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Calling Out to the Heavens for Aid: Disaster Songs in American Folk Music

Abstract: This article will explore American folk songs dealing with disasters, mostly from the first half of the twentieth century. These songs dealt with shipwrecks, train-wrecks, fires, tornadoes and drought and even the so-called Dust Bowl. Along with murder ballads, these songs functioned as a kind of oral newspaper providing information to even illiterate people in rural America. The songs also served as a stimulus to imagination, opening up exotic worlds to people often isolated and sedentary. The songs provided an opportunity for the listener/singer/musician to experience vicarious pain and catharsis in relation to the particular disaster. Finally, there was often a religious dimension to the songs and disasters which were being memorialised in song. The paper will conclude with a demonstration of how the disaster song finally became politicized with the example of Woody Guthrie. The primary source for the songs was the anthology of disaster songs entitled *People Take Warning* released in 2007. The artists included in the collection and discussed in this paper range from well-known figures such as the Carter Family and Charlie Poole to lesser known musicians who are practically forgotten. There will also be a discussion of the predecessors to these songs as well as the successors.

Keywords: *disaster songs; accidents; natural disasters; catharsis; folk music; murder ballads, Woody Guthrie.*

Misery loves company and never more so than when it comes to disaster songs. These kinds of songs have existed from time immemorial with arguably the high point in the popularity of the genre being the first third of the twentieth century in the United States, which of course coincided with the beginnings of field recordings of country/folk/old-time music by musicologists and sound engineers such as John Lomax, Ralph Peer, etc.

I have been inspired by, and made extensive use of, the compilation of

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disaster songs from this period of time entitled *People Take Warning*, released in 2007. Unless otherwise referenced, I will be using the texts of the songs from this anthology. Tom Waits provides the liner notes to the collection, which he introduces aptly as “tragic chronicles of the perils of being human” (Waits). The genres of disaster songs include: floods, fires, shipwrecks, train-wrecks and tornadoes. The disaster genre also has affinities with so-called murder ballads and songs about assassinations. Brian Braiker in a review for *Newsweek* of the anthology comments on the ongoing relevance of songs of this kind.

Amazingly, almost every song in this collection commemorates (if that's the right word) something terrible that actually happened, each tune an ancestor of the cable-television news crawl. ‘If it bleeds, it leads,’ is the news business's oldest mantra. And, boy, do these old 78s bleed. (Braiker)

Prior to this period, of course, disaster songs and narratives were also extremely common, but were not recorded for posterity, although we do have a number of preserved texts. Edith E. Cutting and Harold W. Thompson discuss the situation in the early nineteenth century in *A Pioneer Songster*, specifically in relation to the song *Loss of the Albion* about a shipwreck from 1822: “A murder, a shipwreck, a fire or any catastrophe that occurred before the time of the Civil War was almost sure to be celebrated in a ballad.” (Cutting, 153)

Additional precursors to those focused on this paper included Irish folk songs about the Potato Famine of 1845-1849. Although undoubtedly of interest, they do not focus on a description of the actual natural disaster per se, but more on the political ramifications, in this case the exploitation of Ireland by the English. A typical example would be *Skibbereen/Dear Old Skibbereen*, which takes the form of a dialogue between a father and son, seemingly in America. The father reminisces about his life in his native village *Skibbereen* in county Cork and the reasons why he was forced to leave it behind.

O son, I loved my native land with energy and pride
'Til a blight came o'er my crops, my sheep and cattle died
My rent and taxes were too high, I could not them redeem
And that's the cruel reason that I left old Skibbereen. (Romer)

One of the most famous disaster narratives of the late nineteenth century lives in infamy for its disastrous literary quality. The poem *The Tay Bridge Disaster* by the Scottish poet William McGonagall (1825-1902) was written in 1880

commemorating a tragic incident from a year earlier in Scotland involving the collapse of a bridge when a train was passing over it with all the persons aboard dying (from 60 to 75 casualties). McGonagall's reputation as the world's worst poet is exemplified with this, his most famous/infamous poem. The poem's beginning exemplifies his 'talent' for forced and fumbling verse. McGonagall's doggerel is brilliant in its badness and much of what followed also lacked artistic merit.

Beautiful Railway Bridge of the Silv'ry Tay!
Alas! I am very sorry to say
That ninety lives have been taken away
On the last Sabbath day of 1879,
Which will be remember'd for a very long time.

