Shanty singing in twenty-first century Britain

ABSTRACT

The revival of the shanty accompanied the decline of the UK’s shipping industry in the mid-twentieth century. It was dominated by the larger-than-life figure of Stan Hugill, a former shantyman who ensured the continuation of this musical tradition through his performances and books. But in fact, as shanty authority the late Roy Palmer has pointed out, the idea of reviving a dying art had been a concern by the end of the nineteenth century. Following this, folksong collectors like Cecil Sharp made concerted efforts to document shanties but also to make adaptations (such as censoring the lyrics and providing piano accompaniments) to enable them to be performed on land – even on the concert platform - by those who had little or no direct experience of seafaring. Although this seems to be the complete opposite to Hugill’s approach of connecting the songs with their traditional maritime context, both aimed to ensure that shanties remained relevant.

This paper considers the continuation of these attitudes to the shanty in the twenty-first century. The recent resurgence in shanty singing in the UK has taken place alongside the regeneration of many UK port areas, the (re-)development of sailortowns as contemporary tourist destinations and associated attempts to connect the public with maritime heritage. I will focus in particular on the Falmouth (Cornwall) International Sea Shanty Festival, exploring the aims and motivations of different performing groups and analysing their contemporary approaches to music which is inextricably linked with seafaring history.

Several years ago a visit to family who live in Falmouth, Cornwall, South West England, coincided with the sea shanty festival which has taken place in this coastal town annually since 2003. The festival takes place over a long weekend, providing opportunities for a large number of groups to perform several times each in different venues in the town. The enthusiasm of performers, audiences and organisers was infectious, and I have returned many times since. Founded by the local shanty group Falmouth Shout, over the years the Festival (which now has the official title ‘Falmouth International Sea Shanty Festival’) has grown to the extent that in 2015 more than fifty groups were performing in more than twenty different venues.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Festival involves both informal and concert-type performances in established and temporary, indoor and outdoor venues and spaces across the town. It features individuals and groups, with varying degrees of musical experience or professionalization, in performances drawing on a range of musical and presentation styles, with repertoire ranging from traditional to contemporary, including original material. For a festival to exhibit such diversity of content while maintaining a focus on a single genre struck me as unusual. In fact, the Falmouth festival embodies characteristics from all three categories that make up Webster and McKay’s broad tripartite typology of music festivals:

… greenfield events which predominantly programme music, often involving camping, open-air consumption and amplification; venue-based series of live music events linked by theme or genre, usually urban; and street-based urban carnival.[[2]](#footnote-2)

My academic interest in the broad topic of music and seafaring has developed during the time in which I have been attending the Festival; initially through work on the impact of the sailortown environment of Cardiff in nurturing an important group of black British jazz musicians in the early twentieth century,[[3]](#footnote-3) and then through my co-leadership of the AHRC-funded Research Network ‘Atlantic Sounds: Ships and Sailortowns’.[[4]](#footnote-4) I also became interested in sailing, undertaking many trips around the Hebrides off the west coast of Scotland. Although far more luxurious than the passages undertaken in the golden age of shipping, this gave me a flavour of the particular social dynamic on board ship, a self-contained entity in the ocean, and the relationship between being at sea and being on land, being set adrift and coming home, and a deeper understanding of the importance of seafaring heritage to an island nation. In 2013 and 2015 I returned to the Festival with the specific intention of studying contemporary shanty performance in order to examine how music is implicated in and reflects our changing relationships with the sea, seafaring and maritime history in the twenty-first century.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Music is integral to maritime history, just as seafaring is crucial to the development of music on a global scale. Maritime travel encouraged the global dissemination of music; orally, through the spread of instruments, printed music and records and ultimately, as maritime leisure travel gave a new importance to music as entertainment for passengers, through musicians themselves. However, there is a sense in which the processes of musical encounter, exchange and development – which are often rooted in the maritime, especially prior to technological developments which allowed musical performance to be transmitted in disembodied ways (records, radio, the internet) - have yet to be studied in depth. Similarly, despite the pervasiveness of music in both seaport cities and seafaring, it has not been the subject of sustained attention in maritime history.[[6]](#footnote-6) James Revell Carr’s recent book *Hawaiian Music in Motion* provides a vivid indication of how musical research can enrich our understanding of maritime history and vice versa, and can thereby contribute new perspectives to established histories - in this case, the role that Haiwaiian music played in an emerging popular music culture in the nineteenth century, as well as the implications of Hawaiian sailors’ musicality for intracultural relationships on board and in port.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The shanty has particular importance for maritime history since rather than simply being transported from one place to another via ships and seafarers, it is inherently connected to the physical reality of maritime labour and the nature of the seafaring experience. Ian Russell notes the significance of the shanty as the only substantive body of work songs in the UK[[8]](#footnote-8), and as such the shanty is primarily understood as an accompaniment to pre-industrialised work. Nostalgia undoubtedly plays a part here as the maritime industry was in decline as other types of industrial labour, and the associated use of music (often broadcast or on record) to coordinate and facilitate work and provide entertainment and distraction, were in the ascendance. Importantly, though, as well as accompanying and coordinating work, shanties also look forward to the pleasures of land, as compared to the hard work and drudgery of being at sea. In their book *Rhythms of Labour*, Marek Korczynski, Michael Pickering and Emma Robertson warn scholars not focus on the functional nature of sea songs at the expense of the emotional impact they can have on the workforce, and a corresponding rise in productivity.[[9]](#footnote-9) In other words, shanties obviously had great importance in coordinating shipboard work, but they also provided opportunities for creative self-expression. However, with a dominant definition as historical work song, alternative methods and concepts are required to understand shanty singing in more recent times.

