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From Andersonville to the Streets of New York: The Evolution of a Tune

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In 1864, George F. Root wrote a song to immortalize the experience of Civil War soldiers incarcerated in the infamous Andersonville Prison. The prison, located in Sumter County, Georgia, opened in 1864 and was designed to hold up to 10,000 captured Union soldiers. By June of 1864, 20,000 soldiers were already being held there and work began to enlarge the facilities. By the end of the war, in April 1865, more than 13,000 Andersonville prisoners had died of malnutrition, exposure, and disease. The prison came to symbolize the atrocities of the war to both the North and the South and brought home to both sides the terrible loss the nation had suffered during four years of Civil War.¹

Root's song, 'Tramp, Tramp, Tramp,' was an instant success when it appeared during the war. It, and others of Root's compositions, like 'The Battle Cry of Freedom,' established him as one of the most respected songwriters of the period.² In the case of 'Tramp, Tramp, Tramp,' the original version chronicled the experience of Union soldiers in Andersonville, but a Confederate version soon appeared with lyrics that reflected the experience of the south.³

The very attractive melody of 'Tramp, Tramp, Tramp' remained popular through the late 1800s. It was, for example, adopted by Timothy Sullivan for his patriotic 'God Save Ireland' and became the basis for an American Sunday school staple by C. Herbert Woolston called 'Jesus Loves the Little Children.' By the end of the twentieth century, however, 'Tramp, Tramp, Tramp' had faded into history; it was not included on the list of national songs that were taught to children. The 'Battle Hymn of the Republic' (1862) by Julia Ward Howe generally represents the Civil War in the modern patriotic repertoire.⁴ 'Tramp, Tramp, Tramp' and others of Root's compositions are well-known, of course, to scholars interested in American music and can be heard occasionally on specialist recordings such as Songs of the Civil War and Stephen Foster Favorites.

¹ B. D. Simpson and A. S. Link, America's Civil War (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1996).
³ W. D. Swank, Ballads of the North and South in the Civil War (Shippenburg, PA: Burd Street Press, 1996).
⁴ American Music.
by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. The songs have passed out of the consciousness of the average person, at least in the sense of being discrete songs with specific lyrics associated with distinct melodies.

Nonetheless, the melodies of songs like 'Tramp, Tramp, Tramp,' that once enjoyed very widespread popularity across the American public persist in the minds of many in a very different incarnation: as the melodies of a body of children's street lore that has rarely been documented.

Street Lore in New York

Throughout the twentieth century, children in America's large cities developed, maintained, and passed on to new generations of children a large body of folklore shaped by the requirements of unsupervised play on city streets. Although this society of children has largely disappeared, large numbers of children once spent the middle years of childhood in the company of groups of other children of varying age. Most available hours, outside of school and sleeping, were spent with peers without the interference, or perhaps moderating influence, of parents or other adults. The songs, games, and rhymes of the street, along with their melodies, were passed from older children to younger ones, changing gradually with the times and with the creative impulses of the users.

A number of collections of children's folklore have appeared that record the lyrics of some children's street rhymes and games. In most cases, only one version is presented, and there is usually no information about the melody or nature of use. Collections of this kind are generally intended to document this body of oral folklore or, interestingly, as reference material for teachers. As children's play in American cities has changed from largely unsupervised activities occurring spontaneously on the street to structured activities taking place in school physical education classes or on teacher-supervised playgrounds, children have few opportunities to be initiated into the traditional uses of this kind of folklore and have to be taught the words as part of organized activities. Unfortunately, this situation has led to the loss of traditional melodies, which tend to be overlooked in compilations of this kind, and might not be useful to teachers anyway if written as music. Many are also expurgated, as a large number of traditional children's rhymes are irreverent or 'dirty.'

