If I Had a Shotgun: Musical Protest against Misogyny in Murder Ballads

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Abstract

Appalachian folk ballads have long been part of America's musical history. These ballads preserve many aspects of Appalachian culture, including murder. However, modern listeners may find the misogyny of murder ballads, particularly ballads from the nineteenth century, problematic. The stereotypical murder ballad from this period features a young woman killed by a young man without an apparent motive and little to no resistance from the victim. The aggressor seldom receives punishment for his crime. These peculiarities are stock tropes, collectively labelled "murdered girl" by scholars, and are rooted in the social shift surrounding the Industrial Revolution as well as nineteenth-century gender ideals. There are many popular contemporary songs protesting misogyny in the ballad tradition, but Abigail Washburn's "Shotgun Blues," appearing on the 2014 album *Bela Fleck and Abigail Washburn*, is a notable inversion of the Appalachian folk ballad tradition. She combines traditional folk instruments with an assertive sonic landscape and juxtaposes "Shotgun Blues" with "Pretty Polly," a more traditional "murdered girl" ballad, which directly precedes "Shotgun Blues" on the album.

Introduction

"In almost all murder ballads in Appalachian music, it's the woman who dies at the hands of some misguided male,"[1] writes modern-day folk singer Abigail Washburn in the liner notes for her recording of the traditional murder ballad "Pretty Polly." A ballad (according to this project's working definition) is a strophic song originating in the British Isles that has been preserved via oral tradition, and in some instances, with printed lyric sheets. Ballads, "Pretty Polly" among them, have a long history stretched across two continents. Collectors have found notated examples of strophic ballads dating back to the reign of Henry VIII.[2] Immigrants from the British Isles brought ballads to North America and occasionally distributed lyrics as broadsides, but ballad singing survived largely via oral tradition. Besides continuing ballad singing, eighteenth-century Americans invented new examples of the genre, which focused more on themes of confrontation and violence.[3] The ballad tradition continued to thrive into the nineteenth century, during which time many of the American murder ballads still known today came into existence.

Most commonly, murder ballads in the United States recount the story of a man dominating and killing a woman. Songs typically depict a passive female victim who does not resist her killer. Ballads usually reveal no specific motive for the killing, nor punishment for the murderer.[4] It is this violence toward and domination of women that Abigail Washburn protests in her original song, "Shotgun Blues." She states, "I take the reins in this song and seek retribution for all the ladies."[5] This is remarkable because Washburn directly protests the misogyny pervasive in the folk ballad tradition that she otherwise participates in.

Although Washburn's overturning of misogyny resembles statements made by other female American folk and country artists, including "Goodbye Earl" by the Dixie Chicks or Gillian Welch's "Caleb Meyer," Washburn's statement is a unique inversion of a tradition she otherwise respects. "Goodbye Earl," like the rest of the Dixie Chicks' repertoire, lacks a strong tie to the folk sounds and lyrical content of ballads from the British Isles. Gillian Welch's "Caleb Meyer" falls close to the ballad tradition but lacks the striking musical characteristics of "Shotgun Blues." Traditional ballad renditions are musically unobtrusive, but Washburn's voice and instrumental accompaniment are assertive, powerful, and commanding. To further highlight the evils committed against women in murder ballads, Washburn performed "Pretty Polly" on the same album, placing it just before "Shotgun Blues." Ballad scholars have discussed the misogyny of murder ballads and have written about the cultural influences and social impact created by murder ballads but have not discussed inversions of the traditional ballad pattern in detail; therefore, this paper will focus on these inversions and contrast them with the normative tradition. By writing a musically powerful response song in which the woman seizes control and seeks justice, Washburn protests women's lack of agency in traditional murder ballads.

Before one can understand the significance of female agency in "Shotgun Blues," one must examine the murder ballads produced during the nineteenth century, especially those originating in Appalachia, the geographical region with a particularly rich tradition of murder ballad singing. Ballads written in Great Britain came to America by way of immigrants to Appalachia, who also created new ones inspired by homicides committed in their new country. However, in the nineteenth century, there was a sudden shift in the nature of homicides. For the first time, many of the murders

reported in both Great Britain and America involved a young, single man killing a young, single woman, with whom he was usually romantically involved. Historian Daniel A. Cohen speculates this is due to the change in familial and sexual mores surrounding the Industrial Revolution.[6] In the literary world, there was a parallel movement that obsessed over the "beautiful female murder victim."[7] The musical world, too, drew on femicide cases that were spread through the news and gossip. The result was a surge of murder ballads conforming to a set of stock tropes, or a "formula" in the words of scholar Anne B. Cohen. The formula is known as "murdered girl."[8]