Revival/post-revival/resurgence

The English folk song revival is generally understood as consisting of two distinct phases. From the nineteenth century into the twentieth ‘a small number of privileged middle-class enthusiasts with antiquarian and musical interests, intrigued by the singing culture of artisan and labouring groups in rural southern England, selectively notated (text and tune) certain examples of their tradition.’[[10]](#footnote-10) After a lull in activity during the Second World War, collecting resumed, now facilitated by recording technology which enabled the details of performance (as well as the text of music and lyrics) to be captured and disseminated and therefore replicated more easily. Further, Kegan-Phipps and Winter identify what might be understood as a third, ongoing, phase in the folk revival which they suggest begins around 2002. They employ the term ‘resurgence’ to understand this ‘growth of popularity and profile of a pre-existing genre’ and by implication increasing professionalization of performance and presentation of folk music.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Undoubtedly the shanty is implicated in this broad model, but has (increasingly) developed its own particular narrative within this. As such, it both tracks and complicates the modern history of English folk music. Shanty authority the late Roy Palmer has pointed out that the idea of preserving a dying art had been a concern by the end of the nineteenth century. As early as 1884 a newspaper article lamented: ‘The beau ideal chantyman has been relegated to the past. His deathknell was the shriek of the steamwhistle and the thump of the engines’.[[12]](#footnote-12) Such concerns, in common with the wider impetus to preserve English folk music, led to the collection of shanties, notably by Cecil Sharp who published his *English Folk-Chanteys* in 1914.[[13]](#footnote-13) Sharp expounds his motivation for collecting in the introduction to the volume:

I have no technical or practical knowledge whatever of nautical matters; I have never even heard a chantey sung on board ship. But then I approach the subject from its aesthetic side — my concern is solely with the music of the chantey and with its value as an art-product — and this I contend is quite possible even for one who is as ignorant as I am of the technical details of the subject.[[14]](#footnote-14)

This indicates an aim not only to preserve the music and make it accessible, but to elevate folk culture to the level of art. Indeed, Sharp provides piano accompaniments to the shanties included in the volume which offered the possibility of them being performed in a concert setting by those who similarly had little or no experience of seafaring. Sharp’s aim to restore English folk culture to the people also led to his arrangements being widely performed in schools. Although Sharp’s work was extremely valuable in preserving folk-oriented shanties (his definition of the form served to exclude material with demonstrable links to popular music), his underlying motivation and approach has been questioned by subsequent scholars and enthusiasts, especially when this extended to editing which Sharp explains in terms of ‘excising a few lines and softening two or three expressions.’[[15]](#footnote-15)

In response, the post-War phase of shanty revival fuelled an increasing emphasis on ‘authentic’ performance which privileged the input of surviving shantymen and thereby emphasised the connection with seafaring work. Without question the most notable of these was Stan Hugill, who is known as ‘the last shantyman’. Hugill had spent over twenty years at sea, including as shantyman on the *Garthpool*, the last British commercial sailing ship, amassing a huge repertoire of shanties and sea songs. His collection *Shanties from the Seven Seas* was published in 1961 and remains an authoritative text on the genre.[[16]](#footnote-16) As Dave Arthur points out, Hugill’s appearance served to emphasise his authenticity and status for a new generation of folk enthusiasts: ‘With his pigtail, tattooed hands, hawk eyes, beard and curly pipe, he looked the part of an archetypal seaman of the great days of sail’.[[17]](#footnote-17) As such, Hugill was a defining influence on the ongoing transition of the shanty from sea to land in the latter half of the twentieth century, in particular, by maintaining a connection between the material and its original function which was not either a focus or a possibility for Sharp and some other collectors of that period.

