The (Not-So) Evolution of “Pretty Polly”

According to Brunvand’s definition, a folksong in the category of a ballad must have certain characteristics in order to qualify for the label. “Pretty Polly” is a song that has been sung in various renditions for decades by many artists. “Pretty Polly” can be classified as a folksong when examining each aspect of the ballad.

In this song, each verse consists of three lines each that contains a rhyme scheme of aab. With each verse comes a segment of a story about a man named Willie and a women named Polly. Willie seems to be a mysterious man who woos Polly in conversation. Being a traditional woman, Polly tells Willie that she wants to marry him but gets the response that they must see something before they marry. As they travel though hilly terrain, Polly begins to worry about Willies intentions and confronts him. When he doesn’t deny her accusation and Polly lays eyes on a fresh dug grave, she begins to beg for mercy by asking to leave a single lady since he doesn’t want a wife. Of course, this doesn’t agree with Willies intentions and then kills her. This song is told as a dramatic narrative since it explains a series of scenes in each verse as well as ultimately having a dark and bloody ending. With dialogue between characters and being told in third person, the factors fall under the characteristics of a folk ballad. Throughout the song there is also simple language and repetition of the first two lines in each stanza.
The three songs that I will be comparing with each other will be performed by Dock Boggs, the Stanley Brothers, and Red Tail Ring. While these three variations of “Pretty Polly” have the same basic plot, the artists took different approaches on how they interpreted them.

Dock Boggs created his version of “Pretty Polly” in the late 1920s which seemed to be the first big recording of it to gain recognition and become more widespread. With only a string instrument and his voice, Boggs lays down the basis of the song by beginning with strumming and a slower rhythm, but begins to pick up the tempo as he increases how much he picks out each note on his instrument. Boggs’ voice is definitely not the voice of an angel, but the raw quality of it brings out the folk roots to become even more eminent to the untrained ear. These characteristics show that any person that hears this song can pick up the melody and sing it, because it relates more toward the common people.

The Stanley Brothers released their album featuring their version of the song in the 1950s. In this version, the Stanley Brothers used a string instrument to pick notes, a voice to sing the lyrics, and also had a fiddle-like instrument in the background. The tempo throughout the song is allegro with a lively beat that is easily toe-tapping music, and the singer of the Stanley Brothers maintains a quick tongue with the ability to spit out the words so fast. Their rendition would be more accepted in social events due to the upbeat tempo so people who are listening to it could dance with it as well.

The group Red Tail Ring debuted their rendition of “Pretty Polly” in 2011 with a more modern twist while still maintaining its roots in folk music. There seems to be one, maybe two string instruments that echo each other with their rhythm and a singer, who
happens to be a woman compared to the men in the past two examples. With a female singing the lyrics, new emphasis is put on each verse with the second and third line each adding harmonies with backup singers. I like the feminine-friendly touch that it added. Also, the singer adds emphasis to certain words when she swings the notes which adds a very unique twist onto the song compared to the other versions.

When comparing each of the versions side by side, differences in style and interpretations are apparent, but the structure of the songs and content are universal throughout the three. Even with the decades that separated each version, the instruments used in each song remain the same and maintains its roots while still claiming individuality from the others.