

HOIST THE COLOURS...

A Sea Shanty History

If you've been on TikTok or you've watched a pirate movie you've heard it. The Sea Shanty. The rhythms made you tap your toes and you couldn't help but listen and repeat. But what is a sea shanty and where did they come from?



The sea shanty dates back thousands of years. These catchy songs were meant to help sailors keep time with the rhythm of working on board and doing tasks at the same time as every other man. In fact, some captains, before hiring the crew, would ask the man to sing a line to prove that they were able to carry a tune as they worked. In fact, many historians believe that the word

shanty actually is from the French word 'chanter' which means to sing. There would often be a lead or solo singer that was known as a shantyman. He would lead the singing of the songs and the crew would join in on the chorus. Alternately the song would be sung as what is known as a 'call and response' song. The shantyman would sing a line, and the crew would answer their 'call.'

TYPES OF SHANTIES

Shanties would vary depending on what task the crew were being asked to do. Capstan Shanty was meant to be very regular and rhythmic. They would sing this type of song when they were trying to raise the very heavy iron anchor. Virtually any song could be used for this as long as the sailors sang at the right speed.

The Pulling Shanty however was entirely different. The pulling shanty was meant to go along with irregular work like raising yardarms or hoisting sails. If you think about pulling on a rope, if you've ever had to raise a flag or lower something down, there is a rhythm to what you do. You need to pull on the rope, then wait a second or two before you can adjust your grip and pull again. The pulling shanty was meant to make this task more steady and help all the men to pull at the same time.



Life on board any ship was dull and often sailors were dissatisfied after many months on board. Their lives were difficult with little fresh food, cramped quarters, terrible pay and bad weather. In addition, they were often not allowed to express their thoughts as any talk that was considered to be against the captain could have gotten them killed. However, shanties provided relief from this. When men were singing, they were allowed to express their ideas more openly. Now, we just generally use these historic songs for entertainment.