Although Hugill’s promotion of the original maritime context for shanties and Sharp’s adaptations to give the material a new lease of life are apparently diverse approaches, essentially both aimed to ensure that shanties remained relevant on land within a changing social and musical climate. Thus their approaches can perhaps be understood as much as overlapping continuation rather than oppositional disjuncts. For this reason the shanty is not easily congruent with concepts of musical revival – simply put, the shanty was not in need of reviving. Interestingly, the shanty is not featured explicitly in the recent *Oxford Handbook of Music Revival*. However, in the introduction the editors of that volume evoke the concept of ‘post-revival’ to describe the state of traditional music ‘has become firmly established in a new context … and is therefore no longer in need of rescue’.[[18]](#footnote-18) A ‘resurgence’ can be understood as a rise in popularity of a form which has achieved this ‘new steady state’.[[19]](#footnote-19) The study of the shanty in the twenty-first century, especially foregrounding the perspectives of those that are involved in singing them, provides further nuance to these ideas.

Contributing factors in the recent resurgence of the shanty

Notwithstanding the more recent publications mentioned above, that it is still necessary to recourse to Hugill’s books to find any substantive attention devoted to the shanty as a musical form demonstrates his defining importance to the continuation of a shanty-singing tradition which extends beyond the industrialisation of the shipping industry and became established on land (alongside other maritime forms that were usually heard in port). Despite Hugill’s undisputed legacy it could be argued that his death in 1992 provided the opportunity for others to develop new approaches to performing this repertoire which no longer required such an intimate connection with the shanty at sea, in parallel with a more nostalgic and detached view of seafaring more generally. Particular groups provided some key directions for this new resurgence – The Spinners incorporated sea songs into their wide-ranging repertoire, referencing seafaring as one aspect of their roots (their 1962 debut album was entitled *Quayside Songs Old and New* and included several shanties). A more recent development along these lines is the folk-rock band Bellowhead, who have produced contemporary re-workings of maritime material alongside other folk repertoire. Their 2012 album *Broadside* makes reference to the nautical term and the songs printed inexpensively for distribution from the 16th century; the cover artwork depicts the band in a nautical setting. Through their recordings and live performances of shanties in interpretations that redefined the material musically with reference to contemporary genres, these groups reintroduced shanties to a commonly-recognised mainstream musical repertoire, and as such fulfilled a similar popularising function as Cecil Sharp’s shanty collection.

In 2015 the vast majority of groups featured at the Falmouth International Sea Shanty Festival were formed in the late 1990s/early 2000s. Of undeniable and direct importance to this recent resurgence is the group the Fisherman’s Friends which came to prominence in the 1990s and were signed by the Universal Music label in 2010. Members are drawn from a particular maritime community, Port Isaac in Cornwall, but individuals have a wide variety of occupations – there are seafarers but also hoteliers, landlords and builders – reflecting the redefinition of what it means to have an authentic connection to the sea. However, transferring a contemporary approach to the musical material leads to marked differences between the performances recorded ‘live’ at sessions in Port Isaac, and the performances on the professionally released albums. The addition of instrumental colour and the need to adhere to a regular beat, referencing typical production and presentation of pop music, fundamentally redefines the musical material in an attempt to bring it to a wider audience. No doubt the group has been the inspiration for others, perhaps the fame and prominence that they achieved acting as a motivating factor for some.

The Friends have been featured on television commercials, and also documentaries, including *Shanties and Sea Songs* (2010) presented by Gareth Malone – a young choral leader who through the BBC has led a revival and celebration of community singing in the UK, including in schools and workplaces. Most recently, shanty group ‘The Longest Johns’ were featured in Malone’s latest vehicle *The Choir: Gareth’s Best in Britain* where they reached the regional finals. Although the choral tradition has been long established in the UK, in recent years the development of accessible participatory singing within residential communities and the workplace which does not require prior knowledge and experience, particularly in respect to musical notation, is notable. This is backed by a growing body of research into the health and therapeutic benefits of singing.[[20]](#footnote-20) In addition to the close relationship with the folk resurgence, the shanty singing relates closely to this ongoing trend.

A final largely non-musical factor has been the growth of the most intriguing and glamorous of seafarers, pirates, within popular culture as a result of the highly successful Pirates of the Caribbean series of films. Even though the connection between pirates and shanties is tenuous at best, some shanty groups directly exploit this in their presentation (incorporating stereotypical pirate dress and vocal delivery), and others have found that this has influenced the way that they have been perceived, especially when performing outside maritime environments, with both positive and negative impacts. Groups mentioned that the contemporary popularity of fictional pirates often led to interest in their performances, but that this did not always develop into a realisation of the reality of seafaring work and heritage which the shanty represents.