The city of New York has always been a fertile ground for the development of children's folklore. The nature of the city, which is composed of five separate boroughs further divided into neighborhoods, and its population, which swelled by millions in the early twentieth century with successive waves of immigration beginning in the 1890s and ending in the 1920s, meant that there were always bands of neighborhood children looking for playmates. This included younger children anxious to learn the ways of their older siblings. By the 1970s, the nature of the city and the experience of children had changed considerably. Not only were children spending most of their time in school and in structured afterschool activities, but real concerns about safety were making groups of unsupervised children playing on the street an infrequent sight. Nonetheless, children still learned the games of the streets from their peers on school playgrounds and in parks where they could play away from the view of parents and teachers. Traditional rhymes, taunts, and songs were common, as were games with customary rules and practices, including jacks, hand clapping, and the very popular jump rope. These games were the provenance of girls. Boys played boxball, kick the can, capture the flag and kickball (which was referred to as 'soccer'). They too knew all the rhymes, taunts, and songs, however, which were used by both sexes.

Jumping Rope

Jump rope was one of the most common street games played by girls in New York. Single jumping was common (one child, one rope), but more complex games involving two turners, a long rope, and several jumpers were more frequent, as this was a social game and there were usually many children who wanted to play. One well-known game in the 1960s and 70s was 'Pom, Pom, Pompadour.' This game, which was played by girls in the Jewish neighborhoods of New York (and perhaps in other neighborhoods as well), is interesting for its method and lyrics, which show the level of spontaneous cooperation among children when no adults were present, and its melody, which offers insight into the evolution of melody from song to oral folklore.

'Pom, Pom, Pompadour' was played when there were a lot of girls who wanted to jump because it allowed for a rapid succession of jumpers and did not permit one, very skilled player to monopolize the rope for a long time (this problem was common with several other jumping rhymes and songs). Two girls would turn the rope, and the jumpers would line up to one side, near one turner. The set up required considerable deliberation among the participants because the game required 'jumping

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in,' where a player had to launch herself into the circle described by the rope while it was in motion and begin to jump without missing. Most jumpers had a preference for jumping in from the right or the left, and accommodation was often required.

In 'Pom, Pom, Pompadour,' the turners would begin turning the rope, and a player would jump in from one side. The turners and the girls who were not jumping would begin the song. The first jumper would move closer to the far turner to allow a second jumper to enter on cue. Finally, the first jumper would 'jump out' on cue; the second jumper would take over the role of the first jumper, and a third jumper would jump in to replace the second jumper.

Example 1

This verse could be repeated indefinitely as long as no one missed, with girls jumping in and out on cue. If anyone missed, it was possible to change jumpers and turners or simply pick up where the mistake was made.

Coincidentally, the melody to which this jumping song was sung is that of Root's 'Tramp, Tramp, Tramp.' Still more fascinating is the fact that none of a small group of respondents who grew up in New York and played jump rope in this manner knew 'Tramp, Tramp, Tramp,' or even that the song existed, although all easily recognized the melody as one they associated with jumping rope. The respondents, who were identified through a network of personal connections beginning with childhood friends and relatives, were contacted by e-mail and asked about their experiences. Internet communication in folklore research of this kind has proven valuable in identifying individuals with shared experience who
are separated by large distances and also in its capacity to transmit sound and visual material for comment.\textsuperscript{7}

\textit{The Evolution of a Tune}

How \textquote{Tramp, Tramp, Tramp} made its way to the streets of New York and reappeared in a street game decades after the song itself had faded from popular memory makes for an interesting study. And, while it is not possible to prove conclusively how this might have occurred, a reasonable path can still be ascertained.

As noted, \textquote{Tramp, Tramp, Tramp} enjoyed considerable acclaim at the time of its first appearance and for some years afterward. It never became one of the body of national songs that are taught and sung in schools and is largely known by specialists. Nonetheless, its decline in the generally known repertoire of popular song at the end of the nineteenth century was not its last appearance. In fact, Victor Herbert composed a version of the song for his operetta \textit{Naughty Marietta}, which appeared in 1910. The work was commissioned by Oscar Hammerstein as a vehicle for soprano, Emma Trentini, and contains some of Herbert's biggest hits, including \textquote{Neath the Southern Moon}, \textquote{Italian Street Song}, and \textquote{Ah! Sweet Mystery of Life}. After its stage run, \textit{Naughty Marietta} was made into a Hollywood musical by MGM in 1935 and was the first film to pair Jeanette McDonald and Nelson Eddy.\textsuperscript{8}

It is likely that the \textquote{Tramp, Tramp, Tramp} melody comes from one of these productions, although it is difficult to determine which one. On the one hand, many more people probably saw the 1935 movie, which would have familiarized them with the melody and reinstated it into popular consciousness. Melodies often move through communities, and it is quite likely children learn them from parents and other adults, even if they did not, as in this case, see the movie themselves. Broadway shows have always had a status and influence in New York and hence cannot be discounted entirely as the source of the melody, as will be discussed further below. A curious aspect of this is that the oldest respondent, who jumped rope on the streets of New York in the late 1930s and early 1940s, was familiar with neither the game nor the melody, despite the fact that much younger jumpers knew them well. This may indicate a considerable time lag between the melody being presented to the public in a show or movie and its appearance on the streets in a children's game.

