

## **Songs about Fishing: Examples of Contemporary Maritime Songs**

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# SONGS ABOUT FISHING: EXAMPLES OF CONTEMPORARY MARITIME SONGS<sup>1</sup>

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Throughout the history of folklore studies, forms of community-based narrative expression concerned with maritime folklife have attracted scholarly interest. Broadsides, ballads, and songs depicting dramatic events on the high seas, and aspects of seafaring occupations received particular attention. Indeed, it has long been customary for authors to include the category of "songs of the sea" in their anthologies of folksongs from particular geographic regions. Compositions collected by early scholars featured themes such as naval battles, the exploits of pirates and other notorious figures, and various tragedies at sea. Songs and chants used by sailors and fishermen to focus group labor for the hauling of nets, hoisting of sails and anchors, and launching of boats were also avidly collected.

Beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, major social and economic changes profoundly affected life in North American maritime communities in general and in seafaring occupations in particular. The mode of vessel propulsion shifted from sail to power. Mechanization began to displace manual labor. Crew sizes decreased and crew structures were altered. One result of these changes, and by no means the most significant change, was the radical alteration or elimination of the contexts for musical performance among co-workers in maritime trades. Why retain an anchor hauling song when one had a donkey engine to power a windlass? Why hold onto a net hauling song when a

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1. I am grateful to my colleagues Janet Gilmore, Jim Leary, Jens Lund, Richard March, Peter Narvaez, and Nancy Solomon for bringing examples of songs and poems about fishing to my attention. I also wish to acknowledge songwriters Charlie Nevells and Mack Novak, who kindly discussed the composition of their songs "Penobscot Bay Fisherman" and "Oyster Man's Blues" with me, and Jay Davis, disk jockey at KRVR, Davenport, Iowa, who provided information about the song "Walleye" and his role in popularizing it. Occupational song expert Archie Green aided my research by contributing valuable comments about "Penobscot Bay Fisherman" and "Oyster Man's Blues," and LeeEllen Friedland and Joseph C. Hickerson furnished helpful criticisms of an earlier draft of this essay.

power winch did the job of many men? The introduction of change, technological change in particular, signalled the end of the viability of some musical forms.

It is not surprising that during this period of profound change in maritime trades folksong collectors such as Shay (1924), Colcord (1924), Eckstorm (1927), Greenleaf (1931), Doerflinger (1951), and many others gleaned maritime songs and chants from men who had participated in performance contexts that were clearly on the way out, if they had not already vanished.<sup>2</sup> Some collectors, including Alan Lomax, Herbert Halpert, and a raft of WPA fieldworkers, sought out active, but previously ignored, performance contexts and documented such forms of musical expression as work songs sung by the black crewmen of menhaden fishing boats, Bahamian boat launching songs, lead-line heaving calls, and gospel music sung to pass the time by shuckers in oyster houses.<sup>3</sup> Rarely, however, did folklorists and other collectors concern themselves with emergent musical forms influenced by current popular music that depicted aspects of contemporary life in maritime communities. Indeed, collectors hot on the spoor of classic ballads and others that fit the classical model often ignored current, popular songs that were sung in the communities where they conducted field research.

Although changes of many kinds have inexorably altered maritime occupations, the impulse to compose and perform songs concerning life and work on the water is not uncommon today. In many coastal, riverine, and lacustrine towns where commercial fishing and other maritime trades exert a significant influence on everyday life, men and women seek to evoke a sense of place through the composition and

2. Frank Shay, *Iron Men and Wooden Ships: Deep Sea Chanties*, Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, Page and Co., 1924; Joanna C. Colcord, *Roll and Go: Songs of American Sailormen*, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1924; Fannie Hardy Eckstorm, *Minstrelsy of Maine: Folk-Songs and Ballads of the Woods and the Coast*, New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1927; Elisabeth Bristol Greenleaf, *Ballads and Sea Songs of Newfoundland*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1933; William Main Doerflinger, *Shantymen and Shantyboys: Songs of the Sailor and Lumberman*, New York, Macmillan Co., 1951.
3. A small number of these field recordings have been released on commercial LP recordings. See, for example: B. A. Botkin, ed., *Negro Work Songs and Calls*, AFS L8. 1943 rpt. Washington, Library of Congress, 1960; Duncan Emrich, ed., *American Sea Songs and Shanties: Folk Music of the United States from the Archive of Folk Culture*, L26/27. Washington, Library of Congress, 1953; and *Virginia Traditions: Virginia Work Songs*, Blue Ridge Institute BRI 007, 1984. For a fine description of the process of fishing for menhaden that includes the singing of songs that accompanied net hauling, see: John Frye, *The Men All Singing: The Story of Menhaden Fishing*, Virginia Beach, Va., Donning Co., 1978, pp. 181-188.

