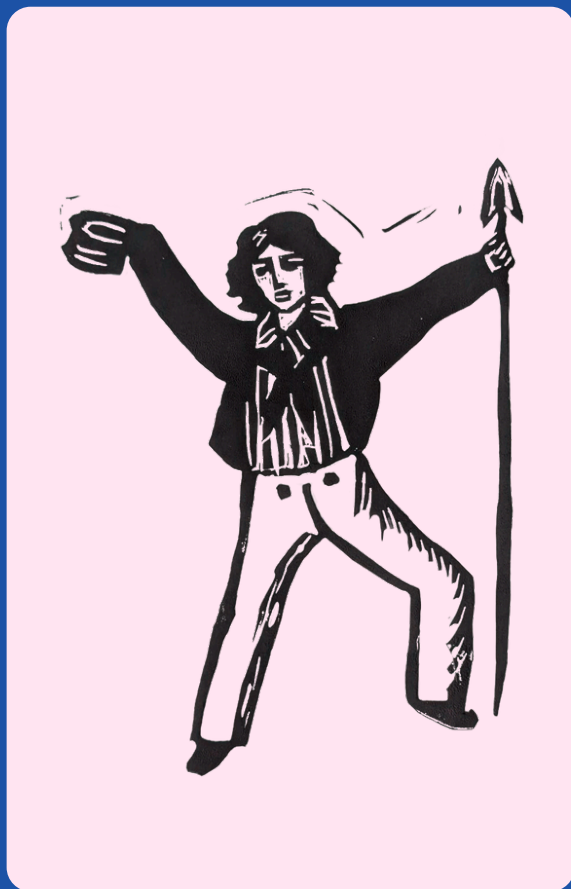


QUEERING



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SEA SHANTIES



BY QUEER
HISTORY
CLUB

Introduction to sea shanties

Sea shanties helped sailors work.

They sung ballads and ‘forebitters’ below deck or at the ‘forebitts,’ for fun, while the ship was at anchor, but they sung shanties during hefty repetitive tasks. John Masefield, first a sailor, later a poet, said the shanties really did make the tasks, such as winding in the anchor, easier. Everyone pulled to the rhythm on the refrain, while the ‘shantyman’ sang the verses, and a good shantyman was a sought-after boost to productivity.

Shanties became subdivided into capstan-, windlass-, pumping-, hauling-shanties, etc. With *Haul on the bowline*, the clue is in the title – but what hard work do we need help with now? Perhaps it’s with navigating our way through the maelstrom of heteronormativity, battling the winds of preconceptions, or fighting oppression. In our choir the shantyqueers sing the verses together, share the lyrical load and work for the common good.

The songs we know are mostly nineteenth-century, but *Haul on the bowline* goes back to the time of Henry VIII according to Masefield. Anyway, they were passed back and forth, collective efforts which evolved and mutated, cross-pollinated and varied naturally according to what mattered to the sailors singing them at the time – love, sex, working conditions, places visited. They could be critical – of authorities, bosses – and are often described as having been ‘crude’ or ‘coarse’.

So we are grateful for these songs, to have them in our hands and pass them on with our own words added. Singing them helps us do the work; singing is good for the mental health, and so is taking control of the narrative.

— Steph Morris

Further Reading: The Caird Library at the National Maritime Museum, open to all, has several books on and of sea songs, including two by Stan Hugill, plus the *Oxford book of Sea shanties*, and John Masefield's *A sailor's Garland* (a book of poems and songs) as well as a biography of John Short/Yankee Jack, who kept the songs alive and passed 57 shanties on to Cecil Sharp.

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Why do we queer sea shanties?

Some people will accuse this of ‘erasing’ history. The past is, indeed, as it was; there is nothing we can do to change it. Sea shanties of course then reflect the gendered, sexist and racist attitudes of the time in which they were widely performed.

Folk music is, however, also a living tradition.

Folk belongs to everyone. Anybody can examine its words and adjust them as they need to. Rather than seeing this as a modern-day privilege, we should also understand that folk songs have always been rewritten, or altered while singing, for as long as they have been sung.

The beauty of traditional folk is that each version of a song is unique to the person singing it; ultimately, there are no ‘fixed’ words to any folk song. (In the commentary to the songs in this zine, we sometimes refer to the ‘original words.’ By this we mean the words which we used as our starting point, but there is often no true ‘original’ wording to a trad folk song.)

Who knows what kind of songs survived in history and which ones were erased? Who’s to say that there weren’t sailors out there whose singing reflected their own lived realities, ones where they behaved, dressed, or loved differently to what was expected?

We’ll never know; these versions are not kept in our archives. But in order to keep folk alive, it must be adapted to our contemporary needs.

To do this we partnered with Sonny Brazil, folk musician and member of Goblin Band. Crucially, Sonny also lives and works on canal barges. At a Queer History Club event at the National Maritime Museum in 2024, they regaled the audience with tall tales of life on the canals, but also shrewdly brought our attention to the words of these old songs.

The result was that song lyrics often or resonate differently depending on who is singing them. Having a group of queer people interested in history already puts these songs in a specific kind of context. Along with Sonny's help, we explored nudging them into specific directions by changing the words. There was always the question of whether we could go *too* far, as we're also interested in remembering when, where and for what purpose these songs were sung. For that reason in some places we left them as close as possible to the old words to keep that 'historical' feel.

Most importantly, though, singing is joyous, strengthening, and belongs to everyone. As queer people, we often create our spaces from scratch, but we can also borrow and amend: in this case, we turn back towards the traditions passed down to us, examine them, and imbue new life into them.

These are our songs, as rewritten for the Cutty Sark Sea Shanty Festival, 2025.