Festivals

Keegan-Phipps and Winter identify the festival as ‘the key location for the resurgence in English folk music’ in the twenty-first century. These most usually take place in rural locations: ‘For the vast majority of folk festivals, most attendees stay on a campsite, and this is often the focal space for festival activities.’[[21]](#footnote-21) They also identify the ‘relative centrality of active *artistic* participation by attendees’ and ‘the full gamut of commercial activity that now exists in England’s folk music culture’ as key features, and explore the ‘far from uneasy’ cohabitation of these characteristics within the structure of the festival.[[22]](#footnote-22) However, the model for the shanty festival both pre-dates and diverges considerably from the archetypal folk festival that they identify. It is likely that the Mystic Seaport Sea Music Festival, first staged at The Museum of America and the Sea in Mystic, Connecticut in 1979, provided a blueprint for the contemporary shanty festival. The museum habitually employs music (specifically shanties) as part of its historical reconstruction of a 19th century coastal village:

The historical interpreters at Mystic Seaport exhibit a wide range of skills that truly bring the Museum to life. Listen as chanteymen perform music of the sea and see interpreters demonstrate maritime skills.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The Mystic Seaport Sea Music Festival, which takes place over a long weekend in June, provides an opportunity for music to become a focal point, complemented by a symposium of papers from academics and scholars.

Similarly, Falmouth and most other UK shanty festivals privilege a connection with maritime location through music rather than the escapism of the conventional festival field. Consequently, the Falmouth festival is dominated by local groups (from Cornwall or nearby counties of Devon, Dorset and Somerset) of mainly amateur musicians. Commercialism and professionalization, identified by Keegan-Phipps and Winters as features of the folk resurgence, are evidenced more readily through the context in which their performances are presented. Whereas attendance at the Mystic Seaport Sea Music Festival requires paid access to the Museum, almost all of the Falmouth Festival performances are free to attend as the Festival is supported by the Council and commercial sponsorship. Revenue is generated for the Festival through sales of merchandise, and for the town by increased tourist spend. While the Mystic event provides revenue for the constructed reality of the ‘living history’ museum, the Falmouth Festival directly benefits a town which can no longer be reliant on traditional maritime trade. Webster and McKay note that:

Festivals have played a significant role in urban ‘cultural regeneration’ … particularly in post-industrial cities in which traditional manufacturing industries have declined and in which culture is used as a means of attracting service-sector professionals …[[24]](#footnote-24)

Consequently, while still run by volunteers and featuring mainly amateur musicians, the Falmouth Festival is now closely overseen by the Town Council. The website, promotion and presentation of the Festival are attaining professional standards.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Rather than conduct a detailed study of the Festival as an entity, I have used it to provide a focus for examining questions to do with the continuation of shanty singing in twenty-first century Britain. Without the proliferation and permanence not only of interested audiences for such festivals and enthusiasts who are proactive in organising them, but also those that formed shanty groups to provide performances, these relatively transient festivals could not exist. Philip Bohlman argues persuasively for ‘a more inductive approach [to folk music research], based on observations of musical activity that continues to display many aspects of folk music, even against the backdrop of a modernized and urbanized world’. Therefore I wish to complement high-level considerations of where the shanty ‘fits’ in the current musical infrastructure of the UK with a focus on the musicians involved.[[26]](#footnote-26) In examining the continuation of the form I am interested to find out about the common and specific motivations for groups and individual performers and how these relate to twenty-first century audiences.

Methodology

The research reported in the remainder of this paper represents two initial phases of what will become a more in-depth study of the musical practices and general motivations of particular groups with specific reference to the Falmouth International Sea Shanty Festival, as well as eventually broadening to consider similar festivals and groups across the UK. The first phase consisted of a panel discussion held at the National Maritime Museum, Falmouth, Cornwall as part of one of the colloquia for the research network, ‘Atlantic Sounds: Ships and Sailortowns’ immediately prior to the opening of the 2013 Falmouth International Sea Shanty Festival. A call was issued for possible participants and direct approaches made by email and personal contact to groups that had been announced as performing in the festival. In the event, several groups sent more than one representative to contribute to the panel; 6 groups and one solo performer were represented. The panel was recorded for future analysis. This panel focussed on three main areas:

• What do you see as the contribution that shanty groups can make to the heritage and cultural life of maritime communities? Has the nature of this relationship changed over time, and if so, why?

• How do you go about deciding what material to sing and how to perform it? How do you learn and develop new material? Are you mainly influenced by traditions, or do you try to incorporate new ideas? Has your group’s approach to the music changed over time, and if so, can you suggest why?

• What do you see as the future for your group and for shanty singing in general?