performance of song.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes these expressions connect people not only to their present places of residence or work but also to different places and different times. Good examples of this are the "old country songs" about fishing and seafaring sung by tuna fishermen and others of Yugoslav descent who live in San Pedro, California;<sup>5</sup> and an array of Swedish, Norwegian, and German dance band instrumentals from Wisconsin and Minnesota with titles such as "Styrman Valsen" (Pilot's Waltz), "Ny Fiskar Vals" (New Fisherman's Waltz), and "Lutefisk" (dried cod prepared in a potash lye).<sup>6</sup>

In some parts of North America, songs about fishing are staples at community dances and house parties. This is especially the case in Newfoundland fishing communities, called "outports," where songs such as "Squid Jiggin' Ground," "I'se the B'y That Builds the Boat," and many others remain popular.<sup>7</sup> The continuing popularity of these

4. The composition of poems and recitations with maritime themes is a related tradition, and one that may be found in many maritime communities. Poems can often be found in the columns of newspapers that serve maritime communities and, occasionally, in commercial fishing newsletters and other trade publications. One of the earliest North American examples is "A Seine Hauling," published in the *Maryland Gazette*, August 20, 1754, and reprinted in J. Thomas Scharf, *The History of Maryland*, Baltimore, John B. Piet, 1879, II, p. 13. See also: Wilfred Wareham, "The Monologue in Newfoundland," in Clyde Rose, ed., *The Blasty Bough*, St. John's, Breakwater Books, 1976, pp. 196-212; Wilfred Wareham, "The Monologue in Newfoundland and Labrador," in J. R. Smallwood, ed., *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, St. John's, Newfoundland Book Publishers, 1981, 1984, II, pp. 252-62; and Ted Russell, *Tales From Pigeon Inlet*, St. John's, Breakwater Books, 1977, pp. 172-175.
5. [*St. Nicholas Day Celebration Program Book*], San Pedro, Ca., Yugoslav Club, n.d. Songs in this publication include "Eto Pletem Mrizu Svoju" ("Here I Sit Weaving My Net") and "Jedan Mali Brodic" ("There is a Little Boat").
6. See the following commercial recordings: John Berquist, *Styrman's (Pilot's) Waltz*, Half Moon Records HM 1005, 1985; Ted Johnson, *Styrman's Valsen*, Nordvest Records, ca. 1940; Norskedalen Trio, *Ny Fiskar Vals*, Encore Productions, ca. 1985; Otto Blihovde, *Lutefisk*, Polka City 8000, ca. 1980; and Six Fat Dutchmen, *Little Fisherman's Waltz*, Polka City 371, n.d.
7. A. R. Scammell's "Squid Jiggin' Ground" is one of Newfoundland's unofficial anthems. First released in 1943 on Scammell's recording "Squid Jiggin' Ground" (RCA PR-931), the song has been "covered" by a multitude of recording artists, including Michael T. Wall and Hank Snow. Scammell also wrote other songs with maritime themes, including "The Capelin Haul" and "The Six Horsepower Coaker."

"I'se the B'y That Builds the Boat," another song of tremendous popularity throughout Newfoundland, first appeared in print in Gerald S. Doyle's booklet *Old-Time Songs of Newfoundland*, St. John's, Gerald S. Doyle, 1955.

