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# The Lost Songs of Motherhood

"Oh hard is the fortune of all womankind
They're always controlled, they're always confined
Controlled by their parents, until they are wives
Then slaves to their husbands the rest of their lives"
—Waggoner's Lad (traditional, Appalachian, multiple sources)

This is taken from a well-known traditional ballad from Appalachia, first recorded in 1916 by the ethnomusicologist Cecil Sharp, and part of the vibrant ongoing living tradition of Old Time music still practiced today. It's some of the music I grew up with as a first generation Australian child born to an American mother who had taken her fair sampling of folk music in the sixties. As I grew up and became a musician myself, I loved the unusual melodies, the singing style, and the fast grooves, but I found the words quaint and dated—nonsense songs that at best perhaps contained a hint of hard times long gone past but had little relevance to me as a woman today.

Then I had children.

The Appalachian Mountains is a chain that runs from the top right hand corner of the USA to the bottom. They were settled by English, Scottish, and Irish people, as well as slaves hailing from West Africa (who brought the banjo with them) from the early eighteenth century. There were few stores, and the economy was largely nonmonetary. Big social events included square dances or barn dances. Life was relatively isolated, and the men would often be gone for days at a time, leaving the women alone on the mountain with their children and their songs. A small look at these songs through the lens of motherhood forms the basis for this article.

First we need a definition for music, which can indeed be slippery. Music is

often lumped together with art. But it can be other things, which are older and deeper. It literally forms the soundtrack to our lives. It has a spiritual depth that can break you open and put you back together again. But it is first and foremost a language, which encompasses all those things, as well as banality and humour. It can be Shakespeare, or Donald Trump, or Twitter. But in our mainstream neoliberal society, music has undergone a change in the last few generations and has now become firmly packaged (with the exception of high art which requires prohibitive hours of relentless focus and financial cost) as a product.

The music you hear in day to day life—from shopping centres, to the radio, to Spotify—has been filtered through a cost-profit analysis. Women are often the singer and the product for sale, but these songs are often written or co-written, produced, and directed by men, who effectively control the narrative being piped into our ears in public spaces and in our homes. Women peak at sixteen years of age in these songs, whose themes centre on sex, youth, and the thrill of the chase. The whole thing is an exercise in fuckability—to a good beat and bassline. Where are actual women's voices in this? Elders' voices? Mothers' voices? Where are the songs for you once you become a mother, and the chase is over? The dominant cultural dialogue is male. Where is the discussion of the soul and the inner lived experience of womanhood? It's a separate topic in itself.

Music has not always been this way, with a big, centralized corporate interest dictating what is available to consume and participate in. Music has always been integral to culture. People have shared songs and tunes (and danced to them) for as long as there has been a community. These songs are encoded with information, wisdom, and culture. And to quote Michael Pollan, "culture is just a fancy word for your mom."

There is nothing older than singing, and in that, there is nothing older than a mother singing to their baby. In the Appalachians, the women had brought their songs with them from the old country, which they then mixed with African slave music and Native American music (large part Cherokee).

Child ballads (named for Francis Child, the collector) are a collection of English storysongs that date back as far as the thirteenth century. While they went dormant in England, they were retained in the New World. Known colloquially as murder ballads, they were long, sprawling songs (fifty verses or more) that were sung while working or for entertainment. They are relatively graphic and deal frequently with every flavour of domestic violence you can imagine: husbands kill wives; wives kill husbands; mothers kill babies or terminate pregnancies in a variety of ways; and women are sentenced to eternal pregnancies by their evil mother in-laws and never give birth. They are dark, and they got darker as they moved to the New World. Songs were treasured as heirlooms and passed down. They evolved, and new ones were written against a backdrop of an isolated existence with no birth control, strict patriarchy and

religion, and the generalized violence that comes with a frontier. Women had lay midwives ("granny women") but could not always access them. Nutrition was sporadic, and children were plenty, so the women sang as an escape, as an art form, and as an interwoven part of their lives. You don't need to look at these songs very hard, once viewing through a maternal lens, and see an element of trauma processing here. These murder ballads, by the way, where known locally as "love songs." I'll let you ponder that.