This discussion allowed me to explore some key themes around shanty singing in 21st century Britain, as well as building relationships with musicians for future work.

The second phase of the research involved a Survey Monkey questionnaire that was distributed directly to participating groups and via social media (Facebook and Twitter). The questions (see Appendix 1) were developed from the panel discussion and informal interaction with participants during the Festivals. The majority of responses to the questionnaire were received during July and August 2015, the period immediately following the Falmouth Festival. This resulted in 40 individual responses from across 25 groups, the majority of which had performed in the Falmouth festival. The responses were captured within Survey Monkey for future analysis. Other than providing the name of their group, responses were anonymous. In addition, the author attended performances of various groups during the 2015 festival, analysing and documenting these for future reference. This also enabled survey responses to be contextualised, particularly in relation to performance and presentation.

Discussion

The primary theme emerging from the data was performers’ concern with respecting the history of the shanty while ensuring its contemporary relevance. Individuals positioned their groups variously on an axis between tradition and adaptation – either explicitly, or as evidenced by their approach to presentation and performance.

*Community*

The process of an individual becoming involved in a shanty group usually evolved from membership of a community often, but not always, in a maritime setting. Maritime locations encompassed areas with distinct seafaring heritage (fishing village, whaling port), and/or a contemporary nautical function (pleasure sailing, lifeboat stations). Some singers joined a group by responding to a formal advertisement, but more often people were invited to join by existing members, became absorbed into a group as a result of frequenting places where it met or performed, or became familiar with the group before asking to join. This demonstrates the integration of shanty groups with pre-existing communities which was repeatedly emphasised in musicians’ descriptions of their activities. Most groups undertook fundraising activities with local and/or maritime relevance (at the Falmouth Festival there are collections for the Royal National Lifeboat Institution at every performance). Respondents also cited raising of awareness of maritime history through a combination of education and entertainment as the contribution that they made to maritime communities, but the music performed was often not explicitly associated with particular locations from which the groups came.

Beyond the obvious relocation of shanty performance almost exclusively to land, shanty groups have been formed in response to particular aspects of modern communities. The Exmouth Shantymen was formed in order to re-inject culture into a dock that had been regenerated into a marina, and particularly in response to a landlord who wanted singing in his pub, perhaps for commercial reasons as much as for a sense of altruism. For the London-based Trad Academy Sea Shanty Choir maritime music provided the opportunity for a community to be formed within a cosmopolitan metropolis. Running counter to the continued male dominance of shanty singing, several mixed gender and all-female groups were included in the 2015 Festival. The repertoire of all-female groups often made direct reference to the female experience of seafaring, which seems particularly appropriate given the relocation of the shanty from ships to the ports and that women in seafaring communities were more frequently land-based. Interestingly, Hanna Hagmark Cooper notes that although ‘maritime history to a very large extent focuses on men and ships’ ‘in the 1990s women were starting to become a bit more visible’ – coinciding with the resurgence of shanty singing.[[27]](#footnote-27) Renowned shanty singer and ex-submariner Tom Lewis has compared the modern shanty movement to that of brass bands and choirs in British industrial communities in providing social cohesion and structure for leisure time. While contests continue to bring brass bands together regionally and nationally, as discussed above, festivals fulfil this function for shanty groups. Festivals allow groups to articulate their particular identity with reference to others, and to represent this on national and international stages.

*Purpose*

The purpose of the groups to which respondents belonged was most often identified as ‘for members to have fun’, with ‘making money for members’ considered to be the least important. This indicates broadly amateur rather than professional outlook, although this must be qualified with reference to the desire of almost all groups to make money for charity, and for some groups striving to attain professional standards of performance was an important focus. Entertaining the public was thought to be more important than educating them. Despite the stated focus on the quality of the members’ own experience, other responses make clear that the audience were often considered when preparing for performances (see below).

The basis for the existence of the groups varied considerably. For the Pirates of St Piran, which began as a re-enactment society, branching out into music was seen to help their educative function. Shake a Leg was formed from a ‘disparate’ group of musicians, who adopted a maritime theme to provide them with what they termed a ‘brand identity’, indicative of their aspirations towards professional music making. The Oggymen strongly articulated a sense of connection with the contemporary and historical maritime community of Falmouth, with particular reference to Cornish cultural identity:

As we grew up in Falmouth we heard these songs regularly. Fathers sung them in male voice choirs, friends sung them after working boat races, brothers sung them gig rowing, and we all tried to sing them down the pub... In recent years, the songs of our fathers have been heard less, and collectively we lamented the loss of this bridge to our Cornish past.[[28]](#footnote-28)

*Preparation*

The complexity of the relationship between shanty groups and more established modes of amateur music-making emerge in discussions of preparation for performances. Although most groups gathered regularly often behind closed doors to develop and refine their material, these occasions were referred to as ‘meetings’ rather than ‘rehearsals’ (and as distinct from the generally more open folk ‘session’). Similarly, there was an emphasis on democratic decisions and any leadership was usually defined with reference to musical expertise or knowledge of shanties. In many groups, there was a clearly defined musical director, but members were encouraged to give their input into decisions about repertoire and arrangement.