For a thorough survey of commercial recordings with Newfoundland connections, see: Michael Taft, *A Regional Discography of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1904-1972*, St. John's, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1975.

hoary standards, which are usually alternated with country and western, and rock and roll tunes when played by bands performing at community "clubs," is probably due to the critical importance of commercial fishing which, at least in the inshore sector, has undergone relatively few changes over the years.<sup>8</sup>

Other compositions focus on the popularity of regional recreational fisheries. Good examples of this are two songs by popular, regional bands that use the tunes of earlier pop hits to heighten the comedic value of the songs. The first is "Walleye," performed by a midwestern band, The aHula-Poppers.<sup>9</sup> This number uses the theme song from the old television program *Rawhide* to extol the virtues of fishing for walleye pike (*Stizostedion vitreum*). The distinctive line in the chorus of the original song—"Rolling, Rolling, Rolling—Rawhide!"—is replaced with: "Trolling, trolling, trolling—Walleye!" Released in 1986 on a 45 r.p.m. disc, it is played every year during the fishing season by Davenport, Iowa, radio station WLLR.<sup>10</sup> Another song that uses the same model is "Smelting, U.S.A." by Da Yoopers, a band from Michigan's Upper Peninsula that specializes in humorous songs about life in the "U.P."<sup>11</sup> This song describes smelt fishing—a U.P. rite of spring—in rich detail, announcing at the outset:

The smelt are running, the fever's everywhere.  
The smelters are coming with their waders and beer.

Then, it notes the arrival at the river of two Finnish-American smelters (presumably local men), who are followed by the "boys from the college" who are "eating the raw smelt and drinking the beer." Eventually, the fishermen become caught up in a vernal frenzy:

They all go so crazy, they got nothing to lose.  
They fall in the river and throw-up on their shoes.

The song comes to a rousing close with a parody of the chorus of the famous Beach Boys song, "Surfing, U.S.A.":

Everybody's gone smelting.  
Everybody's gone smelting.  
Everybody's gone smelting, smelting U.S.A.

8. For a discussion of the influence of country and western music, see: Peter Narvaez, "Country and Western in Diffusion: Juxtaposition and Syncretism in the Popular Music of Newfoundland," *Culture & Tradition*, 2(1977), 105-114 (reprinted in *Journal of Country Music*, 7:2(May 1978), 93-101).
9. Richard A. Lewis and Larry V. Hayes, "Walleye." Performed by The aHula-Poppers, on Shadow 3355, 1986. 45 r.p.m. disc recording.
10. Personal communication with Jay Davis, former WLLR disk jockey. Davis was the DJ who initiated the playing of "Walleye" over WLLR during the fishing season, a practice he continued for about four years (1986-1990).
11. Da Yoopers, "Smelting U.S.A.," *Yooponese*, Ya Hey Music JA-61286, 1986.

Another example of a humorous, contemporary song about fishing is "The Goey-Duck Song" by singer/songwriter Ron Konzak of Bainbridge Island, Washington.<sup>12</sup> This alliterative song, which is about the harvesting of the giant clam known as the geoduck (pronounced: goey duck) (*Panope generosa*), was issued as a 45 r.p.m. single in 1972. According to Washington folklorist Jens Lund, the record "was on every jukebox on Puget Sound for years," and is well known by most commercial clam divers in the region.<sup>13</sup> The entire song is as follows:

You can hear the diggers say as they're headed for the Bay,  
 "Oh I gotta dig a duck, gotta dig a duck a day,  
 Cuz I get a buck a duck if I dig a duck a day.  
 So I gotta dig a duck, gotta dig a duck a day!"

[Chorus:]

Dig a duck, dig a duck, dig a goey duck.  
 Dig a duck, dig a goey duck, dig a duck a day!  
 Oh, it takes a lotta luck and a certain kind of pluck  
 Just to dig around the muck just to get a goey duck.  
 Well, he hasn't got a front and he hasn't got a back  
 And he doesn't know Donald and he doesn't go "quack."<sup>14</sup>

[Repeat Chorus]

While Konzak's song says next to nothing about the process of harvesting geoducks, and uses no in-group language, it probably appeals to a local audience that includes professional clam divers because it is a catchy, up-tempo song with tongue-twisting lyrics, and because it calls attention to a highly regionalized fishery and an unusual marine species that is an unlikely subject for a song.

In marked contrast to Konzak's composition are three songs that clearly demonstrate their composers' understanding of local values, occupational jargon, and the minute, esoteric details of commercial fishing activities. It should be no surprise that the authors of the songs are three active or retired commercial fisherman: Charlie Nevells, from Maine; Mack Novak, from Florida; and J. J. Jones from Oregon.

Charlie Nevells of Stonington, Maine, is a retired commercial lobsterman and clam digger who, for many years, has been singing and,

12. Ron Konzak, "The Goey-Duck Song," 1972. The lyrics and music for the song can be found in Linda Allen, ed., *The Rainy Day Song Book: Contemporary Songs of the Northwest Collected and Edited by Linda Allen*, Bellingham, Wa., Whatcom Museum of History and Art, 1978, p. 26.