Sam's Gone Away

Call: Oh, I wish I was a cabin boy,
aboard a man o'war!

Response: Sam's gone away,
aboard a man o'war!
(x2)

Pretty work, brave boys,
pretty work, I say!

Sam's gone away,
aboard a man o'war!
(x2)

Oh, I wish I was the helmsman, aboard a man o'war!
Oh, I wish we were together, aboard a man o'war!
Oh, I wish I was the bos'n, aboard a man o'war!
Oh, I wish I was your boyfriend, aboard a man o'war!
Oh, I wish I was the first mate, aboard a man o'war!
Oh, I wish I was a gunner, aboard a man o'war!
Oh, I wish I was a Capstan bar, aboard a man o'war!
Oh, I wish I was a Cucumber, aboard a man o'war!
Oh, I wish I was a Bar of soap, aboard a man o'war!
Oh, I wish I was a Daffodil, aboard a man o'war!
Oh, I wish I was a Pack of cards, aboard a man o'war!
Oh, I wish I was a Dolly winch, aboard a man o'war!
Oh, I wish I was a Wangtackle, 'board a man o'war!
Oh, I wish I was a Bilge pump, aboard a man o'war!

The tune of this song is so simple, it really stuck with us for days. We liked that the lyrics we started from could already be read as queer: 'Pretty work, brave boys! Pretty work, I say' is a very delicate and idealised way to describe the hard reality of working on a ship.

We've also heard versions where they sing 'pretty work they say,' which possibly reads more like the statement is coming from someone wanting to recruit others for work on the ship. The protagonist of our version, on the other hand, is recruiting themselves in order to follow Sam – who has a delightfully neutral name.

It was very easy to turn this song into one about queer longing, and we really wanted to lean on the ability to give some lines a double entendre. This would bring in queer audience members without alienating anybody else, and... who wouldn't want to be a wangtackle or a cucumber?

Haul on the Bowlin'

Call: Haul on the bowlin', Kitty is me darlin',

Response: Haul on the bowlin', the bowlin' haul / ho!

Haul on the bowlin', Kitty comes from Liverpool

Haul on the bowlin' so early in the mornin'

Haul on the bowlin', we don't know what

we're doing here

Haul on the bowlin' and the old man he's a-growlin'

Haul on the bowlin', we don't have any healthcare

Haul on the bowlin' but we don't know

where we're going

Haul on the bowlin', how did I even get here

Haul on the bowlin' and the sooner we get going

Haul on the bowlin', it's a far cry to payday

Haul on the bowlin', we're not getting paid enough

Haul on the bowlin', the old man keeps the profits

Haul on the bowlin', we're going to form a Union

Haul on the bowlin', the old man better watch himself

Haul on the bowlin', he made me ride the grey mare

Haul on the bowlin', it's a weary way to Liverpool

Haul on the bowlin', I've not met Kitty's other loves

Haul on the bowlin', we're going to have a mutiny

Haul on the bowlin', I think at last I've woken up

Since the original words already expressed the crew's dissatisfaction with the hard life of working as sailors, it was very easy to translate them for the modern age. It was nice to just take the rhythm of the song and fit our thoughts into it. Everything we needed to say was in there already, we just had to take it further.

Some of us who are learning to sail are also familiar with the command, 'haul on the bowline,' as it's one of the first things we learn on a boat. It makes it all the more satisfying to use it as a springboard for additional commentary.

Our new lyrics feel like we're honouring our maritime ancestors as an island nation as well as reflecting the timeless need for workers to come together and question the conditions they're expected to exist within. Especially as trans people, we love songs about unity and solidarity of thought.



Clear the Track (Let the bullgine run / Eliza Lee)

Call: Oh the smartest packet that you can find,

Response: Ah Hey! Ah Ho! Are you most done?
Is our Rosalind of the Black Ball Line,
So clear away the track and let the bullgine run

Chorus:

To my high rig-a-jig in the low back bar
Ah Hey! Ah Ho! Are you most done?
With Eliza Lee on Rosalind's knee
So clear away the track and let the butchdyke run

Oh our butch Rosalind of the Black Ball Line,
She'll always get you home on time

Oh the winds are fierce and the beats are hard
From Liverpool docks to a Soho bar

When we've stowed our freight at the West Street Pier
It's home to Liverpool then we'll steer

When we gets back to Liverpool town
She'll stand ye whiskies all around

Oh heave a pawl, oh bear a hand.
Just one more pull; it's a one night stand.

Our changes came from creating our own answer to the question, 'who is Rosalind?'

As we know, sailors often refer to ships in the feminine 'she' and give them women's names. While many of us find the tradition quite charming, it does also make some shanties harder to understand. Are they referring to a woman, or a boat? And of course, sometimes the women in these songs are given less soul than boats...

We've kept some of the ambiguity of the original words (Rosalind of the Black Ball Line can still be a ship), but with just a few changes, the new narrative woven through our lyrics is that of a utopia of queer nightlife. We highlighted the community and joy that can be found in these spaces. We think about our Butch Rosalind when we go to Dalston, when learning about dyke history, and when meeting people who embody the personality of this figure we've created.

Rosalind turned from a ship to a person, from fair to butch, and immediately we had a character we loved – and Eliza Lee loved her too.



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Ema Sala, *Female Sailor*, 2024. Linocut after *Caroline and her Young Sailor Bold*, an 1860s-1880s broadside ballad © Ema Sala

Edwin Hayes, *Men hauling on a rope*, date unknown. Drawing

Angela Felicity Bromley-Martin, *Girl trainees hauling on a foresail halyard on board the 3-masted topsail schooner Sir Winston Churchill (1966)*, 1969. Photograph

Gladys E. Reed, *Maintenance. Wren oiling blocks*, ca. 1943-44. Drawing