Hear, Take My Database: Finding Resources on Sea Music

by Peter McCracken

Searching for information about sea shanties (or chanteys) is an interesting experience, because several of the largest databases are available for the taking, literally: if you want to have your own copy of the database, you can download it and install it on your own machine. Other sites include impressive bibliographies. On the whole, while there are not a lot of web pages about sea music, some of the ones out there do have a lot of information, and it's yours for the taking.

When starting a search for information about sea music, a great source is The Mudcat Café, at **http://www.mudcat.org**. Mudcat has been online for at least a decade, and its Digital Tradition Database contains around 9,000 songs, including lots of sea shanties. Unfortunately, it hasn't been updated in a few years, but you can actually download your own copy of the entire database as it stood in Spring 2002. The folks at Mudcat classified each set of lyrics, so you can do limited searching by genres or subjects. You'll find many different versions of a lot of songs, and simple recordings of the tune for some selections.

The "Forum" section of Mudcat is even more valuable: it provides a continually expanding wealth of resources, as lots of folk song aficionados post comments, lyrics, and responses to questions there. Searching either the Digital Tradition database or the Forum isn't easy—it can be slow, can time out, and isn't all that intuitive. One good way to search the Mudcat is actually through Google—just add "site:mudcat.org" to your search terms in a Google search. The results aren't as extensive as if you use the Mudcat search interface, but they will get you to the information you probably want much more quickly.

A site at **http://www.8notes.com** has taken works from the Mudcat collection and has presented many of the songs as recordings and in sheet music format. So, if you're looking for the tune to "Leaving of Liverpool," you can go to 8notes.com, scroll down and select "Folk Songs," then select the "L" list. From there, you'll find an image of the sheet music, and a downloadable midi file of the tune.

The Traditional Ballad Index is an impressive ballad bibliography, including shanties. For any given title it lists a description of the song, references, recordings, and other interesting data. It's accessible at **http://www.csufresno.edu/folklore/BalladSearch. html**, and like Mudcat, you can download your own copy of the database. The site at **http://www.songtext.net** offers lyrics, as well, but you need to register to view the lyrics and the site is completely in German. Registration is free. You can find which albums contain various songs without registering, but its focus is more on popular music than folk music.

Of course, there are other ways to find lyrics. If you're looking for the complete lyrics to a song, often the best thing to do is type in one line to a search engine, and revel in what is returned. As you wander, you'll find web pages for modern-day shanty singers, from well-known ones like Tom Lewis (**http://www.tomlewis.net**) or Lee Murdock (**http://www.leemurdock.com**), to some slightly more comical groups, such as ARRR!!!, the "Pirates of Brown University," at **http://www.arrr.net**, or The Bilge Pumps, at **http://www.thebilgepumps.com**. Finally, **http://www.shanty.org** is the home of the Dutch-based International Shanty and Seasong Association.

For background on the history of shanties, there's a very nice site at **http://shanty.rendance.org/**, which discusses many aspects of sea shanties. "Songs of the Sea," at **http://www.contemplator.com/sea/** (part of a larger folk music site), has a lot of information on a collection of songs, but consider turning down the volume on your speakers before you visit!

Suggestions for other sites worth mentioning are welcome at shipindex@yahoo.com. See **http://www.shipindex.org** for a compilation of over 100,000 ship names from indexes to dozens of books and journals. ⚓