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Consideration of the lyrics of ‘Pom, Pom, Pompadour’ also offers a suggestion of origin. The first line, ‘Pom, pom, pompadour,’ is the only part of the rhyme that does not relate to the method of play and seems to exist only for its sound. No respondent reported knowing what this line meant or to what it referred, and the youngest, now in her late 30s, commented that she thought the line was ‘Pom, pom, pom the door,’ which she took to mean that the first jumper was supposed to answer a knock at the door. She had never questioned what ‘pom’ might mean in this context. This report is very much in line with the usual way in which folklore of this kind was transmitted. Children learned by imitating other children and tended to take as fact the way in which specific items were presented to them.

The line ‘Pom, pom, pompadour,’ it turns out, comes from an operetta by Leo Fall called Madame Pompadour. It premiered at the Carl Theatre in Vienna in 1923 and, later that same year, opened in London in English for 476 performances. The German-language work might have been known to the parents or grandparents of the first generation of New York jumpers as many of them were Yiddish and German speaking. Some may have been familiar with the London performance. However, Madame Pompadour did have a New York run in translation and opened on Broadway in 1924 as the first show at the new Martin Beck Theater. Its run of 79 performances would certainly have offered an opportunity for theatergoers to learn this line. Like ‘Tramp, Tramp, Tramp,’ this operetta is no longer well-known, but something of its music was preserved by children, however they managed to learn it, more than 50 years later.

The theatre was apparently an excellent source of elements children incorporated into their folklore. A song loved by generations of New York children, as it allowed them to express their derision toward school, was set to the melody of ‘Ta-Ra-Ra Boom-De-Ay.’ The original version of the song was part of Mama Lou’s act at Babe Connor’s Maison de Joie in St Louis in 1888. In 1891, a respectable version of the song appeared. This was composed by Henry J Sayers and was sung by Lottie Collins in London. These 1891 lyrics began as follows:

A smart and stylish girl you see,
Belle of good society, not too strict but rather free.
Yet as right as right can be!
Never forward, never bold, not too hot and not too cold.
But the very thing, I’m told. that in your arms you’d like to hold!

10. Operetta.
Ta-ra-ra Boom-de-ay! Ta-ra-ra Boom-de-ay! Ta-ra-ra Boom-de-ay! Ta-ra-ra Boom-de-ay! Ta-ra-ra Boom-de-ay! Ta-ra-ra Boom-de-ay! Ta-ra-ra Boom-de-ay! Ta-ra-ra Boom-de-ay!

The lyrics that accompany this melody and were once known to children throughout New York went as follows:

Example 2

It is difficult to know whether this melody came to New York in the 1890s with the midwestern show of which it was part. There is another possible source for the melody, however, in the songs of Joe Hill, the labor activist of the early twentieth century. Hill, who emigrated to the United States from Sweden, was active in the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) movement, and wrote many labor songs to the melodies of well-known popular hymns and tunes. One of these was “Ta-ra-ra Boom-De-Ay.” The Joe Hill version was published in 1916 in The Little Red Songbook that the IWW intended as an encouragement to workers to unionize. As New York Jews were traditionally heavily involved in the Labor Movement, it is perhaps more likely that the melody reached the streets indirectly through the Joe Hill version.

Returning to “Tramp, Tramp, Tramp,” it is worth noting that this is not the only patriotic song whose melody was taken over by children for their games. There is a street song sung to the melody of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” This version goes as follows:

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Example 3

"Pom, Pom, Pompadour," however, is different in that it is a game, rather than just a song to sing. Nonetheless, it is obvious that any melody or piece of information that entered the collective consciousness of children might reappear in their folklore at some time. Unfortunately, the many influences are difficult to trace, especially as versions of many children's songs and games are reported from across the United States, with little information available about their origin, dates of use, and currency today.