13. Personal communication to the author from Jens Lund. Lund also remarked that the song has been recorded in Japanese and played over the radio in Japan.

14. Lyrics taken from Linda Allen, p. 26.

from time to time, writing songs. In the late 1960s, inspired by the nation-wide success of "Tombstone Every Mile,"<sup>15</sup> a paean to truck drivers recorded in 1965 by country and western recording artist and Maine native Dick Curless, Charlie resolved to write a song that would bring recognition and honor to one of Maine's most distinctive occupations: lobster fishing. With insight gained from a life-long association with fishing and fishermen, he wrote "The Penobscot Bay Fisherman."<sup>16</sup> Ostensibly, the song is about fishermen from Penobscot Bay, Maine's largest bay and home of the largest number of commercial fishermen,<sup>17</sup> but what it describes applies to all lobstermen within the state. Of the many noteworthy features of Nevells's composition, perhaps the most remarkable is its accurate depiction of the three key stages of a fisherman's life: apprentice, full-fledged fisherman, and, finally, shore-bound retiree.

[Verse 2:]

When the fisherman he learns his trade he's very small and frail.  
Goes with his father in the boat, he can hardly reach the rail.  
He learns the rocks and ledges, and the breakers, too.  
It's a hard way to earn a dollar, now I'm telling you.

[Verse 7:]

When the fisherman he has grown old, his fishing days are through.  
You'll find him with the younger folks telling a tale or two.  
He tells them 'bout old days gone by and all the fish he caught.  
But the ones that got away were the biggest of the lot.<sup>18</sup>

Nevells's song also contains a wealth of esoteric information about the lobster fishery. In one verse, eight of the state's principal fishing ports are named. In another, the term "shedders" is used to refer to lobsters that have come inshore to moult among the rocks. And he simultaneously confirms and pokes fun at the olfactory stereotype of fishermen by advising us:

When the shedders are crawling and the flowers are in bloom,  
If you see a fisherman coming, better give him lots of room.  
He smells like a bed of roses that died away last fall.  
And that's the way he'll always smell when he's coming home from haul.<sup>19</sup>

15. Dick Curless, "Tombstone Every Mile," Tower 124, 1965.

16. Nevells first released "Penobscot Bay Fisherman" on a 45 r.p.m. single he produced independently, ca. 1974. It also appears on the LP recording he later produced with Roger Stone, *Down East Potpourri*, ca. 1980.

17. Nevells's home community of Stonington is on an island (Deer Isle) in the middle of the bay.

18. Transcribed from cut of "Penobscot Bay Fisherman" on the LP recording *Down East Potpourri*, produced by Charlie Nevells and Roger Stone, ca. 1980.

19. "Coming home from haul" is the vernacular locution of: coming home from hauling lobster traps.

Throughout the song he tries to debunk the misconception, commonly held by summer people and others from away, that lobstering is an easy, idyllic pursuit by mentioning “work that is never done,” chores begun “before the sun is rising,” and harsh weather. Yet he can’t resist a bit of bravado. The weather may be “freezing cold,” with the harbor “full of ice,” but the hardy fisherman can take it because “his hide is made of leather and his back is made of steel.” But Nevells returns to the reality of the contemporary lobster fishery by noting the decline of the lobster population due to over-fishing. He cautions: “If fishermen don’t mend their ways they’ll be gone forevermore.” That is, without conservation efforts the lobsters will disappear, and with them the fishermen.

Another song by a fisherman is “Columbia River Song” by commercial salmon fisherman J. J. Jones of Astoria, Oregon.<sup>20</sup> This song’s opening verse establishes the author’s experience by noting the “many nights” he has spent on the banks of the Columbia and the boats he has seen go out for salmon. The next verse combines the beauty of the river at night with technical advice for novice fishermen.<sup>21</sup> As the experienced fisherman/singer puts it:

Down river to my right the lights of a distant city sparkle on the ground swells  
rolling past.

If you see a light that moves, you’d better pick up fast, boy, or that lumber  
ship will cut your net in half.

And the advice continues and is underscored by placement in the chorus:

Watch for deadheads,<sup>22</sup> watch for sand bars, watch the white flags on your  
buoys.

