

Let Us Drink: A Brief History of the American Drinking Song

By Jesse Nolan

The wine urges me on, the bewitching wine, which sets even a wise man to singing and to laughing gently and rouses him up to dance and brings forth words which were better unspoken.

- Homer, *The Odyssey* -

In the entire history of man's gaiety, no two things are perhaps more inextricably linked than the drinking of alcohol and the singing of songs. Alcohol and music are ancient man-made inventions; both can be traced back to at least 2500 B.C. in Mesopotamia, and both have always been used as celebratory and social devices. It could be said that alcohol and music have had a joyous partnership throughout the history of mankind. Alcohol is even mentioned in the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, where an all too familiar story occurs. A man, in this case Noah, after surviving the great flood, plants a vineyard, drinks the wine, gets drunk and takes off his clothes. "When he drank some of the wine, he got drunk and uncovered himself inside his tent" (Genesis 9: 21-22). And although there is no evidence that Noah sang any songs, it cannot be denied that drunken people have been singing songs for centuries.

As a result of the lifelong partnership of alcohol and music, it was only a matter of time before songwriters turned to drinking as a viable source for the subject matter of songs. The countrymen of Ireland and Germany are famous for their drinking songs, and even European classical composers would pick up on the trend. In Giuseppe Verdi's operas alone "drinking songs range from the cheerful "Libiamo" ("Let Us Drink") in *La Traviata* (1853), to Iago's foreboding toast in *Otello* (1887)."¹ And it would not be long before American composers and tunesmiths would use this European example coupled with the tunes imported by European immigrants at the turn of the 20th century to craft their own songs about drinking. In fact, the drinking song became so vital to American music that in the 1920s John Phillip Sousa "testified in front of the United States Congress against prohibition on the grounds that it adversely affected the American musical theatre because it deprived the drinking song of its traditional social motivation."²

This "social motivation" is the subject of a majority of American drinking songs. An example of these types of songs can be found in the Starr Sheet Music Collection at the Lilly Library of Indiana University. Among the vast holdings of the library, a catalogue of about one hundred drinking songs exists in sheet music form. By examining a representative sample of the drinking song collection, undeniable links between songs are discovered in the areas of subject matter, lyric content, formal music elements (melody, rhythm, harmony) and historical

¹ Encyclopedia Britannica Online. www.britannica.com

² Encyclopedia Britannica Online. www.britannica.com

background. These links not only reveal patterns in music composition but also shed light on the social context and background of the era in which these songs were composed.

Among the twenty-five songs examined in detail, a great majority of them fall into one of two subject categories. The first category is actual drinking songs or “Stein songs” as they were sometimes called; songs intended to be sung while drinking. Stein songs were usually written in some type of compound meter (3/4 or 6/8), and occasionally bear the marking “tempo di valse (waltz).” Included among these is “Beer, Beer, Beer” (1904), a humorous drinking song celebrating “the best liquid known.” The song, by Heelan and Helf and published by Sol Bloom comes complete with an overflowing beer stein on the cover and includes this rousing chorus in 3/4 time:

*If it's beer, beer, glorious beer,
No matter what brand may appear.
For the labels they paste can't improve on the taste,
But be careful you don't let a drop go to waste,*

*If it's beer, beer, glorious beer,
Let's all take our hats off and cheer.
Cheer long and cheer, and cheer all in a crowd,
For the man who invented beer.*

Another example of the Stein song is the hilarious “Budweiser’s A Friend of Mine” (1907) by Vincent Brown (words) and Seymour Furth (music) and published by Shapiro Music Publishing. An unabashed advertisement for the popular brand name beer (the cover bears the words “Compliments of the Anheuser-Busch Brewing Assn.” inscribed on an overflowing beer stein), the song boasts of the loyalty and companionship of a glass of Budweiser beer, even going so far as to insinuate that a glass of beer is better than a woman because it “never talks back to me.” In the second verse the main character is caught coming home late by his wife Eliza. When asked “Where on earth did you roam?” he tells her he’s “been taking Budweiser home.” Another example of this kind of advertisement is the song “Schlitz” (1910) by Harry Breen (words) and Fred Fischer (music) and also published by Shapiro. Written in 3/4 and marked “Waltz Moderato,” it includes the chorus:

*Schlitz, Schlitz, Donner and Blitz
A Dutchman can drink without losing his wits
If you look for a place where a good German sits,
You find Schlitz, Schlitz, Schlitz!*

The words to the chorus are also indicative of another trend in sheet music publishing that emerged in the Tin Pan Alley period (1890-1920); that of marketing music to certain segments of the population, which in this case is the large German and Dutch population of Milwaukee. The words imply that you would not be a “good German” if you did not drink Schlitz beer. Other tunes

of this same advertisement type include “Piper Heid Sieck” (1928), an advertisement for the champagne of the same name, by Geo. Cooper and Chas. E. Pratt.