Approaches to harmony expose different relationship with the choral tradition. While some respondents talked about singing in 4 or even 6 parts in arrangements usually made by the musical director, for others harmony was the responsibility of specific members of the group. Similarly, a few groups used notated music; more usually the music was learned orally. The desire for ‘natural’ harmonies rather than something that ‘sounds nice’ was mentioned, alluding to the common practice of harmonising shanties in open fourths and fifths (not unlike the way in which harmony was introduced as an addition to liturgical plainchant) rather than full chords (like a hymn). For many groups, attaining acceptable harmonies was a struggle through a process of trial and error.

*Performance*

The stated desire for groups to entertain contemporary audiences led to consideration of authenticity in performance. Some groups pursued a traditional approach founded on a scholarly attitude to the shanty, while others pursued adaptation, for example, writing new lyrics and in some cases writing original material using shanty structures and style, with the deliberate aim of appealing to younger/modern audiences. However, most performers agreed that it was necessary to adapt the material to make shanties suitable for modern audiences. This included cutting verses to limit the length of songs and censoring bawdy or offensive lyrics, particularly to make them suitable as family entertainment, with some groups mentioning that they would perform different versions of songs depending on the audience. There was some discussion of stylistic adaptations, with the idea that ‘rocking it up’ (in the words of one respondent) would appeal to a younger audience.

Adherence to tradition and the contemporary was also expressed through choice of clothing. While the Exmouth Shantymen and the Pirates of St Piran adopted historical dress, other groups opted for a more contemporary uniformity (for example, matching polo shirts with the group’s name in the case of the Oggymen) or obviously referencing the nautical (Shake a Leg). The choice of the all-female group Femmes de la Mer is particularly interesting, adopting the all-black ‘concert dress’ with colourful neckerchiefs as a nod towards the maritime. While some groups adopt the conventions of classical vocal group performance, others actively encourage audience participation, and for others movement is important to engage audiences and in particular remind them about the physical connection of the material to the seafaring (demonstrating hauling in time to a shanty).

*Past, present and future*

Who cares [what the future holds]? It’s all for fun and fun for all … Who wants to live forever? Only shanties do that. We are merely today’s courier.

Perhaps most significant of all is the overwhelming sense that the groups were positioned within a lineage of post-industrial shanty performance. In this respect, other than Stan Hugill few clear influences were cited in the questionnaire, although participants in the panel discussion were more forthcoming about learning from recordings and performances by other contemporary groups. There was also a sense that the accepted core repertoire of shanty singing had become broader, in particular to encompass original songs in a traditional style, for example by The Spinners and Tom Lewis.[[29]](#footnote-29) But even when adhering to core traditional repertoire, originality and creativity were highly valued by respondents. In addition, there was no sense in which a lack of connection to the sea was seen as a barrier to involvement in shanty singing, evidencing the transition from seafaring work-song to land-based entertainment.[[30]](#footnote-30) The general acceptance of innovation is indicative of a tradition that has reached ‘a new steady state’.

Although several respondents alluded to an older generation of singers dying out, there was a reassurance that younger groups were poised to take over. Two of these are particularly worth mentioning. Members of the aforementioned Trad Academy Sea Shanty Choir, which performs arrangements of traditional material, felt that they were able to forge a connection with maritime history, and in particular maritime work through the physicality of singing.[[31]](#footnote-31) A contrasting model is provided by The Aggie Boys Choir, a self-proclaimed ‘loosely formed, rag tag bunch of young upstarts from all over Cornwall’ who position themselves within the shanty scene by virtue of their performance style, but perform original material with strong contemporary references. ‘Home’s Where the Heart Is’, in which successive verses consider ‘drinking, fighting, fishing and mining’, addresses typical shanty themes of home, cultural pride, intoxication, work – but underscored by modern concerns - the need to maintain traditional values of established Cornish maritime communities in the face of the threat of ‘skinny lattes’.

I am not a silly boy,

I’m better off here with my pasty-o

Pour me a pint of ale any day,

I don’t want no skinny latte.

Oh-hey up and say,

Home’s where the heart is and I won’t stray.

Oh-hey I love this place

But it’s a hard life drinking night and day.