The final moral is hammered home with very little subtlety and unintentional humour. "For the stronger we our houses do build / The less chance we have of being killed." (Gutoskey) McGonagall's collected works contain a number of unreadable similar poems (*Grace Darling or The Wreck of the "Forfarshire"*, *The Albion Battleship Calamity*, *The Wreck Of The Steamer "London"*), to name but a few. Shipwrecks, as is apparent, were one of his specialities.

With the rise of professional recordings at the beginning of the twentieth century, with money to be made by songwriters with an ear for a hit, entrepreneurial songwriters began to glean the newspapers for suitable material. Carl Wilson describes the process as follows:

There were professional songwriters who made a speciality of news-set-to-music, such as Carson J. Robison of Kansas, who in 1929 described his method: 'First I read all the newspaper stories of, say, a disaster. Then I get to work on the old typewriter. There's a formula, of course. You start by painting everything in gay colors. ... Then you ring in the tragedy—make it as morbid and gruesome as you can. Then you wind up with a moral.' (Wilson)

Charles Wolfe discusses this kind of so-called 'fakelore', elaborating on how Robison and others of his ilk wrote songs for artists like Vernon Dalhart, whose *Wreck of the Old 97* was the first gold record in country music in 1924 (Wolfe 190).

The most famous shipwreck of all time, the sinking of the Titanic in 1912, generated a number of folk songs. The most successful by far was *The Great*

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Titanic/The Titanic/It Was Sad When That Great Ship Went Down/Titanic (Husbands and Wives). The plethora of names makes it apparent that a number of versions came into existence. As with many folk songs, there is no consensus as to the original author of the song. A. E. Perkins discusses the origin: "The 'Titanic' sank on Sunday, April 14, 1912. The following Sunday I saw on a train a blind preacher selling a ballad he had composed on the disaster. The title was 'Didn't that ship go down?'" (Perkins 223)

Ernest Stoneman's version from 1924, which apparently sold two million copies, is the most well-known and deservedly so. The African-American husband and wife blues duo, William and Versey Smith also recorded a version of the song which was included on the ground-breaking collection of folk songs by Harry Smith, *Anthology of American Folk Music*, from 1952. The first verse and the chorus should provide a sense of the song.

It was on one Monday morning just about one o'clock
When that great Titanic began to reel and rock;
People began to scream and cry,
Saying, "Lord, am I going to die?"

It was sad when that great ship went down,
It was sad when that great ship went down,
Husbands and wives and little children lost their lives,
It was sad when that great ship went down.

In an ironic twist of fate, this song became a classic so-called campfire song belted out by millions of children at summer camps around the United States, who seemingly found no discrepancy between the sadness of the disaster and their own 'high and dry' state of being.

Fires were also a popular topic for folk songs. The *People Take Warning* anthology includes the macabre *Ohio Prison Fire* from 1930 by Bob Miller which includes a bizarre conversation between a prison warden and a mourning mother identifying the body of her convict son. This surreal interchange is preceded by the following lines, all sung in a happy-go-lucky singing voice.

Picture an old lady there
Climbing up the smoldering stair

Looking for her boy, a victim of the flames
Now her tears are falling fast
And she finds her son at last
All a tremble she looks on his charred remains

Burning of the Cleveland School is an upbeat song from 1923 by J.H. Howell's Carolina Hillbillies, with the catchy chorus sung with great verve in two-part harmony.

You could hear the children screaming
As the flames were rolling high.
'Daddy come and get your baby,'
Would you stand and see him die?

Baltimore Fire recorded by Charlie Poole in 1930 has a great deal more to it both lyrically and artistically. It tells the story of the Great Baltimore Fire of 1904 which was one of the worst disasters of its kind in American history and which led to much-needed reforms in fire safety. The song captures the frustration of the firefighters, helpless to combat the rising flames.

"Fire, fire," I heard the cry, from every breeze that passes by;
All the world was one sad cry of pity.
Strong men in anguish prayed, and calling loud to heaven for aid,
While the fire in ruin was layin' fair Baltimore, the beautiful city.

Amid an awful struggle of commotion,
The wind blew a gale from the ocean.
Brave firemen struggled with devotion,
But their efforts all proved in vain.

