

# CDSS Sings—Hangman, Hangman, Slacken Up Your Line

by Hannah Shira Naiman

Late one evening, while driving home from an old-time jam in Toronto, I tuned into CBC radio. Typically at this hour, I expected to hear a mundane debate or archived episode that I would eventually turn off. Tonight, however, I was captivated by something quite rare on public talk radio: an a cappella ballad. Sung by Almeda Riddle, “Hangman Slacken Up Your Line” was a line sung so purely, so rhythmically and so urgently emotive, that it struck my core immediately. It was raw, crooked and beautiful. I instantly promised myself that I would add it to my repertoire. I could hear it with simple claw-hammer banjo plucking along. In fact I could hear it with drums or horns, and lo! Someone read my mind. Immediately following the original recording, CBC played a remix featuring all sorts of funk and rhythm. The remix is part of an album by Tangle Eye, called “Alan Lomax’s Southern Journey Remixed,” and I highly recommend you check it out.

Soon after learning this song in my fashion, adding banjo and three-part harmonies, I came to learn more still about this song’s far reaching appeal. It turned out that my brother had been singing a variation of this song for my nephew for several months, his version called “Prickly Bush.” A good friend in Kentucky told me she had also sung the song in yet another variation during a group singalong. Just the other day I sang this song for a friend in Toronto who immediately recalled Bob Dylan’s version, “The Maid Freed From the Gallows.” And so, my curiosity piqued, I investigated further.

Readers, I know this story is not unique. I have had a “folk epiphany”—which is to say that I had both the amazing experience of discovering that my beloved song is also someone else’s, and yet the heartbreaking experience of realizing our favourite versions can’t be sung together since they are entirely different. But what a fantastic mystery there is within this epiphany! How incredible that so many listeners would be drawn to the same tale despite such enormous variations.

What is it about a song that attracts us to it with such universality? I am by no means an ethnomusicologist, however my amateur Internet-based research has lead me to learn only that this song is also Child ballad #95, and that it likely originated in a language other than English. Some fifty versions are known in Finland; other versions appear in Hungary and Italy. In some versions the protagonist is male, in

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## **Hangman (Hold Your Hands, Old Man; The Maid Freed from the Gallows), sung by Almeda Riddle, recorded on May 14, 1970\***

“Oh, hangman, hangman, slacken up your lines.  
I see my father coming from a far-off distant shore.”

“Oh, father—my father—have you brought me gold,  
Or have you paid my fee?  
Or did you come to see your only son  
Hanging high on a gallows tree?”

“Oh, no, son, no, and I have brought no gold,  
Nor have I paid your fee.  
Alas, I come to see an unworthy son  
Hanging high on the gallows tree.”

“Oh, slackman, slackman, slacken up your lines.  
I see my mother coming from our far-off distant home.”

“Oh, mother—my mother—have you brought me gold,  
Or have you paid my fee?  
Or did you come to see your only son  
Hanging high on a gallows tree?”

*[Mrs. Riddle: “Now, it’s the same answer that his father  
give, it’s so long, let’s . . . Will it be okay?”*

*Dr. Wolf: “Yeah.”*

*Mrs. Riddle: “And then it comes on to the sister, and then  
to the sweetheart.”]*

“Oh, slackman, slackman, slacken up your lines.  
I see my sweetheart coming from a far and distant  
plain.”

“Oh, sweetheart—my sweetheart—have you brought me gold,  
Or have you paid my fee?  
Or did you to come but to see me hung,  
Hung high on the gallows tree?”

“Oh, yes, and yes, I have brought you gold,  
And I have paid the fee.  
I never intended to see my love hanging  
High on a gallows tree.”

\*source: <http://web.lyon.edu/wolfcollection/songs/riddlehangman1304.html>

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others female. In some versions the protagonist escapes execution; in others, he or she does not. In most cases it is the protagonist's lover that saves him; in others, it is a family member. If all specific elements of the story were removed, and the structure of the melody itself altered, what is it that remains constant that tugs so at our heart's strings? As a songwriter in the Appalachian tradition and style, the answer to this question is the holy grail I seek to find.