The Aggie Boys, ‘Home’s Where the Heart Is’[[32]](#footnote-32)

Conclusion

Although more work is needed, especially in the form of individual interviews and observations of shanty group ‘meetings’ to test, develop and probe these initial findings, this research demonstrates strong continuation of key features of the shanty in a twenty-first century context. This suggests that resurgence rather than revival is an appropriate conceptualisation of the recent increase in interest in the form. Moreover, innovation characterises the negotiation of the previously established diametric tropes of tradition and adaptation by contemporary shanty groups.

Typically, commonly-known shanties provided the basis for connecting a temporary community on board ship. In addition, textual variations in music or lyrics (and most likely delivery too) of these shanties allowed these songs to also express particular identities, and some repertory denoted specific geographic and cultural origins. In the contemporary context, shanties continue to provide the basis for forging a sense of local community and identity, which can then be articulated nationally and internationally by groups, through recordings but particularly through live performances at festivals. Interactions between groups means that even core material remains in constant flux, retaining the character of an oral tradition. Despite the ready availability of notated versions of shanties, many singers do not read music, learning instead from recordings or other singers and collecting to amass a repertoire, as demonstrated by Sharp and others, has been democratised. However, in the panel discussion at Falmouth in 2013 it was interesting to note the interchangeability of the words ‘collecting’ and ‘stealing’, the implication being that the act of amassing musical material (whether orally or via recordings or notation), a necessary part of the shanty tradition, could be read as a legitimate act of knowledge acquisition and veneration of the creators/performers, or a more questionable covert or even aggressive attempt to assume ownership, including of an interpretation, for personal gain. This opens up ethical concerns with the backdrop of commercialisation, copyright and intellectual property from which this primarily amateur scene is far from immune. The blurring of distinction between amateur and professional status and aspirations, often intertwined with levels of musical education and experience, are further evidenced by discussions of approaches to the incorporation of harmony into arrangements. This demonstrates that while some groups aspire to professional status, others revel in a more informal approach to music-making – but yet this is usually underscored by a seriousness of intention to educate, entertain, or raise money for charitable purposes.

Groups remain torn between the desire to preserve heritage and to make it relevant, and acceptable, to twenty-first century audiences. The function of shanties as entertainment, and their associated commercialisation might appear to be a new phenomenon, but as the member of one Falmouth crew pointed out, as well as their function of coordinating manual labour, shanties originally existed to entertain the crew, providing a way of dealing with the work at hand. Democratically constituted groups performing for an audience represents a key change in function for the shanty. However, tradition after Hugill and adaptation after Sharp remain at play in twenty-first century shanty performance in the UK, negotiated through a spirit of invention which typified shanty performance on board ship. Shanty singing has become established as a key post-revival musical practice which has an important role to play in developing our understanding of maritime history and ensuring its continued relevance in the context of the present day.

Appendix 1

Survey Monkey Questionnaire

1. What is the name of your group?

2. How did you begin singing with this group?

3. What is the purpose of your group? Rate the following factors on the scale.

Very important Neither important or unimportant Very unimportant

* For members to have fun
* To educate the public
* To preserve culture
* To entertain the public
* To make money for members
* To raise money for charity

4. How does your group decide what material to sing?

5. How does your group decide how to perform the material you have chosen?

6. What is your group's approach to singing in harmony?

7. Are you influenced by tradition, or do you try to incorporate new ideas, or both?

8. Which other groups (if any) have influenced your group's approach to shanty singing?

9. What contribution, if any, does your shanty group make to the heritage and cultural life of maritime communities?

10. What do you think the future holds for your group and for shanty singing in general?

1. *Falmouth International Sea Shanty Festival*, <http://www.falmouthseashanty.co.uk/> [26 November 2016] [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Emma Webster and Geroge McKay, *From Glyndebourne to Glastonbury: An Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded literature review* (2016, [www.dx.doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.3413836](http://www.dx.doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.3413836)), 4.