While the disaster songs about fires called for the development of improved technology to prevent further tragedy, train-wreck songs warned of the dangers of a novel mode of transport and were very much of interest as the subject of folk songs. One of the most popular was *Casey Jones/The Ballad of Casey Jones/Casey Jones, the Brave Engineer* about a train engineer who wrecked his vehicle in 1900, supposedly sacrificing his own life through his bravery and

saving the passengers. The song, in various versions, has been covered by a wide range of performers. There are also completely different songs with similar names, such as the Grateful Dead's drug-addled, but catchy and amusing version: "driving that train, high on cocaine, Casey Jones, you better watch your speed." (Grateful Dead)

An equally popular railway song was *The Wreck of the Old 97* by once again a range of artists, but arguably recorded in its classic version by Vernon Delhart in 1924. It provides an account of a famed railway disaster from 1903.

They give him his orders at Monroe, Virginia
Sayin', "Steve, you're way behind time
This is not '38, this is old '97
Put her into Spencer on time"

The song begins with an upbeat reference to a challenge presented to the often lauded at the time profession of the train engineer. The lines describing the actual wreck are described with a great deal of verve and vim, providing obvious titillation to the listeners of the song.

He was going down the grade makin' 90 miles an hour
His whistle broke into a scream
He was found in the wreck, with his hand on the throttle
Scalded to death by the steam

As is often the case with these songs, it ends with a pithy, moralistic lesson to be taken from the tale, in this case an absurd reprimand for less-than-loving wives of heroic train engineers.

Now all you ladies you better take a warning
From this time on and learn
Never speak harsh words to your true lovin' husband
He may leave you and never return

Mining disaster songs were particularly popular during this period and were arguably one of the few sub-genres which actually packed a critical punch, as they often pointed out the insufficient safety standards of the mining

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companies which led to the tragedies. The songs make reference to actual historical mining disasters in West Virginia (not coincidentally one of the centres of country music): *Explosion in the Fairmount Mine*, *McBeth Mine Explosion*, *West Virginia Mine Disaster*. One of the most poignant, *Dream of a Miner's Child*, was covered by bluegrass legend Ralph Stanley among others. Although the origins of the song are murky, with some arguing an older British origin, its sentiments obviously struck a rich vein in the coal-mining regions of the Appalachians. Stanley's version runs as follows, providing an account of a child's dream foreshadowing a coming disaster.

Oh, daddy my daddy, oh don't go away
For dreams have so often come true
Oh, daddy my daddy, oh don't go away
I never could live without you
I dreamed that the mine was all covered with flame
The men all fought for their lives
Just then the scene changed, and the mouth of the mine
Was covered with sweethearts and wives (Stanley)

Less common, but nevertheless, popular were songs about tornadoes, windstorms, cyclones and earthquakes. These are again very much topical in nature and would have served as a way of spreading news to the rest of the nation. The *People Take Warning* anthology includes wide-ranging songs such as *Ryecove Cyclone*, *Santa Barbara Earthquake* and *Tennessee Tornado*. Arguably the most famous of these types of songs, *My Oklahoma Home (It Blowed Away)* was actually written as late as 1961 by Sis Cunningham and her brother Bill, but was based on their own first-hand experience of the Dust Bowl disaster in the 1930s. The song relates of the hopes and dreams of a young farmer and the abrupt loss of everything he had worked so hard for.

It blowed away
It blowed away
My Oklahoma home it blown away
Well it looked so green and fair
When I built my shanty there
Now my Oklahoma home is blown away (Cunningham)

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Floods, in particular, were often connected with biblical imagery from Noah's flood and the theme of cleansing or punishment for the sins of humanity; there was also the related notion of renewal and creating a new, better, world. Examples from the afore-mentioned anthology include: *High Water Everywhere*, *Mississippi Heavy Water Blues*, *Alabama Flood* and *Flood of 1927*. Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie composed and recorded *When the Levee Breaks* in 1929 about the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, which was covered most famously by Led Zeppelin for their fourth classic album in 1971.

If it keeps on rainin', levee's goin' to break
If it keeps on rainin', levee's goin' to break
And the water gonnna come in and we'll have no place to stay

Well all last night I sat on the levee and moan
Well all last night I sat on the levee and moan
Thinkin' 'bout my baby and my happy home

If it keeps on rainin' levee's goin' to break
If it keeps on rainin' levee's goin' to break
And all these people will have no place to stay

The blues feel of the song is very much apparent and explains its attraction for Led Zeppelin.