**What'll I Do with the Baby-O**
(traditional, recorded by Jean Ritchie, Kentucky)

Chorus

What'll I do with the baby-o, what shall I do with the baby-o
What'll I do with the baby-o, when she won't go to sleepy

Wrap her up in calico,
give her to her daddy-o
(repeat)
Chorus

Tell your daddy when he gets home
to give old Blue a chicken bone
(Repeat)

Chorus

Dance her north and dance her south
Pour a little moonshine in her mouth
(Repeat)
Wrap her up all warm and soft,
toss her in the old hayloft
(repeat)

Every time the baby cries
Stick a little needle in the baby's eye
That's what I'll do with the baby-o
When she won't go to sleepy-o

When I had my daughter in 2014, I was amazed by the songs that came pouring out of my mouth. They were my mother's songs that had been sung to me as a child. If had you asked me before I gave birth, I don't think I could have recalled a single one of them. It was like they were embedded in my DNA, and I felt compelled to sing them on and inoculate my daughter with them. It was a powerful feeling.

Moreover, as I sang this particular song to my squalling babe, I was stunned to realise that here was this song. I had performed and recorded this song years earlier as a cute "bagatelle." It was loaded with sensible and earthy practical suggestions—get the dad to do household chores, dance the baby around, or feed them a drop of alcohol. But the song concluded with the frustration of still holding a yowling infant, the suggestions being successful, and the final conclusion of poking the baby in the eye. I felt heard and held not only by the nameless mother who had written it but by the generations of mothers between me and her who had added suggestions while rocking their own infants and learning the art of motherhood. And I felt less prone to poking the baby in the eye. For the first time, I felt I saw these women's power and wisdom, and I started looking at their songs in a new light, as important documents. For me, my own matrescence provided a new context for interpreting and discovering songs, and the women who had sung them. And they were waiting for me.

Lullabies are interesting creatures. Who is the singer? Who is the audience? What is their purpose? The baby doesn't understand the words, although the voice is soothing. According to Holly Pester,

> The sound of lullaby is the cry of reproductive work. The lullaby is the mother's (the sister's, the maidservant's, the nanny's) work song. Like any shanty or marching chant the rhythms of her body set the tempo of the song—rocking and jigging the baby into slumber—co-ordinate the act of material effort (in the scene of supposedly immaterial labour). Here, as with washing, cooking, loving, sympathizing, comforting and breastfeeding, the woman's body performs as a resource to soothe and oil the mechanics of capital. This is care work shown for what it is, sweating, muscular movement-task. (114)

I would also add that in the case of traditional music, having "work songs" that describe the breadth and depth of the motherhood experience offers wisdom, learnings, solace, and a feeling of comradeship among mothers stretching back through time. Every long lasting occupation has its work songs.

Lullabies weren't my first introduction to mother's songs though. My first pregnancy ended in a spectacular twelve week miscarriage with all the bells and whistles—haemorrhage, hospital, shock, and two D and Cs. It was one done on the spot with no pain relief or anaesthesia. I was ejected back into the regular, nonchildbearing, working world with little ceremony and a sea of people who didn't know what to say, so said nothing. Imagine my surprise when Child ballad 74 popped up in my iTunes.

In this ballad of many verses, Lady Margaret and sweet William have a wonderful wedding, described in detail, and William lies down to bed and has a disturbing dream in which he lists all the ways in which he is contented with his life, kisses her cold hands, feet and lips, and then wakes up.

**Lady Margaret Sweet William (Child 74)**

Well the night passed away, the day came on
And into the morning light
Sweet William said "I'm troubled in my head
By the dreams that I dreamed last night
Such dreams, such dreams as these
I know they mean no good for I dreamed that my bower was full of red swine
And my bride's bed full of blood"

He asked "Is Lady Margaret in her room?
Or is she out in the hall?"
But Lady Margaret lay in a cold, black coffin
With her face turned to the wall

I sat bolt upright. The recording I had was sung by a man. No further explanation is given for her cause of death. Blood features heavily in love songs. In my own small scale social experiments – men do not hear the implication in these verses. Women (especially those with experience of miscarriage or haemorrhage) do. Context is important.