Other Stein songs were more about friendship and camaraderie than about the actual drink. “Jolly Fellows” (1906) by W.H. Gardner (words) and Louis F. Gottschalk (music) even includes the words “Stein Song” on the cover beneath the title. Whereas the verses are written in 6/8 “Con Spirito” much in the tradition of the other Stein songs examined, the chorus switches to 4/4 time and is marked “Marziale.” The chorus includes the words, “So then, Up, comrades, up, let us pledge now a stein / That we hold all true friendship a blessing diving!” Other tunes with the same subject include “A Stein Song” (1898) by Richard Hovey & Frederic Field Bullard, “Sparkling and Bright” (undated) by James B. Taylor, “Little Brown Jug” (undated) attributed to the name Ryan and “Music, Love, & Wine” which was sung at the Baltimore Anacreontic Society, a name that by its definition means “celebrating love and drinking.” The term Anacreontic is coined after the Greek poet Anacreon, who lived in the 6th century B.C. and is noted for his songs in praise of love and wine. The original Anacreontic Society was a popular gentleman’s music club in London, whose ‘constitutional song’ “To Anacreon in Heaven” is the source of the melody to which Francis Scott Key set the words to “The Star-Spangled Banner.”³ Beneath the title of “Music, Love, and Wine” is the inscription “Arranged by Beethoven” with no further explanation. The piece was published by John Cole of Baltimore, MD but bears no date of publication. An educated guess would place this piece pre-1850.

The second type of drinking song is the “Champagne Charlie” song, a type of song that tells a story where alcohol is involved or acts as a catalyst. (I have dubbed them “Champagne Charlie” songs because the popular song by the same name and all of its variants are the best representation of this song style.) The majority of the remainder of the twenty-five songs examined fall into this category. By examining four versions of the song “Champagne Charlie,” three of which bear dates (1867 & 1868), the idiosyncrasies of this song type come into focus. The first example is titled “Champagne Charlie” (1868) by Alfred Lee (music) and George Leybourne (words) and published by Lee & Walker of Philadelphia, PA. The cover bears a drawing of Champagne Charlie, decked out in a three-piece suit with a top hat pointing his cane to an exploding champagne bottle held in his left hand. Below the drawing the song is classified as a “Comic Song Schottisch.” The music, in 2/4 time and the key of C Major, is marked “Allegro.” Told from Charlie’s point of view, the song chronicles his shenanigans, night “games,” and “sprees” with his “boys” and explains why he “ne’er could get a wife” in spite of all of his “grand accomplishments.” The quandary is solved when he reveals “The way I gain’d my title’s by a hobby which I’ve got” (drinking and partying) and that “a bottle in the morning sets me right then very quick” and finally that he was “a noise all night, in bed all day and swimming in champagne.”

³ <http://www.wordsmith.org/words/anacreontic.html>

Like the other songs examined (“Beer, Beer, Beer,” “Schlitz,” and “Piper Heid Sieck”), the lyrics of “Champagne Charlie” also include a few advertisements for the brand names of Pall Mall cigarettes as well as the popular champagne brand Moet Vintage which Charlie claims is the only kind that “satisfies his Champagne swell.”

The second version of this song published by Oliver Ditson and Co. in 1867 bears the title “Champagne Charlie” on the cover, but on the inside is titled “Champagne Charlie Was His Name.” This particular version of the song is credited to Alfred Lee (music) and H.J. Whymark (words). The cover drawing is *exactly* the same as the Lee & Walker publication. Interestingly, two copies of this piece survive in the Starr collection, one of which has a colorized cover. The music to this version of the song is *identical* to that of the Lee & Walker version. Both pieces even contain the same eight bar intro and the same number of verses (five). The only difference is that the Ditson version is written from Champagne Charlie’s ex-girlfriends point of view and bears completely different lyrics than the Lee & Walker version. Charlie’s nameless ex-girlfriend chronicles his night games and explains why she left when she sings the final verse:

*His cash did quickly disappear
Which did not well suit me,
For Champagne dear – had he drank beer
Things different now would be.*

*I might have been his slave for life
But now ‘tis all in vain,
For how can he require a wife
When wedded to Champagne.*

This version of “Champagne Charlie” bears similarity to the song “Budweiser’s a Friend of Mine” in that the alcohol becomes paramount over the woman. Finally, there are also more advertisements in this version including the brands Madam Cliquot (champagne) and Henry Clay (cigars).