Sow 'Em on the Mountain, covered by the Carter Family amongst others, is yet another folk song which references both floods and fires. It is very much charged with biblical references to the final days, with the implication being that these disasters might be interpreted as punishments for human iniquity and decadence.

Sowing on the mountain
Reaping in the valley
You're gonna reap
Just what you sow

God gave Noah
That rainbow sign

God gave Noah
That rainbow sign

God gave Noah
That rainbow sign
Won't be water
But fire next time (Carter Family)

While the traditional songs from the Interwar period are more or less presented without personal commentary or any political ramifications, Woody Guthrie, a proud Okie, who experienced the cyclones, windstorms and the consequent tragedy of the Dust Bowl first-hand, practically single-handedly transformed the genre to not only generate compassion and sympathy (which the earlier songs did as well), but also to provide a critique of the government, the capitalist system and the lack of opportunities for the working-class people who were obviously most impacted by these disasters. Guthrie's autobiographical novel *Bound for Glory*, published in 1943, powerfully describes where his interest in the disaster song might have been born.

'Sing to me,' I whispered to Mama.
She had already been rocking me back and forth, humming the tune to an old song. 'What do you want me to sing?'
'That. That song.'
'The name of that song is The Sherman Cyclone.'
'Sing that.'
And so she sang it (Guthrie, *Bound For Glory* 88)

This movingly demonstrates how Guthrie as a child, in the 1910s and 1920s, would have been exposed to the genre and how it captured his imagination. An excerpt from his mother's rendition of the song, referencing once again an actual disaster in Texas in 1896, follows:

You could see the storm approaching
And its cloud looked deathlike black
And it was through
Our little city

That it left
Its deathly track. (Guthrie, *Bound For Glory* 88)

The song, through the voice of the beloved tragic figure of his mother,¹⁰ provides food for thought, but also triggers his social conscience. “And I drifted off to sleep thinking about all of the people in the world that have worked hard and had somebody else come along and take their life away from them.” (Guthrie, *Bound For Glory* 88)

Later in the book, Guthrie describes how he began to use folk songs as a method for not only spreading news, but as a way of making a living and spreading notions about social justice.

If you think of something new to say, if a cyclone comes, or a flood wrecks the country, or a bus load of school children freeze to death along the road, if a big ship goes down, and an airplane falls in your neighborhood, an outlaw shoots it out with the deputies, or the working people go out to win a war, yes, you’ll find a train load of things you can set down and make up a song about. You’ll hear people singing your words around over the country, and you’ll sing their songs everywhere you travel or everywhere you live; and these are the only kind of songs my head or my memory or my guitar has got any room for.” (Guthrie, *Bound For Glory* 254)

This new novel approach to songwriting and performing is exemplified by one of his first compositions *So Long, It’s Been Good To Know Yuh/Dusty Old Dust* from arguably the first concept album *Dust Bowl Ballads* from 1940.

I’ve sung this song, but I’ll sing it again,
Of the place that I lived on the wild windy plains,
In the month called April, county called Gray,
And here’s what all of the people there say: (Guthrie, *Woody Guthrie*)

Unlike the earlier disaster songs, almost inevitably described with deadpan

¹⁰ For more on Woody Guthrie and Huntington’s disease which ravaged both his family and ended his own life prematurely, see David Livingstone. “Pastures of Plenty: the Profound Cultural Legacy of Woody Guthrie.” forthcoming.

objectivity and indifference, this account is very much in first person, related by someone who lived through the disaster, which is about to be described in vivid detail. The chorus captures not only the atmosphere as the storm hits, with the victims wondering if the end of the world had arrived, but also the aftermath as the survivors often had no choice but to pack up their belongings and head west for a new life.