You’d better stay awake, boy, or you’ll have to bring it home.

In another verse, Jones, like Nevells, addresses the depletion of fish stocks. Unlike Nevells, however, he blames government officials, not fishermen, for the decline of the resource:

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20. J. J. Jones, “Columbia River Song,” Rex RR 5023-A, ca. 1980. 45 r.p.m. disc recording.

21. For examples of occupational narratives that provide object lessons and informal training, see: Robert McCarl, “Smokejumper Initiation: Ritualized Communication in a Modern Occupation,” *Journal of American Folklore*, 89:351(1976), 49-66; Robert McCarl, “Accident Narratives,” *New York Folklore*, 14:1-2(1988), 35-44; and Jack Santino, “Characteristics of Occupational Narratives,” in Robert H. Byington, ed., *Working Americans: Contemporary Approaches to Occupational Folklore*, Washington, Smithsonian Institution, 1978, pp. 57-70.

22. A “deadhead” is a submerged or partially submerged log. Deadheads are dangerous because they can hole a wooden vessel if struck at sufficient speed.



The statesmen count their dams and all their new creations,  
And they wonder why the valiant salmon die.

A strong sense of place is evinced in "Columbia River Song" through references to local landmarks such as the North Head lighthouse and a reef called Peacocks Pit. In addition to evoking the Columbia River setting, these references serve to subtly confirm the composer's familiarity with the local landscape and enhance his status as a knowledgeable commercial fisherman.

Moving from the Pacific Northwest to the Gulf of Mexico, we find our final example, "Oyster Man's Blues" by Mack Novak, a native of Eastpoint, Florida.<sup>23</sup> Eastpoint, along with the neighboring town of Apalachicola, possesses some of the nation's most productive oyster beds. Like Stonington, Maine, it is a thorough-going fishing town. Mack Novak, like most young men from Eastpoint, tried his hand at oystering, shrimping, and other local fisheries. However, he decided fishing wasn't for him and went off to join the Navy, where he presently serves as a submariner. "Oyster Man's Blues" is one of several songs he has written about Apalachicola Bay fishing activities.<sup>24</sup>

Structurally, the song describes an oysterman's typical day of tonging for oysters from the deck of his small boat. It begins at 5 a.m. when he "hits the bar"—oyster bar, that is.

Their day it starts at 5 a.m.—they hit the bar.  
They've got their Maxwell House Coffee in a Bama Mayonnaise jar.  
Out goes the anchor and over go the tongs.  
At 10 a.m. they're saying, "Oh, Lord, where did I go wrong?"  
[Chorus:]  
He's got those oyster man's blues.  
He can't afford a pair of shoes.  
His hickory sticks,<sup>25</sup> well, they're slapping out a tune.  
And it's called those oyster man's blues.  
He comes in from the bar expecting to go home.  
But there's a grouper trooper on the dock in his grey uniform.<sup>26</sup>  
He pulls out his oyster ruler<sup>27</sup> and he goes to work.  
When the count is 35 per cent, he says, "Hey, you're out of luck."

23. Mack Novak, "Oysterman's Blues," St. George Sound Records CSS-152, 1978. 45 r.p.m. disk recording.

24. Personal communication to the author from Mack Novak.

25. "Hickory sticks" are oyster tongs. The handles of the tongs used in Apalachicola Bay are characteristically made of hickory.

26. A "grouper trooper" is a state fisheries patrol officer. A "grouper" is a type of sea bass, another of the marine species the patrol officer must protect from unlawful harvesting.

27. An "oyster ruler" is Novak's phrase for the measuring device used by fishery patrol officers to determine if oysters are of legal size.

For the remainder of the day, the oysterman repeats the back-breaking chore of hauling tong-loads of oysters aboard his boat, emptying them on his "culling board,"<sup>28</sup> and then taking another pass across the oyster bed. Like many oystermen, the subject of the song has his wife on board and it is her job to toss back dead and undersized oysters and use a tool called a "cull iron" to bang apart oysters that have grown together and formed clumps.<sup>29</sup> Throughout the song, Novak emphasizes the onerousness of the work, and its meager profits. The song's oysterman regrets his occupational lot, yet seems resigned to his fate, to his "oysterman's blues."