The final two versions of “Champagne Charlie” are instrumental versions and are a testament to the popularity and success of the original song. The first, titled “Champagne Charlie Galop” by W.M. Dressler bears no date, but was published in New York by J.L. Peters. It is written for solo piano and takes the constant eighth note pulse of Alfred Lee’s original melody and uses a gallop rhythm (eighth-eighth-dotted eighth-sixteenth) instead. The melody is in C Major and is *identical* to that of both vocal versions, although Lee is not credited anywhere. The most interesting moment in this piece comes after the first verse and chorus. Here, the composer adds a four bar tag which segues to completely new music, a quasi-development section of the main theme which uses the form AABA with each section lasting 16 measures. At the end of this AABA form there is a da capo and the piece ends on the fine which is located at the end of the four bar segue. The last of the “Champagne Charlie” pieces, “Champagne Charlie’s Galop” (1868) by Paul Steinhagen and published in New York by W.M. Hall & Son is written for trumpet and piano in the key of D major. It is not clear whether this is a transposed part, but if it is, then the piece

sounds in the concert key of C major like the other three versions. This piece is notable because upon first glance it bears absolutely no relation to the original “Champagne Charlie” song other than the time signature (2/4). The form of the first 64 bars is AABB, with each section lasting 16 bars. However, after the second B section, a new section of music labeled “Chantant” (which literally means “singing”) is introduced. Written in the key of G major (the subdominant of D), this section of music presents Alfred Lee’s original melody in 2:1 augmentation with legato phrase marks. The verse and chorus are both 32 bars long. A da capo at the end of this section brings the return of the A and B section.

Another example of the “Champagne Charlie” song type is “Come Down and Pick Your Husband Out” by Arthur Longbrake (words) and Ed Edwards (music), published in Philadelphia by Jos. Morris and Company. Although the piece bears no date of publication, the cover, which is in color and includes a drawing of a few drunk men stumbling around outside a city bar, is reminiscent of late Tin Pan Alley era covers and therefore the piece is most likely from circa 1910. The “Charlie” in this particular song is a man named Mr. Smith who imbibes a few too many drinks on a night out with his friends Mr. Jones and Mr. Brown. Consequently, his wife must come down to the bar and pick him up as indicated by the chorus:

*Good Missus Smith, Kind Missus Smith
Oh won't you please come down
We cannot tell which is Smith
For we are turned around
Good Missus Smith, Kind Missus Smith
No more we care to roam
So come down and pick your husband out
The rest of us want to go home.*

The song “Don’t Tell Me In The Morning What I Did The Night Before “ (1913) is told from the point of view of a man hung over from the previous evening’s revelry. On the cover is pictured a sailor with his hands clasping his throbbing head from which sprouts dream bubbles containing memories of last night’s events. The chorus reads:

*Don't tell me in the morning
What I did the night before
My head is aching, almost breaking
I have heard it all before.
Of course you know what I know
And perhaps a great deal more
Don't tell me in the morning
What I did the night before.*

Another song that uses alcohol as the stories catalyst is “I Wish New Year’s Was Twice A Month” (1864) by M. Keller (music) and Bay State (words) and published by G.D. Russell and Company in Boston. The song, in 2/4 time and marked Tempo di Schottisch, is written in heavy dialect and is presumably a minstrel song. The verses are written like all the other songs, for a single voice with piano accompaniment, but the chorus shifts to four voice writing, an indication that a troupe of singers on stage may have sung this piece. The six verses of this song chronicle the New Year’s

Eve party-crashing of the African-American main character who wishes New Year's Eve was twice a month because, among other things, he "git such drink and feed," gets "free lunch in ev'ry body's house," and gets to "see such pooty gals." Midway through the song, he gets drunk on wine and whisky and slides off his chair and onto the floor.