When I first set out to write this article, I hoped to be able to provide some solid academic research about this fabulous song. Time constraints and my lack of ethnomusicology skills played a factor in my having taken a different approach, but there is a part of me that relishes the absence of more academic information. I am sure there is someone who can tell me the origins of this song and all of its deviations. But all of this information would only reinforce what I already know: that there is a magic in the best of songs. They reveal our humanity across nations, languages and generations. The best of songs are so ambiguous about their specifics, and yet so specific in their emotion, that we are drawn into their core.

Most importantly is this: even now, in 2014, we can still have this kind of "folk epiphany." If anyone worries that this music might languish and fade out of our canons, fear not. Whatever magic lies within these songs, we are helpless to it. We cannot help but sing the stories and the music at the fibre of our human story: our ballads.

\* Also found in Child, #95, "The Maid Freed from the Gallows," Randolph, Vol. I, #24, "Hold Your Hands, Old Man"; Brown, Vol. II, #30, "The Maid Freed From the Gallows"; Belden, p. 66, "The Maid Freed From the Gallows. ~ H.S.N.

**Web extra:** Hear Alma Riddle singing "Hangman" as recorded May 14, 1970 as part of the Ozark Folk Songs of the John Quincy Wolf Collection, <http://web.lyon.edu/wolfcollection/songs/riddlehangman1304.html>; for more about the collection, see <http://web.lyon.edu/wolfcollection/>.

*Hannah Naiman grew up just north of Toronto, but all around her was the musical tradition of the Appalachian Mountains. Her banjo-driven songs draw on folk traditions and themes, and "are a little bit crooked, a little bit new." Hannah's sound recalls the music of Gillian Welch and Hazel Dickens, though it also features hints of English and Irish ballads, African spirituals and gospel music.*

(*Shenandoah Harmony*, continued from page 20)

"Consolation New" is one of many songs in *The Shenandoah Harmony* which has ties both to religious singing practice and to other forms of Anglo-American folk music. A cappella and instrumental recordings and a video tutorial may be found at <http://www.shenandoahharmony.com/2014/consolation-new>. The song's history demonstrates how the shape-note repertoire evolved over time, in a sort of collaboration, to quote from Wesley's text, "beyond the bounds of time and space." John Wyeth first published the tenor and bass parts in 1813 in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Davisson added a treble part around 1822. We preferred his arrangement to Wyeth's, but felt that an alto part was needed. Several of our friends contributed to the writing of this alto. The abbreviation "C.P.M." stands for the poetic rhythm "Common Particular Meter;" any other C.P.M. text may be substituted for this one. On the upper left, "SKH 58" indicates that the original song is on page 58 of *A Supplement to the Kentucky Harmony*.<sup>3</sup>

The Second Annual All-Day Shenandoah Harmony Singing is planned for June 1st in the Harrisonburg, Virginia area. Over one hundred singers from sixteen states attended the first annual singing. Recordings, photographs and videos of the singing are on our website. At this time there are more than ten all-day singings from *The Shenandoah Harmony*; the book is also used in numerous monthly local singings. Please see [www.shenandoahharmony.com/singings](http://www.shenandoahharmony.com/singings) for details on upcoming events, all of which are free and open to the public. No experience is necessary and books are available for loan or purchase.

*The Shenandoah Harmony* is now in its third printing since its release in mid-February 2013. Both print and electronic editions may be ordered through [www.shenandoahharmony.com](http://www.shenandoahharmony.com).

<sup>1</sup> Myles Louis Dakan, John W. del Re, Leyland W. del Re, Rachel Wells Hall, Daniel L. Hunter, Kelly Macklin, Nora Miller, and Robert Stoddard, *The Shenandoah Harmony* (Boyce, Va.: The Shenandoah Harmony Publ. Co.), 2012.

<sup>2</sup> William Hauser, *The Hesperian Harp* (Philadelphia: S.C. Collins, 1848), xviii.

<sup>3</sup> Ananias Davisson, *A Supplement to the Kentucky Harmony*, 2nd ed. (Harrisonburg, Va.: The author), c.1822

*Rachel Wells Hall grew up in a family of folk musicians and first sang shape-note music with her mother in Cincinnati in the 1980s. In addition, she has toured and recorded with Simple Gifts on English concertina, diatonic accordion, piano, fiddle and tabla. She is an associate professor of mathematics at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia.*