The oysterman's travails do not let up when he brings his catch to shore at the end of the day. There he is greeted by the bane of all fishermen: the fisheries patrol officer, or "grouper trooper" in the local vernacular. The oysterman must submit to having his catch checked by the officer who determines whether or not a predetermined portion of the oysters are of legal size.

Novak's accurate depiction of the rhythm of oystering is enhanced by his use of occupational jargon such as "cull iron" and "grouper trooper," and by his attention to small details such as oystermen carrying their coffee in mayonnaise jars. Another line—"He can't afford a pair of shoes"—carries connotations for the insider that are far different than those of the outsider. To the outsider, the line simply conveys the message that fishermen, though they may work hard, do not earn much money. To the oysterman and other insiders, however, the message is much more complex. While some locals might agree that there are oystermen who actually are poor, they perceive that Novak is using the line to spoof the view commonly held by outsiders that oystermen are too poor to buy shoes and/or too lazy to work hard enough to earn enough money. The reference to barefootedness has other connotations for insiders. For some oystermen, going barefoot on their boats is a overt sign of the independence they exercise as their own bosses. For others, going without shoes is directly connected to work technique since they pride themselves on their ability to sense the presence of living oysters (as opposed to empty shells) underwater by

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28. A "culling board" is a piece of plywood with rails that is placed athwart an oyster skiff. The oysterman dumps oysters on the culling board when he empties his tongs and there they stay until the oysterman or a helper separates ("culls") oysters of harvestable size from those that are under the legal measure or otherwise unmarketable.

29. A higher price is paid for single oysters that have been separated in this manner than for clumps.

interpreting the vibrations transmitted up the shafts of their tongs to their hands and feet. Footwear would dull this sensitivity.

Novak's song in no way romanticizes the life of the oysterman; far from it. Like Charlie Nevells's song about Penobscot Bay fishermen, Novak's composition emphasizes the long hours and hard work of fishing, but, unlike Nevells's song, there is no boast of the fisherman's ability to withstand the forces of nature.<sup>30</sup> And, unlike J. J. Jones's song, there are no images of the beauty of the marine environment. It is about simple, hard work. If it were not for the spritely tune, evocative descriptions (such as hickory sticks slapping out a tune), and use of the humorous moniker "grouper trooper," this would be an exceedingly grim composition.

Apart from the general theme of these three songs—commercial fishing—and the similar backgrounds of their composers, what do these three songs have in common? First, they all deal with process. "Penobscot Bay Fisherman" and "Oysterman's Blues" describe, respectively, the course of a typical lobsterman's life and a typical oysterman's day: the processes of life and work. Jones's "Columbia River Song" deals with work process, too, but the focus is tighter. It deals with informal instruction about the conduct of work, instruction redolent of its natural context. This is especially apparent when he sings:

Watch for deadheads, watch the sand bars, watch the white flags on your buoys.

You'd better stay awake boy, or you'll have to bring it home.

Second, two of the three songs deal with the degradation of renewable marine resources, a concern of paramount importance to all commercial fisherman. "Penobscot Bay Fisherman" and "Columbia River Song" are quite explicit about this, although they are diametrically opposed in their assignment of causes. Nevells cautions his fellow fishermen about over-fishing, while Jones lays the blame on politicians who callously ignore salmon spawning and other natural cycles when backing the erection of dams and other obstructions to waterways. A key message underlying these "allegories of ruin"<sup>31</sup> is that fishermen—individuals with regular, intimate contact with the marine environment, and, arguably, those with the greatest stake in its conservation—are more sensitive to the rhythms of the marine

30. The couplet in "Penobscot Bay Fisherman" that refers to a fisherman's long hours is: "Before the sun is rising, he's up and on the run/He's the hard-working fella, his job is never done."

31. This concept was suggested to me by my colleague Brenda McCallum.

ecosystem than anyone else. It cannot be argued that Novak addresses the depletion of resources in "Oysterman's Blues" unless one considers fishermen themselves as a renewable resource under threat.

Third, two of the songs, "Columbia River Song" and "Oyster Man's Blues," deal with authority figures who have the power to greatly affect the lives of fishermen: politicians and fisheries patrol officers. Along with marine biologists and members of the Coast Guard, these are the figures most often damned by commercial fishermen everywhere. These references to agents of control are highly significant since they are rooted to one of the most contentious issues debated in fishing communities: who controls the resource? As mentioned earlier, full-time commercial fishermen agree almost unanimously that they have the best understanding of the marine environment in which they work and live, an understanding based on traditional knowledge passed down in families and on years of personal experience in local waters. Given this view, in most cases fishermen and their families tend to regard the fisheries regulations promulgated by biologists, politicians, and others with great skepticism and, occasionally, contempt.