So long, it's been good to know yuh;
So long, it's been good to know yuh;
So long, it's been good to know yuh.
This dusty old dust is a-gettin' my home,
And I got to be driftin' along. (Guthrie, *Woody Guthrie*)

The song continues with the thoughts of Guthrie's family and friends concerning the implications of the disaster, "We talked of the end of the world" or "Instead of marriage, they talked like this" (Guthrie, *Woody Guthrie*), but also includes a critique of the local church and its preacher who still finds time to take collection in the midst of the dust storm. "He said, 'Kind friend, this may the end;/ An' you got your last chance of salvation of sin!'" (Guthrie, *Woody Guthrie*). Guthrie's account makes use of this disaster to punch home barbed criticisms of not only the government which has failed the working people, but also of institutionalized religion which provides little but "pie in the sky"¹¹ solace. Guthrie wrote, of course, hundreds of songs, many of them concerned with disasters both natural and man-made. Near the end of his tragically prematurely shortened career, he penned a song concerned with a plane crash, which was only recorded posthumously, *Deportee/Plane Wreck at Los Gatos*. He was led to write the song upon reading the news of a plane crash carrying Mexican itinerant labourers back home. Only the American pilot and airplane staff were listed by name while the illegal immigrants or deportees were anonymous. This gave rise to a tribute to these unsung heroes, which is still very much relevant to the present.

Goodbye to my Juan, goodbye, Rosalita,

¹¹ Term coined apparently by the labour activist and folk singer Joe Hill, see David Livingstone. "Dreaming of Joe Hill: Folk Songs by and about the Greatest Hero of the American Labour Movement." forthcoming.

Adios mis amigos, Jesus y Maria;
You won't have your names when you ride the big airplane,
All they will call you will be 'deportees' (Guthrie, *Woody Guthrie*)

The People Take Warning anthology is divided into three categories and records: man versus machine, in other words, disaster songs about train wrecks and shipwrecks; man versus nature, floods, fires, mining collapses, earthquakes and the like; man versus man (and woman, too), involving murder ballads and political assassinations. I would like to briefly make reference to the last third category. Just as Guthrie politicized and personalized the disaster song, Dylan did something similar with the genre of the murder ballad, which dates back to the Middle Ages if not even earlier (Cain and Abel).

One of the most widely covered and known songs of this kind is *Tom Dooley*, inspired by an actual 'sweetheart' murder in North Carolina in 1866. The song told in an amoral, matter-of-fact voice, provides no substantial explanation for the wicked deed. Dooley sees to do it on a whim, only to realise the consequences of his actions when it is too late.

I met her on the mountain
There I took her life
Met her on the mountain
Stabbed her with my knife

Numerous other examples could be provided along similar lines: *Pretty Polly*, *Banks of the Ohio*, *Stagger Lee*, *Long Black Veil*, etc.

Bob Dylan, Guthrie's self avowed disciple, at least at the beginning of his musical career, performed a similar act as his mentor, not with the disaster song, however, but with the murder ballad. Songs such as *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll* or *Hurricane* about the wrongly accused boxer Ruben 'Hurricane' Carter make use of the tradition to call society to task for injustice and racism. A short excerpt from the first song, which relates of the murder of an African-American woman by a young white man in Maryland in 1963 should serve to exemplify the accomplishment.

William Zanzinger killed poor Hattie Carroll,
With a cane that he twirled around his diamond ring finger

...

But you who philosophize, disgrace and criticize all fears,
Take the rag away from your face, now ain't the time for
Your tears. (Dylan)

Paige Hernandez in a recording made for the Kennedy Center on the disaster song tradition makes an apt comparison between rap and hip hop in the African American community, often spreading the word about atrocities and topical issues and the disaster song in the early twentieth century. (Hernandez). This educational aspect of the songs is certainly valid, but the songs also provided a form of catharsis which we could seemingly learn a great deal from here in the twenty-first century. Living in an age being over-inundated with news about war, murder and tragedy has led to a great deal of mental stress. Perhaps the singing of these tunes provided a healthier form of pain relief. Creating a song and singing it also made for a form of community and solidarity, with a kind of protection in numbers. Tom Waits in the liner notes to *People Take Warning!* eloquently explains the partly contradictory attraction of the songs.

If there's an overriding moral point to all of these old songs, that might be it. Take warning, but don't stop dancing as long as the fiddles are still playing. ... It may be dour and morbid on the surface, full of floods, shipwrecks, hurricanes, suicides, murders, and uncountable disasters, but it is somehow strangely redemptive, too, reminding us that we are all survivors even as it also reminds us that when the music stops, we all have to sit down. (Waits)

These songs provide a pleasure of gawking and titillation, but also involve an expanding of consciousness and acquired compassion. The listener not only realizes his or her own good fortune, "There but for the grace of God go I." but is all called to repent: "Where you gonna run to when the world's on fire?" (Carter Family)

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