubilee Singers who toured the world performing spirituals before royalty. She made a search for her mother, whom she found and brought to her home. By this time, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" was on its way to becoming one of the greatest American spirituals.

Maud Cuney-Hare, in her 1936 book *Negro Musicians and Their Music* (quoted by LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka] in *Blues People* [1963 , 44]), tells a different story based on the experience of a Bishop Fuller of Calcutta who traveled to Central Africa:

[I]n Rhodesia he had heard natives sing a melody so closely resembling *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* that he felt that he had found it in its original form: moreover, the region near the great Victoria Falls has a custom from which the song arose. When one of their chiefs, in the old days, was about to die, he was placed in a great canoe together with trappings that marked his rank, and food for his journey. The canoe was set afloat in midstream headed toward the great Falls and the vast column of mist that rises from them. Meanwhile the tribe on the shore would sing its chant of farewell. The legend is that on one occasion the king was seen to rise in his canoe at the very brink of the Falls and enter a chariot that, descending from the mists, bore him aloft. This incident gave rise to the words "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," and the song, brought to America by African slaves long ago, became anglicized and modified by their Christian faith.

J. Warner (1972 , 98) also told the story of the spiritual "Steal Away," written by the slave, Aba Ouigi, named Charles by his owner. He was a powerful preacher among Georgia slaves but was discovered leading a secret prayer meeting and kicked to death. The owners feared even religious meetings and tried to keep the slaves apart.

Much has been written about the meaning of songs like "Steal Away," debating whether the reference is to a purely spiritual freedom--death as liberation--or whether it refers to a concrete freedom, either to worship, as Warner implies, or escape from slavery itself. Many have seen this as a code song for the underground railroad, but the truth is probably that different people gave the song different meanings as they sang it.

Writers should, but often do not, identify their sources and clearly distinguish between fact, folklore, and pseudo-folklore. Sloppy scholarship, provoked in part by the fluid nature of the material and the frequent impossibility of putting together a factual history from an oral tradition, is a significant problem in the relatively new discipline of "folklore." Some of the songs, like the colonial broadside "The Death of General Wolfe," actually relate a historical event (the Siege of Quebec in 1759) fairly accurately. To inform the listener was the original purpose of ballads of this type. Others, like "Jesse James," are folk legends put to music, [184] possibly once based on fact but now true tales. A third group, including "The Frozen Logger," for example, could be considered fakelore, at least at the time of their writing. "The Frozen Logger" was written by James Stevens, an "inventor of folktales," and others for a radio program in 1929 (Brand 1962 , 89). Folk-style, composed songs are not necessarily inferior, they are just not traditional--although they can eventually be considered folk songs, as happened with "Oh Susanna" or "Camptown Races," which were written by Stephen Foster around 1850. Ideally, each type of song would be correctly identified; unfortunately, for various reasons that is not always the case.

Dean of western folklorists, J. Frank Dobie, once stated that "when one is a historian, he must stick to the facts. When one is telling a story, hang the facts and just make it a good story" (West 1986 , 4). Most folk songs are good stories, which are also a form of cultural history, "soft history," to be taken with a grain or two of salt. The accounts of the origins and meaning of folk songs, or their own individual histories, must be approached with the appropriate spirit. The value of folklore does not rest in its factualness. Dobie insisted, "This folklore is part of our social history, as legitimate in its way as the best authenticated state papers" (Dobie 1927 , 6). Folk songs and their background stories can give a broad picture of the people and the social situation in which they were created. The conditions and feelings of the various ethnic and occupational groups in the different regions and eras make up a real history of human beings.

While the folklorists struggle with separating fact from lore in folksong explanations, we, the people, can simply enjoy and gain understanding from these remarkable songs--and the often just-as-remarkable stories of their origins. Whether fact, fake, or lore, we may never know; but the importance of knowing is relative. A much more essential point is that we must not abandon our songs and stories--or to paraphrase Woody Guthrie, "Take these songs easy, but take them!"

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