   *List of Maritime Music Festivals,* [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\_of\_maritime\_music\_festivals [26](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_maritime_music_festivals%20%5b26) November 2016] provides an indication of maritime music festivals across the world. This often share characteristics with the Falmouth event. Festivals under the auspices of Shanty UK have a similar model. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Catherine Tackley, ‘Tiger Bay and the Roots/Routes of Black British Jazz’, in Jason Toynbee, Catherine Tackley and Mark Doffman, *Black British Jazz: Routes, Ownership and Performance* (Aldershot, 2014), 43-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Atlantic Sounds: Ships and* Sailortowns, <http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/tackley-atlantic-sounds/> [26 November 2016] [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Although shanties (maritime work songs) are regarded by scholars as a distinct from other maritime song forms such as the forebitter (usually sung by sailors at rest) and more generic ‘sea songs’, in contemporary practice these distinctions are blurred. Contemporary shanty groups usually incorporate these types freely within their repertoire. Therefore the term ‘shanty’ will be used as a shorthand throughout this paper for the broader category of ‘sea songs and shanties’. For more detail on particular maritime song forms, see Robert Lloyd Webb, ‘Music’, in John J. Hattendorf, *The Oxford Encylopedia of Maritime History* <http://www.oxfordreference.com> [4 October 2012]; Roy Palmer, ‘Shanty’, *Grove Music Online* [<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.liverpool.idm.oclc.org/subscriber/article/grove/music/25583> [26 November 2016]; Roy Proctor, *Music of the Sea*,(London, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Proctor, *Music of the Sea* is one important exception. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. James Revell Carr, *Hawaiian Music in Motion: Mariners, Missionaries, and Minstrels* (Illinois, 2014). Carr’s formative experiences of shanty singing took place at Mystic Seaport, which has been active in promoting and sustaining music as a since the 1970s (see later). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ian Russell, ‘England (i): II Traditional Music’, *Grove Music Online*, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.liverpool.idm.oclc.org/subscriber/article/grove/music/40044 [25 November 2016]. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Marek Korczynski, Michael Pickering and Emma Robertson, *Rhythms of Labour: Music at Work in Britain*

   (Cambridge, 2013), 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Russell, ‘England (i)’. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Simon Keegan-Phipps and Trish Winter, ‘Contemporary English Folk Music and the Folk Industry’ in Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival* (Oxford, 2014), 289-509; 493. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cited in Roy Palmer, ‘Shanty’. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Cecil Sharp, *English Folk-Chanteys*, (London 1914). Other published collections from this period include Frank. T. Bullen and W.F. Arnold, *Songs of Sea Labour*, (London, 1914); Frederick J. Davis and Ferris Tozer, *Sailor Songs or 'Chanties'*, (London, 1887); John Masefield, *A Sailor's Garland*, (London, 1906); and Laura Alexandrine Smith, *The Music of the Waters*, (London, 1888). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Sharp, *Folk-Chanteys*, x. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Sharp, *Folk-Chanteys*,xvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Stan Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas* (London, 1961). It is frequently referred to in shanty singing circles as a ‘bible’. This was followed by *Sailortown* (London, 1967) and *Songs of the Sea* (New York, 1977). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Dave Arthur ‘Hugill, Stan’ Grove Music Online <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.liverpool.idm.oclc.org/subscriber/article/grove/music/52405> [25 November 2016]. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Juniper Hill and Caroline Bithell, ‘An Introduction to Music Revival as Concept, Cultural Process, and Medium of Change ’ in Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival* (Oxford, 2014), 3-42; 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Hill and Bithell, ‘Introduction’, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Stephen Clift, Jennifer Nicols, Matthew Raisbeck, and Ian Morrison (2010) Group singing, wellbeing and health: A systematic review, The UNESCO Journal, 2, 1. <http://www.abp.unimelb.edu.au/unesco/ejournal/> [26 November 2016]. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Keegan-Phipps and Winter, ‘Contemporary’, 496. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Keegan-Phipps and Winter, ‘Contemporary’, 496-498. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Mystic Seaport: Demonstrations and Performances*, <http://www.mysticseaport.org/explore/demonstrations/> [26 November 2016] [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Webster and McKay, *Impact*, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Interestingly, the National Maritime Museum Cornwall, situated on Event Square in Falmouth which hosts the largest festival stage, often experiences a decline in visitor numbers during the time of the festival. Indeed, it can be difficult for maritime museums with more traditional spaces than Mystic Seaport, to incorporate music into their exhibits, no doubt influenced by the unhelpful dislocation between music and seafaring in existing scholarship but also because, as an oral tradition, there is a lack of artifacts on shanty singing to make conventional ‘exhibits’. Therefore music often plays a particular and somewhat peripheral role for such museums, for example in informal learning or widening participation events. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Philip Bohlman, *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World*, (Indiana, 1988),xvii. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Hanna Hagmark Cooper, *To Be a Sailors Wife* (Cambridge, 2012), 3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *The Oggymen* <http://www.oggymen.co.uk/> [26 November 2016]. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Tom Lewis, *Worth the Singing* (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. The nickname of one singer was ‘Master Chunder’, evidencing a problematic relationship with seafaring! [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *Voices from the City, Songs from the Sea: A Sea Shanty Choir in London* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOYYGUyL6jw> [26 November 2016] [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *‘Home’s Where the Heart Is’*, https://vimeo.com/69576950

    [27 November 2016]. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)