In recent years these strong feelings have intensified as a result of such factors as the shrinking of fish stocks and the concomitant imposition of catch quotas, and the rapid development of coastal lands which, in turn, has prevented fishermen from maintaining easy access to the water.<sup>32</sup> These factors have tended to heighten the feeling among fishing families that they are marginal people whose cultural heritage is in danger of being obliterated. References to agents of control are also significant in that they call into question one of the fundamental values of fishermen: independence.<sup>33</sup> Clearly, as the songs suggest, the possibility of achieving freedom by virtue of being one's own boss, though always an elusive ideal, is becoming increasingly difficult.

Fourth, each of the three songs is larded with esoteric terms that cannot be fully understood or appreciated outside the immediate

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32. During the 1980s there were many examples of fishermen and their families vigorously protesting newly-enacted regulations intended to protect marine resources. Two prominent cases include opposition to quotas on redfish landings in the Gulf of Mexico, and to the regulation stipulating that southern shrimpers must install "turtle excluder devices" (TEDs) on their trawls. These and other examples are chronicled in the monthly trade publication *National Fisherman*.

33. When asked to choose what they like most about fishing, commercial fishermen invariably say: "Being my own boss."

context of occupation, family, and community. While the composers may have hoped to attract large audiences for their songs, consciously or unconsciously they wrote lyrics that have greatest appeal among persons with an insider's perspective on the regional fishing activities described. In addition to the accuracy with which they describe the process of fishing, these songs achieve popularity with this audience because they literally speak the insider's language while communicating emic values.

Finally, stylistically, all three composers were heavily influenced by country music models. This influence is apparent in the melodies of their songs and, especially with "Oyster Man's Blues," the instrumentation used on the recordings. The influence of country music may also be seen in the themes expressed by the lyrics of these three songs. The country music genre is replete with songs about blue collar occupations (such as the truck driver song "Tombstone Every Mile," that inspired Nevells's composition), songs about alienation and marginality, songs about individualism, and songs that celebrate sense of place.<sup>34</sup> All these themes are present in "Penobscot Bay Fisherman," "Columbia River Song," and "Oysterman's Blues."

There are innumerable songs about fishing that offer insights into the cultural meaning of the activity. However, the songs that offer the most profound insights are those by composers who, like Charlie Nevells, J. J. Jones, and Mack Novak, have been raised in fishing communities and have had considerable experience as fishermen. These songs are expressions worthy of the cultural investigator's attention because they can provide valuable clues to the way insiders conceptualize the process of work. They can also help illuminate the values that are important to fishermen, their families, and other residents of fishing communities; and the anxieties felt by these groups. In addition, analysis of songs about fishing composed by fishermen can lead to a better understanding of how fishermen establish and maintain their identity as an occupational group.

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34. The themes of country music are discussed in detail in Bill C. Malone's seminal work, *Country Music U.S.A.: A Fifty-Year History*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1968. See also: Bill C. Malone, "Honky Tonk: The Music of the Southern Working Class." in William Ferris and Mary L. Hart, eds., *Folk Music and Modern Sound*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, pp. 119-128.

**Penobscot Bay Fisherman<sup>35</sup>**  
by *Charlie Nevells*

[Chorus:]

Now, they tell about the truckers of the Haynesville Woods,<sup>36</sup>  
Tell about potato men and his Aroostook County<sup>37</sup> goods.  
Lend an ear and listen to what I have to say.  
I'll tell you 'bout the fishermen of Penobscot Bay.

There's a great many fishing ports along Maine's coastal shore:  
Swan's Island, Matinicus, and lots more.  
Manset, Beals Island, Jonesport by the way,  
North Haven, Friendship, and old Boothbay.

When the fisherman he learns his trade he's very small and frail.  
Goes with his father in the boat, he can hardly reach the rail.  
He learns the rocks and ledges and the breakers, too.  
It's a hard way to earn a dollar, now I'm telling you.

Now, the fisherman's a friendly man, he'll have a drink or two.  
You can't beat him, no matter what you do.  
Before the sun is rising, he's up and on the run.  
He's the hard working fella, his job is never done.