"Murdered Girl" Formula

"Murdered girl" ballads share certain tropes (or stereotypes) that work together to strip the female victim of control over her situation. Scholars Daniel A. Cohen, Lydia Hamessley, and Anne B. Cohen have noticed stock elements that appear in the following composite list: the innocence of the victim, the luring away and subsequent isolation of the victim by her killer, the victim pleading for her life (often on her knees), an outdoor setting, a romantic relationship between the victim and the assailant, the suggestion that the crime was the result of sexual transgression, the victim's abandoned body that is vividly described, and the killer's punishment or regret for the deed.[9] Anne B. Cohen also identified three main stock roles in a "murdered girl" ballad: murdered girl, lover-murderer, and grief-stricken family.[10] Of these, only the first two seem essential, since not every ballad refers to the victim's family. The "murdered girl" is young, trusting, and innocent. She is helpless in preventing her death and a passive figure in the story. Her family and friends cherish her presence. Author Daniel A. Cohen adds that she is physically beautiful.[11] The lover-murderer, on the other hand, is calculating and without conscience. He is the only active character in the ballad, as the other dramatis personae have little influence on the events of the story, rather they react to them. The grief-stricken family is helpless—portrayed as careworn and teary-eyed in the aftermath of the murder. Mothers play an especially prominent role.

Although most "murdered girl" ballads feature the same stock tropes, their conformity to a single formula is odd considering their origins are in different murder cases. The explanation for this strange pattern can be found in the murder ballad tradition. If details of a particular crime did not adhere to the "murdered girl" formula, balladeers altered the facts. The variations of the "Pearl Bryan" ballad serve as a prime example. The earliest ballads mentioned her two killers, whereas later versions eliminated one man or blended the two into one. Early ballads also mentioned the beheading of Pearl's corpse, whereas in newer variants she is stabbed, a more common method of dispatching the victim in ballads. However, the two real-life murderers beheaded her to keep the police from identifying her body. The likely cause of death was a botched abortion, not a stab wound.[12] Further blurring the truth was the simple passing of time, the potential for mishearings, and transformations common to musical practices preserved primarily via oral tradition.

A look at popular literary genres of the nineteenth century reveals the extent of the public's fascination with objectified "beautiful female murder victims, and thus, a cultural tendency to objectify women."[13] Many newspaper accounts and novels referred to women's bodies as sexualized works of art. One such instance comes from an 1836 newspaper article by James Gordon Bennett that reported on the murder of

Helen Jewett: "The perfect figure—the exquisite limbs—the fine face—the full arms—the beautiful bust . . . all surpassed in every aspect the Venus de Medicis. . . . For a few moments I was lost in admiration at this extraordinary sight—a beautiful female corpse—that surpassed the finest statue of antiquity."[14] The misfortune of her death is merely an afterthought to Bennett's reaction as he ogles her body. Indeed, there is no reference to her murder.

Both the "beautiful female murder victim" phenomenon and the tropes of "murdered girl" reflect nineteenth-century cultural ideals for women, particularly their lack of agency. Wealthy (and usually white) women spent the bulk of their time cultivating "accomplishments" to demonstrate their good upbringing or serve as adornment in order to raise their fathers' or husbands' status. Women in middle- and working-class families were encouraged to emulate the behavior of their richer peers, even if their circumstances necessitated a more labor-oriented lifestyle. In almost every aspect of their lives, women were expected to be passive and submissive to men for their benefit, yet it was that subservience that ultimately cost many their lives. These cultural patterns were reflected in "murdered girl" ballads. Anne Cohen says in ballads, "the 'good,' morally approved characters are . . . passive sufferers."[15] It is likely that many young women had spent so long learning to be sweet and demure that, when their lives were in danger, the only resistance offered (if any) was to plead with their assailants not to kill them. It is also plausible that balladeers exaggerated these qualities in female characters so their audiences would admire the victim's moral perfection as well as her appearance.

The ballad "Frankie Silver" is one of the rare murder ballads in which the woman is the killer. Despite its potential for subversion, it still reflects the nineteenth century feminine ideal. Scholar C. Kirk Hutson briefly discusses the historical murder, saying that Frankie killed her abusive husband in self-defense.[16] The ballad leaves this point out entirely, instead claiming jealousy as her motive. Frankie is depicted as remorseful for the wrong she committed against her husband and terrified of meeting his ghost if she goes to hell to "bear [his sins] in his stead."[17] The ballad is full of vivid imagery surrounding Frankie's eternal suffering for her crime. Gender norms did not allow for women to be seen as moral and innocent (or at the very least, pitiable) if they took action. Therefore, in murder ballads, women either died without a fight or, like Frankie, they became objects of morbid sensationalism.

"Pretty Polly"

The lyrics of "Pretty Polly" contain many elements of the "murdered girl" formula, making it an excellent choice for Washburn if her goal in presenting it was to highlight the tropes before inverting them. In the first stanza, Willie entices Polly to go "O'er the mountains to the other side"[18] with him, thus isolating her from anyone who might help her. The outdoor setting is also typical. The couple is romantically involved, as the first stanza indicates they are planning to marry. Without question, she follows him. It is not until they have journeyed a long distance that she begins to get nervous and tells him "I'm afraid of your ways." She then "began to weep" and Willie finally reveals his true intentions, stating that he has her grave freshly dug and waiting. Without any apparent resistance from Polly, Willie stabs her. Although this song does not mention a corpse as in other "murdered girl" ballads, it does refer to Polly's flowing blood. The last stanza

has Willie address the audience, telling them that "For killin' Pretty Polly I soon will be in Hell"[19]—his punishment for the crime.