Finally, the song "A Little More Cider" (1853) by Austin Hart uses apple cider as a metaphor for love. Much like "I Wish New Year's Was Twice A Month," the main character in this song is also an African-American man, but this time he is in love with a white woman whom he calls Snow-flake. The third verse of the song uses the making of apple cider as a metaphor for love:

*Oh I wish I was an apple
And Snow-flake was another
Oh what a pretty pair we'd make
Upon a tree together
How bad de darkies all would feel
When on the tree I spied her
To think how we would be
When we're made into cider.*

There are undoubtedly countless other examples of "Champagne Charlie" type songs in the American songbook, a few more of which are "The Load That Father Carried" (1905) by Frank Fogerty & J.B. Mullen, "Razzle Dazzle" (1938) by Willard Thompson, "The Rinkey Doo Café" (1915) by Ernest B. Lydick, and "Moonlight Cocktail" (1941) by Kim Gannon and Lucky Roberts.

Taking a closer look at the formal music elements of each of these songs it is interesting to note that every single one of them is in a major key, the most popular of which are C and Bb Major. D Major and G Major also appear frequently. In fact, 22 out of the 25 songs examined are in these four keys. It is also interesting to note that all of the tunes except one, "The Load That Father Carried" (1905) have instrumental introductions of either four or eight measures, and some are followed by two measure vamps marked "till ready," indicating that they were probably sung on stage.

Almost all of the tunes are also rather harmonically simple. Many of them, such as "Beer, Beer, Beer," "Budweiser's A Friend of Mine," "Champagne Charlie," "I Wish New Year's Was Twice a Month," "Schlitz," "Little Brown Jug," and "A Little More Cider" contain few, if any, harmonies outside of the key, except for the occasional secondary dominant, the most common of which is the V/V chord. The simplest of all the tunes is "Little Brown Jug" which uses the following form for both the verses and the chorus:

||: I | IV | V | I :||

Many of these harmonically simple tunes also contain scalar melodies that are memorable and easy to sing with regular four or eight bar phrase lengths and repetitive rhythm. Almost every

tune sets the words in a completely syllabic fashion. Many of the tunes, such as “Champagne Charlie” also use a steady rhythm of constant eighth notes or quarter notes with a longer note value (half note) at the end of each phrase. Some of the more common melodic phrase structures include A4 A’4 (“Beer, Beer, Beer”); A4 B4 A4 B’4 (“Champagne Charlie”); A4 B4 A4 C4 D4 (“Come Down And Pick Your Husband Out”); and A4 B4 C4 D4 (“Don’t Tell Me In The Morning What I Did The Night Before”). The time signatures vary from piece to piece, but the two most common are 2/4 and 3/4 time. Very few songs include the 4/4 time signature.

As simple as many of the songs are, a few of them bear some harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic complexities. Of particular note is the song “Don’t Tell Me In The Morning What I Did The Night Before,” which uses two colorful harmonies, bVI and bVII⁷, in succession leading to a vi chord. The tune also uses many seventh chords, including a III⁷, many secondary dominant seventh chords, and a barrage of V⁷ chords. The most interesting tune is “Five Hundred Thousand Devils” (1911) by Leola Harvey Elder (words) and Joseph Melville (music). Coincidentally, it uses the same types of harmonies as “Don’t Tell Me In The Morning...,” including III, bVI⁷, and many secondary dominants and even includes a few more surprises such as #ii⁴⁻³ → I, #iv⁶⁻⁵ → iii, vii⁰⁶⁻⁴ → I, bIII⁷ → V⁷/V, #vi⁰⁷ → V, and #vi⁰⁷ → vii⁰⁷. The tune also changes tempos rather frequently. Written in 6/8 and marked “Allegro Vivace/Moderato (vigoroso)” the piece includes many tempo and dynamic instructions such as *meno mosso*, *rit.*, *atempo*, *rall.*, *accel.*, *cresc. e. accel.*, *p. e molto rit.*, *rall. e. cresc.*, and many fermatas. Another rhythmically notable song is “Jolly Fellows” which is the only tune examined that changes time signatures from 6/8 (verse) to 4/4 (chorus).

Among the songs with words, all of them except four are written for one voice (or unison) in the verse and chorus. “Little Brown Jug”, “A Little More Cider”, and “I Wish New Year’s Was Twice A Month,” have choruses written in four part harmony and “Music, Love, and Wine” has a chorus in three part harmony. Finally, almost all of the songs offer the standard verse-chorus alternation with the exception of only one, “Five Hundred Thousand Devils” which is completely through-composed with no repetition.