The importance of the mother to mother audience can't be diminished. Most murder ballads today are performed by men, which obscures the original meaning and makes the songs sound funny and quaint, if not creepy. I know that when I was younger, other female musicians and I were uncomfortable and embarrassed to sing these songs publicly, but we couldn't articulate why, even though the songs were fabulous and an important part of the repertoire. Most of us learned some in private, though, as we were drawn to the content.

If you feel I'm drawing a long bow and seeing things that aren't there in these songs, take this song, "My Love Has Brought Me to Despair," which tells of a well-off woman who has fallen pregnant out of wedlock (alluded to be the fact that she can no longer tie her apron).

**My Love Has Brought Me to Despair**
**(Berzilla Wallin, Madison County NC)**

There is a flower I've heard say
that'll cure false love both night and day

And of these flowers I did pull
Until I got my apron full

I gathered black, I gathered blue
But none of these flowers could I find
That could cure false love or ease my mind

It's out of these leaves I made my bed
And out of these flowers a pillow for my head

It's down she lay and nary word spoke
Until her aching heart was broke

And in the green meadows around
I thought I heard some doneful sound

Speaking the unspoken. To the uninitiated, this song could be about a young girl who had broken up with her boyfriend and who is now trying to pick a posy to superficially brighten up her day. Who heard that? I guarantee that I would have prechildren.

As well as the bone-deep acknowledgement of how an out-of-wedlock-pregnancy will be life-ending for this woman, this song contains at least partial information on how to end a pregnancy. Black and blue cohosh is a well-known emmenagogue and an abortefactants. And she picks an apron full—perhaps the dose required? I'm tantalized by the fact that there seems to be a line missing there. Perhaps Berzilla when confronted by an outsider man, with wax recorder in her face and singing this most intimate song, held something back.

Another great example of hidden meanings is the "Riddle Song," a child ballad originally from fourteenth-century England.

**Riddle Song (Traditional)**

I gave my love a cherry
That had no stone
I gave my love a chicken
That had no bone
I gave my love a ring
That had no end
I gave my love a baby
With no crying

How can there be a cherry
That has no stone?
How can there be a chicken
That has no bone?
How can there be a ring
That has no end?
How can there be a baby
With no crying?

A cherry when it's blooming
It has no stone
A chicken when it's pipping
It has no bone
A ring when it's a rolling,

It has no end
A baby when it's sleeping
Has no crying.

Is this baby napping or a stillborn? It's a slow, contemplative melody, sung solo.

To anyone who hasn't mothered a baby, a baby with no crying can be a good thing. I played this song with a band and toured it. We sang it hundreds of times, without this possibility ever occurring to us. It wasn't till I was firmly ensconced in mothering until I realised the patently obvious; that you want your baby to cry.

There are more, hundreds more.

I would contend that modern Australian women have had our work songs, which should be our birthright, taken from us and replaced (because you have to replace songs, or they flourish underground) with Taylor Swift, Katy Perry, and Justin Bieber. What effect does that have? What meanings and themes

and understandings are unavailable? We don't even know what insights we are missing. We have no songs to sing in the dark.

Information is not knowledge. Knowledge is not wisdom. Appalachian women's love songs are peppered with wisdom of the relationship between life, love, sex, birth, and death under patriarchy, and, perhaps they contain a roadmap, or at least touchstone or reference, for surviving.

Transmitting and sharing songs and truths like these to our daughters and to our sisters mean our wisdom and learnings are retained through the generations. Mothering in the absence of this wisdom (held and passed on by elders) means we are left to reinvent our own wheel, painful truth by painful truth, for our own children in our own houses on our own, with no feeling of being heard or reassurance that others have gone through similar and survived. This also limits our ability to progress socially. Our songs are important.

**Work Cited**

Pester, Holly. *The Restless Compendium: Interdisciplinary Investigations of Rest and Its Opposites*, edited by Felicity Callard, et al., Palgrave, 2016, pp. 113-18.