[Repeat Chorus]

In the winter when it's freezing cold, the vapors flying low,  
The harbor it is full of ice, the ground's all white with snow.  
The fisherman he doesn't mind the cold he cannot feel.  
His hide is made of leather and his back is made of steel.

Once there was a dollar in the lobster game.  
You'll find along the coast it's not quite the same.  
There's ten traps to every lobster—they're going fast from our shore.  
If the fishermen don't mend their ways they'll be gone forevermore.

[Repeat Chorus]

When the shedders are crawling and the flowers are in bloom,  
If you see a fisherman coming, better give him lots of room.  
He smells like a bed of roses that died away last fall.  
And that's the way he'll always smell when he coming home from haul.

When the fisherman he has grown old, his fishing days are through,  
You'll find him with the younger folks, telling a tale or two.  
He tells them 'bout old days gone by and all the fish he caught,  
But the ones that got away were the biggest of the lot.

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35. Transcribed from LP recording *Down East Potpourri*, produced by Charlie Nevells and Roger Stone, released ca. 1980.
36. The Haynesville Woods is a area of eastern Maine through which the lonely and treacherous highway Dick Curless sings about in "Tombstone Every Mile" passes.
37. Aroostook County is Maine's northernmost county and one of the nation's most productive potato-growing regions.

**Columbia River Song<sup>38</sup>**  
by J. J. Jones

Well, I've spent many nights on the banks of the Columbia River.  
As the moon came up I've watched it come to light.  
I've watched the boats go out upon the silvery waters.  
The salmon season opens tonight.

Down river to my right the lights of a distant city sparkle on the ground swells  
rolling past.  
If you see a light that moves, you'd better pick up fast, boy, or that lumber  
ship will cut your net in half.

[Chorus:]

Watch for deadheads, watch the sand bars, watch the white flags on your  
buoys,  
You'd better stay awake, boy, or you'll have to bring it home.

[Instrumental Break]

They've conjured up a bridge near the mouth of the Columbia River with a  
partial span that seems to touch the sky.  
The statesmen count their dams and all their new creations and they wonder  
why the valiant salmon die.

As a boy I still recall the North Head lighthouse beacon that warns men of a  
reef called Peacocks Pit.  
A thousand souls and more beneath that wet, clear water in a city called "the  
graveyard of the ships."

[Chorus:]

Yes, you'd better stay awake, boy, or they'll have to bring you home.

\* \* \* \*

**Oyster Man's Blues<sup>39</sup>**  
by Mack Novak

[Spoken:]

Now, this is going to be a quick story in oystering in which you have to go out  
and separate the little oysters from the big oysters so you won't get a  
ticket. And it goes something like this:

[Sung:]

Their day it starts at 5 A.M. — they hit the bar.  
They've got their Maxwell House Coffee in a Bama Mayonnaise jar.  
Out goes the anchor, and then over go the tongs.  
At 10 A.M. they're saying, "Oh, Lord, where did I go wrong?"

38. Transcribed from side 1 of 45 rpm disc recording, Rex RR 5023-A, ca. 1980.

39. Transcribed from side 1 of 45 rpm disc recording, St. George Sound Records CSS-152, 1978.

[Chorus 1:]

He's got those oyster man's blues.  
He can't afford a pair of shoes.  
His hickory sticks, well, they're slapping out a tune.  
And it's called those oyster man's blues.

When he tongs up those oysters, then he throws them on the deck,  
He reaches over to his wife and he gives her a little peck.  
Then he hands her a glove and a cull iron,  
And says, "Honey, separate these things 'cause I sure am tired."

[Chorus 2:]

I've got those oyster man's blues.  
I can't afford a pair of shoes.  
My hickory sticks, well, they're slapping out a tune  
And it's called those oyster man's blues.

[*Instrumental Break*]

He comes in from the bar expecting to go home,  
But there's a grouper trooper on the dock in his grey uniform. He pulls out his  
oyster ruler and he goes to work.  
When the count is 35 per cent, he says, "Hey, you're out of luck."

[Chorus 3:]

You've got those oyster man's blues.  
You can't afford a pair of shoes.  
Your hickory sticks, I'll bet they're slapping out a tune.  
And I'll bet it's called those oyster man's blues.  
Yeah, it's called those oyster man's blues.