Lastly, two of the pieces, “Schlitz” (1910) and “The Load That Father Carried” (1905), both of which were written at the commercial height of Tin Pan Alley, contain advertisements for other music by the same publishing company on the inside front cover. In the pre-1900 years it was not uncommon for many publishers to print the titles of other pieces on the back cover, but by 1900 the inside front cover, which was usually left barren was used to print excerpts of other pieces. On the inside cover of “Schlitz” the heading “Try this over on your piano,” is found, beneath which is an excerpt titled “Intermezzo” by Herbert Ingraham. The purpose of this advertisement was to get the music purchaser to play this small piece of music which might them motivate them to get out and purchase the full version.

By examining popular drinking songs of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it becomes clear that their coincidences far outweigh their differences. These songs, although lost to the archives of collegiate libraries such as the Lilly Library hold the “social motivation,” as Sousa called it, behind which many facets of American culture from relationships to advertising can be examined. And although perhaps many of the words and lyrics within the songs may have been better left unspoken in Homer’s eyes, the colorful music history of the American songbook would have never been the same without them.

List Of Songs Studied

“Beer, Beer, Beer”

(New York & Chicago: Sol Bloom, 1904)
by Heelan & Helf

“Budweiser’s A Friend Of Mine”

(New York: Shapiro Music Publishing, 1907)
w. Vincent Bryan, m. Seymour Furth

“Champagne Charlie”

(Philadelphia: Lee & Walker, 1868)
w. George Leybourne, m. Alfred Lee

“Champagne Charlie Was His Name”

(Boston: Oliver Ditson & Co, 1867)
w. H.J. Whymark, m. Alfred Lee

“Champagne Charlie Galop”

(New York: J.L. Peters, No Date)
W.M. Dressler

“Champagne Charlie’s Galop”

(New York: W.M. Hall & Son, 1868)
Paul Steinhagen

“Come Down And Pick Your Husband Out (The Rest of Us Want To Go Home)”

(Philadelphia: Jos. Morris & Company, No Date)
w. Arthur Longbrake, m. Ed Edwards

“Don’t Tell Me In The Morning What I Did The Night Before”

(Denver: Robert D. Sharp Music Co., 1913)
S.D. Robb

“Five Hundred Thousand Devils”

(New York: M. Witmark & Sons, 1911)
w. Leola Harvey Elder, m. Joseph Melville

“I Wish New Year’s Was Twice A Month”

(Boston: G.D. Russell & Company, 1864)
m. M. Keller, w. Bay State

“Jolly Fellows”

(New York – Detroit: Jerome H. Remick & Co., 1906)
w. W.H. Gardner, m. Louis F. Gottschalk

“Schlitz”

(New York: Shapiro Music Publishing, 1910)
w. Harry Breen, m. Fred Fischer

“Little Brown Jug”

(London: W. Paxton, No Date)
Anonymous

- “The Little Brown Jug”
(Cincinnati: John Church & Co., No Date)
composed and arranged by Ryan
- “A Little More Cider”
(Boston: Oliver Ditson, 1853)
Austin Hart
- “The Load That Father Carried”
(New York: P.J. Howley, Inc., 1905)
w. Frank Fogerty, m. J.B. Mullen
- “Piper Heid Sieck”
(New York: Chas. H. Ditson & Co., 1928)
w. Geo. Cooper, m. Chas. E. Pratt
- “Razzle Dazzle”
(New York: Willis Woodward & Co., 1938)
Willard Thompson
- “The Rinkey Doo Café”
(Pittsburgh: Lydick Turner & Co., 1915)
Ernest B. Lydick
- “The Rollicking Rams”
(Boston: White, Smith, & Perry, 1869)
arranged by Harry Birch
- “Music, Love, & Wine”
(Baltimore: John Cole, No Date)
arranged by Beethoven
- “Moonlight Cocktail”
(New York: Jewel Music Publishing, 1941)
w. Kim Gannon, m. Lucky Roberts
- “A Stein Song”
(New York: Oliver Ditson Company, 1898)
Richard Hovey and Frederic Field Bullard
- “Sparkling and Bright”
(New York: Thos. Birch, No Date)
James B. Taylor
- “Sparkling and Bright”
(New York: Firth and Hall, No Date)
James B. Taylor