



Handing it Over to Riley

I was looking at the website of the **Center for the Study of Upper Midwestern Cultures** (CSUMC) in general (csumc.wisc.edu/) and a section about a woman named Sidney Robertson Cowell in particular (csumc.wisc.edu/src/collector.htm), an ethnographer who *...spent most of her 30s traveling alone throughout the United States collecting music from lumberjack camps, dance halls, and chain gangs*. A good number of these recordings were made in northern Wisconsin in the late 30s. And many of the songs feature refrains.

What exactly is a refrain? I was going to write this whole episode about them until I got sidetracked, as you will see. The word refrain, in lyrics, usually refers to a passage at the end of a string of stanzas (verses) that repeats itself, as:

In Dublin's fair city

Where the girls are so pretty

I first set my eyes on sweet Molly Malone

As she pushed her wheel barrow

Through streets broad and narrow

Crying cockles & mussels alive, alive, Oh

She died of a fever

And no one could save her

& that was the end of sweet Molly Malone

Her ghost wheels her barrow

Through streets broad and narrow

Crying cockles & mussels alive, alive, Oh

A refrain differs from a chorus in that a chorus can usually stand alone, whereas a refrain is an actual part of the verse. Dylan uses a lot of refrains, as *the hour that the ship comes in, everybody must get stoned, the times they are a-changin*, and *like a rolling stone*. I've written lots of (not quite as successful) songs with refrains, but also I like listening to songs like this because every verse has a feeling of a homecoming. The whole situation feels almost like the way, at the end of every day, you might say the same old "Good night, sleep tight, and don't let the bed bugs bite." Or, like my little babysitting charge David used to say, "Jesus loves

me this I know, E-I-E-I-E-I-O." You could think of those as refrains for the stanza of a day.

Anyway, I read again the brief online biography of Sidney Robertson Cowell and how she tromped around recording songs from old Wisconsinites 70 years ago. I was interested in her collection because I knew, from the recordings of Art Thieme, that a lot of the old midwest logging songs and woodsy ballads contain refrains and/or choruses. So I perused these old works which are archived on the CSUMC website at digicoll.library.wisc.edu/WiscFolkSong/. And sure enough, in these scratchy old thumpy recordings are many examples I was looking for, some more peculiar and fascinating than others. One, sung by Robert Walker in 1937, turned out to be an 1892 music hall song written by Albert Hall and Felix McGlennon, as I found out elsewhere (the amazing **Internet Archive** at www.archive.org/). Here are a few verses of the song I Handed It Over To Riley. Incidentally, songs with refrains often use the refrain as the song's title too.

There never were two stauncher pals

Than I and my chum Johnny Riley;

We'd booze together or flirt with gals

And we valued each other highly;

Whenever there was any booze to be got,

Or somebody paid for the keg or the pot,

I would collar the measure and gulp the lot,

Then I handed it over to Riley.

One day while I was on a spree

along with my chum Johnny Riley,

One of those men they call a "D" (?)

Came in and surveyed us slyly.

Then he grabbed me gently by the ear,

And whispered, "Young man, I've a warrant here!"

Well, I took that warrant in the greatest fear,

Then I handed it over to Riley

One night I found a watch and chain

While out with my chum Johnny Riley,

And he for his share did soon complain,

And he did it so awfully wily,

But as by a lamp we chanced to pass,

I saw by the light of the flaring gas

That the watch was gold but the chain was

brass,

So the chain went over to Riley

...And so on. Not only do this song's verses have a refrain, but a version of it is used in the chorus, too:

For Riley and I were chums,

and we always shared

Black eyes or sugar plums,

the devil a hair we cared;

When there was anything nice about,

take my word

That when I had done,

I handed it on, to Riley.

There is a lot more to be said about refrains, but as I mentioned at the beginning, though I started to write about this subject, I found myself straying to marvel at the dated phrasing in this ("I would collar the measure and gulp the lot") and other of these lyrics. I was also goose-bumped by the coarse, eerie sound of those old recordings, while gazing at the old timey photograph of Sidney R. Cowell and grooving at THAT. Going back again and listening to more of these old folks of long ago singing yet older songs, I realized how much I enjoy the evocative oldness (the oldness-ness?) of old songs and old recordings of them.

And I'm not the only one who digs this aspect of certain arts, as can be seen by the popularity of digital movie making software that puts pretend scratches and specs on your flick to make it look like old film. Many digital cameras have a "sepia" setting so that your photo can look like a daguerreotype. And music recording software offers tricks to make you sound like you are recording on a coal fired dictaphone. Jeans come pre-oldified and beat up. They make vinyl siding now that looks like old logs.

So I guess in the end, this month's WZ is about how the search for a specific needle can pull you out into a general appreciation of the haystack. There's a swell folk festival in New York state with an ideal name: The Old Songs Festival. We wrote a song for it years ago, with this in the last verse:

Gordo writes a new song on the hood

He would write an old song if he could

That's the refrain I would choose for this month's stanza.

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