

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

The Ballad of John Henry

TRADITIONAL

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On August 28, 1830, the driver of a horse-drawn carriage challenged the Tom Thumb, the first American-built steam locomotive, to a race on the newly formed Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. The locomotive was winning the race until a mechanical malfunction caused it to slow, allowing the horse-drawn car to pull ahead. Despite this initial setback, steam locomotives quickly became popular with railroad companies, and for the next forty years, thousands of miles of railroad track would be laid across the country. Like the carriage driver who challenged the Tom Thumb, the folk hero John Henry, an ex-slave African American steel driver, was said to have challenged a mechanical, steam-powered drill to a steel-driving race in order to protect his job. John Henry won the competition, only to die in victory.

The song celebrates a man who matched his prowess against that of a machine. Do we admire him for doing so? The song begins with John Henry's premonition, while still a baby, that "Hammer's gonna be the death of me." Yet as a grown man he clings to that hammer and squarely faces the death that doing so brings him. Why? What, for John Henry, does that have to do with the dignity of "being a man"? Do you admire him for dying with his hammer in his hand? Can we generalize, to other ways of living and working, the meaning of dying with one's hammer in one's hand?

For a musical rendition of this ballad, see Harry Belafonte's performance in 1959 at Carnegie Hall, available here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6vcvYJckic>.

John Henry was a little baby
Sittin' on his papa's knee
He picked up a hammer & a little piece of steel
Said "Hammer's gonna be the death of me, Lord, Lord!
Hammer's gonna be the death of me."

The captain said to John Henry
"Gonna bring that steam drill 'round
Gonna bring that steam drill out on the job
Gonna whop that steel on down, down, down!
Whop that steel on down."

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John Henry told his captain,
“A man ain’t nothin’ but a man
But before I let your steam drill beat me down
I’ll die with a hammer in my hand, Lord, Lord!
I’ll die with a hammer in my hand.”

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John Henry said to his Shaker*
“Shaker, why don’t you sing?
I’m throwin’ 30 lbs. from my hips on down
Just listen to that cold steel ring, Lord, Lord!
Listen to that cold steel ring.”

John Henry said to his Shaker
“Shaker, you’d better pray
’Cause if I miss that little piece of steel
Tomorrow be your buryin’ day! Lord, Lord!
Tomorrow be your buryin’ day.”

The Shaker said to John Henry
“I think this mountain’s cavin’ in!”
John Henry said to his Shaker, “Man
That ain’t nothin’ but my hammer suckin’ wind! Lord, Lord!
Nothin’ but my hammer suckin’ wind.”

The man that invented the steam drill
Thought he was mighty fine
But John Henry made 15 ft.
The steam drill only made nine, Lord, Lord!
The steam drill only made nine.

John Henry hammered in the mountain
His hammer was striking fire
But he worked so hard, he broke his poor heart
He laid down his hammer and he died, Lord, Lord,
Laid down his hammer and he died.

* *The hammer man always had a partner, known as a shaker or turner, who would crouch close to the hole and rotate the drill after each blow.*

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John Henry had a little woman
Her name was Polly Ann
John Henry took sick & went to his bed
Polly Ann drove steal like a man, Lord, Lord!
Polly Ann drove steal like a man.

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John Henry had a little baby
You could hold him in the palm of your hand
The last words I heard that poor boy say
“My daddy was a steel-driving man, Lord, Lord!
My daddy was a steel-driving man.”

They took John Henry to the graveyard
And they buried him in the sand
And every locomotive comes a-roaring by
Says “There lies a steel-driving man, Lord, Lord!
There lies a steel-driving man.”

Well every Monday morning
When the bluebirds begin to sing
You can hear John Henry a mile or more
You can hear John Henry’s hammer ring, Lord, Lord!
You can hear John Henry’s hammer ring.