Discussion

Children, when left to their own devices, show an amazing level of creativity in adapting adult material to their own uses, even when (or perhaps especially when) parents and teachers would most likely disapprove of the content and intent. The streets of major US cities often saw the most energetic and vivid folklore creation and maintenance simply because of the large numbers of children and the constant appearance of new participants who wished to learn the lore of the area. New York was no exception to this, with an amazing number of rhymes, songs, and games known to generations of children who learned them exclusively from other children on the streets and playgrounds.
Today, however, the environment in which this transmission can take place has largely disappeared, and it is likely that city children today have only a fraction of the folklore knowledge of their parents. Efforts to document children's folklore have concentrated on lyrics, but, without the melodies and experience in how they were used, it is difficult to perpetuate this kind of play. A new occurrence in this area has been the adoption of traditional children's items as material for teachers who wish to encourage educational and cooperative play as well as higher levels of physical activity. Many items of children's folklore are ideal for this purpose because game lyrics incorporate movements, counting, or gestures or are intended to be sung while playing some other game, like jump rope.

One well-known example of this is the adaptation of Double Dutch, a type of jump rope requiring two turners using two ropes turned in opposite directions. One or two jumpers must negotiate both ropes while completing a complicated series of movements in time to a song. This street game, which was at one time common in black neighborhoods, has become a part of school physical education courses, and there are interschool and city-level championships in New York today and even a national Double Dutch League that was founded in 1973.\(^\text{15}\)

An unfortunate side effect of the institutionalization of children's folklore in this manner is that much of the original creativity that characterized items of spontaneous generation has been lost in adult-mediated versions. This is particularly the case with items that children viewed as "dirty" or inappropriate, in that they realized adults would not approve if they heard them. The censored versions often appear bland and uninteresting compared to the originals that appeal more to children's delight in the forbidden, the disgusting, and the horrible. An excellent example of this is the following handclapping rhyme about the legendary Miss Lucy. Two versions of this rhyme existed. The first was the adult-approved one:

Miss Lucy had a baby,
His name was Thin Tim.
She put him in a bathtub,
To see if he could swim.

He drank up all the water,
He ate up all the soap,
He tried to eat the bathtub but it wouldn't go down his throat.

There are several more verses about Miss Lucy and her baby in the same vein. These lyrics seem to have been created by children (unlike some

recent attempts to reintroduce street games as school activities) to be used when parents, teachers, or tattle-tales were around. The ‘real’ form of this game was:

Miss Lucy had a steamboat.
The steamboat had a bell.
Miss Lucy went to heaven and the steamboat went to ... 
Hello operator, give me number nine.
And if you disconnect me, I will chop off your ... 
Behind the ‘frigerator, there is a piece of glass.
And if you dare to step on it, I’ll shove it up your ... 
Ask me no more questions, tell me no more lies.
The boys are in the bathroom pulling down their ...
Flies are in the country, bees are in the park.
Miss Lucy and her boyfriend are kissing in the D-A-R-K, 

It is possible to buy recordings of the first version above for school use, but Miss Lucy and her steamboat exist mostly in the memories of now middle-aged children who played this game on the street. There are websites that seek to document children’s folklore of this kind, but they seem to be contributed to mostly by people who experienced use of the items in context and rarely include any information about melody or playing procedures.

As is always the case with folklore that is traditionally transmitted orally, a dimension is lost if all aspects of items cannot be documented and recorded in instances of natural occurrence. In the case of much of the body of city children’s folklore, this kind of recording is no longer possible because current children do not know the games and songs of earlier generations, and it is difficult to find groups of adult respondents who grew up in the same location and hence know the same items and who also still recall them well enough to replicate the way in which they were used, along with their melodies and procedures. One aspect of this is that the spontaneous generation of games and songs using elements of popular culture, such as occurred with ‘Pom, Pom, Pompadour,’ may have ceased or almost ceased. There may be no more additions of the kind seen in the past to the body of city children’s folklore. Unfortunately, this may also mean that the very rich world children created without adults present may be lost or irrevocably changed into something quite different that serves a completely new purpose far from the streets of its birth.
Bibliography


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