

CDSS Sings—“Black Jack Davey,” or Ballads: Alive, Well, and Changing

by Sally Rogers

When I was new to the folk world, in high school, my first “Ah-hah!” moment was when I discovered the Child Ballads. I suddenly realized that Simon and Garfunkel didn’t write “Scarborough Fair” and that its roots went deep down into history. A couple years later I had a second “Ah-hah” moment when I discovered that “The Whistling Gypsy” that I had known from an old Limelighter’s record was another one of those classic ballads. I was living in Ann Arbor, Michigan at the time and started to attend concerts at the venerable coffeehouse, The Ark. There I met folksinger, Mary Addis, who taught me her version of Child Ballad #200, or “The Gypsy Davey.” She had made a lovely nontraditional arrangement on her dulcimer which she taught to me and which I play to this day, no doubt folk-processed a bit. I related well to the young bride who left her stodgy life to be a gypsy’s lover. It sounded so romantic. And after singing a lot of old ballads, this one was the only one that seemed to have a “happy” ending, at least for the lady. Ladies were always getting left by their lovers at best or getting their heads cut off and coming back as ghosts to haunt their murderers at worst.

I was fascinated by the attempts of Francis James Child, the noted Harvard ballad scholar, to connect the ballad story to historical fact. Whether or not his connections are true, they make a great story: The Earl of Cassilis married his first wife, Lady Jean Hamilton. She had apparently had an earlier lover, whose name was Johnny Faa. After several years of marriage and two children, her lover returned disguised as a gypsy, and in the company of a gypsy band, while her husband was abroad. He convinced her to come with him, but the Earl returned home before they got away. He hanged the whole lot of them for their treachery, except for Lady Hamilton, who was condemned to live out her years in a tower. Her room faced the stairway whereupon the heads of all the gypsies were carved, Johnny Faa’s at the top where she could well see it. There are many reasons that make this story a stretch, but what a story! And what a ballad!

In Bronson’s *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads: Vol. 3*, there are one hundred twenty-eight versions of this romantic story of a lady leaving her wealth, her husband and her baby to go live the life of a gypsy with her true love. The American

versions seem to diverge the most from the original, at least in the name of the amorous gypsy. Number 128 of Bronson’s versions replaces “Gypsy Davey” with “Harrison Brady.” The woman in question ends her story by saying, “Last night I slept in my downy bed,/And in my arms, my baby;/Tonight I’ll sleep in the Pittsburgh jail/In the arms of Harrison Brady.”

And, of course, the folk process continues. But with the advent of the computer, digital recording and video, you’d think that these old ballads might ossify. Proof that new singers bring new life to old stories lies in Mike Agranoff’s 1996 sequel to the ancient ballad. He says:

“I’ve always had trouble with the Gypsy Davey ballad. It’s this wonderfully romantic story of the handsome stranger who rides in out of the countryside and steals the heart of a lady. My problem is I’ve always felt for the husband. There is nothing I’ve read in any of the versions of the ballad to indicate that the husband has done anything to merit being abandoned by his wife.... The other problem I have is this: What is a high-born woman, who has lived in luxury all her life, and has no survival skills, going to do on the road with a band of gypsies? It’s not going to last a month. And no matter who abandons whom, she’s going to be pregnant when they part ways. So a year later, in desperation, cold and hungry, she arrives at her husband’s door, babe in arms. That’s where I picked up the story.”

Mike’s new version is entitled “Gypsy Davey One Year After.” Enjoy the old story, and now what do you think of this new take, from the husband’s point of view?

Well met, well met my own dear wife.
Well met, my blue-eyed lady.
How strange to see thee at my gate.
How strange to see thy baby,
Thy dark-eyed crying baby.

Come in, come in, my own dear wife.
Come in out of the rain-o.
Come dry thy feet and warm thy hands
All by my fire again-o,
All in my hall again-o.

Call for the cook to bring thee meat,
The maid to bring thee wine-o.

CDSS Sings—Black Jack Davey

Child Ballad #200, from the singing of Mary Addis and Sally Rogers

Black Jack Da - vy came ri - ding by, down to the ri - ver sha - dy. He
whist - led high and he whist - led low and he won the heart of a la - dy, He
won the heart of a la - dy.

Black Jack Davey came riding by
Down to the river shady.
He whistled high and he whistled low
And he won the heart of a lady. (2x)

“He is no gypsy,” her father said,
“But Lord of free lands all over.”
“I shall live ’til my dying day
In the arms of my gypsy rover.” (2x)

“Take off, take off your high-heeled boots
All made of Spanish leather
Jump behind me on my horse
And we’ll ride off together.” (2x)

So she took off her high-heeled boots
All made of Spanish leather,
Jumped behind him on his horse
And they rode off together. (2x)

That night when the master he came home
Inquiring for his lady,
The maid she spoke before she thought,
“Oh she’s gone off with Black Jack Davey.” (2x)

“Go saddle me my fastest horse,
The white one that’s so speedy,
And I shall ride o’er the countryside
And I’ll bring back home my lady.” (2x)

He rode and he rode o’er the countryside
Down to the river shady
And there he spied his own wedded love
In the arms of Black Jack Davey (2x)

“Take off, take off your long, long gloves
All made of Spanish leather.
Give to me your lily-white hand
And we’ll ride home together.” (2x)

She’s taken off her long, long gloves
All made of Spanish leather,
Given him her lily-white hand
And said good-bye forever. (2x)

“Could you forsake your house and lands?
Could you forsake your baby?
Could you forsake your own wedded love
To go with Black Jack Davey?” (2x)

“Yes, I’ll forsake my house and lands
And I’ll forsake my baby,
I’ll forsake my own wedded love
To go with Black Jack Davey.” (2x)

Last night I slept on a goose-feather bed
With silks and sats for covers.
Tonight I sleep on the cold, cold ground
In the arms of my gypsy lover.” (2x)

Tune typeset by Peter Barnes