Although the details are sparse, Polly's character is clearly portrayed as a stereotypical, passive "murdered girl." She is trusting and innocent, only questioning Willie's motives when it is too late. She has no power to resist her murderer. In this version of the ballad, she speaks only once in the entire song, bursting into tears afterward. Her physical appearance, although not as detailed as the "beautiful female murder victim" ideal, is also referenced through her name—"Pretty Polly." Willie is the typical, cunning killer, having planned how to entice Polly away from other people and also having already dug a grave to hide her body. This particular ballad lacks an appearance from Polly's family, proving that their presence is not essential.

Like many other murder ballads, there is no specific reason given in the ballad for the murder, intensifying the misogyny. However, evidence suggests "Pretty Polly" is based on an actual homicide case; so, pertinent background information may be gleaned from contemporary accounts. Scholar C. Kirk Hutson asserts that Polly Aldridge and William Chapman were lovers from Kentucky, and William decided to kill her.[20] Folklore asserts she was pregnant with Chapman's child.[21] This plot element, though nearly always left out of murder ballads, became a more common motive for a man to kill a woman in the nineteenth century.[22] With the Industrial Revolution came a new focus on individuality and mass migration to urban environments. Once away from their families of origin, many individuals (men in particular) felt less bound by the sense of collective responsibility and morality of their families and hometowns.[23] However, sex outside of marriage, even for engaged couples, remained taboo; therefore, couples maintained greater secrecy. Even though there was a decline in illegitimate pregnancies, the tendency to "get rid of the problem" by killing a pregnant girlfriend or fiancé became a more frequent way for a man to preserve his chances to advance in society. Even if she were not expecting, a man might still choose to murder his lover if the opportunity for a more advantageous match came along.[24] The well-known ballads "Rose Connelly" and "Pearl Bryan" feature murders that involve out-of-wedlock pregnancy. "Omie Wise" does too, but it is one of the few that explicitly reference the victim's condition.[25]

Specific reasons for murder in ballads must, in most cases, be obtained from outside sources. However, the prevailing motive for all such homicides is misogyny itself. This overarching connection is somewhat hidden, as misogyny is not explicitly mentioned in the lyrics. Thus, someone who listens to murder ballads without analyzing or having a historical context in which to place them may never realize that there is always a motive, albeit a generalized one, presented for the killing. Instead, the listener may conclude that the victim was murdered for no reason at all, increasing the misogyny and perceived strangeness of "murdered girl" ballads.

Influence on Culture and Social Mores

The pervasive misogyny of "murdered girl" ballads is clear, but what is debatable is the level of influence they had on the culture and social mores of regions where they were sung. Were these songs merely the product of a violent culture, or did they serve to encourage increased violence? C. Kirk Hutson discusses research across multiple disciplines that suggests music and lyrics can and do influence behavior, including triggering violence. He notes that as long as a violent narrative is realistic

and the aggressor escapes punishment, test subjects who experienced the narrative were more likely to imitate the behavior.[26] While there is no evidence available to prove nineteenth-century men could be influenced by music as the modern-day test subjects were, it is possible given what scholars know about the function of the human brain. Furthermore, "murdered girl" ballads contain many of the same conditions that triggered violent behavior in the studies, such as fact-based narratives and a killer who often received no punishment. These ballads were part of everyday life, especially in the rural South and Appalachia, further reinforcing the violent message.[27]

"Shotgun Blues" and Ballad Performance Practice

Although there is no outright mention of murder in the song, Abigail Washburn connects "Shotgun Blues" to the murder ballad tradition with lyrics that reference the plot tropes of "murdered girl" in order to invert them. Washburn sings that she would "hunt [the aggressor] down" if he was "in the woods"—an outdoor setting. The plea-on-bended-knee scene is missing in Washburn's version of "Pretty Polly" but it appears here:

> If I had a shotgun
> You'd fall down on your knees
> I'd get you talkin'
> And you'd start beggin' please[28]

Punishment for the criminal in "Shotgun Blues" comes from the victim, not from the legal system or nonhuman sources as in traditional murder ballads. This is another reversal of nineteenth-century gender roles. Women were sometimes blamed for a crime even if they were the victim, while men were often acquitted or given token sentences.[29] Even when male criminals were executed, they sometimes received sympathy from the public. In her study of ballads, musicologist Susan C. Cook writes that men in the nineteenth century were thought to have "hot and dry" temperments that explained irrational behavior.[30] Many men were able to make plea bargains on these grounds, whereas women, whose anger was supposedly muted by their temperments, had little success in getting their misdeeds classified as crimes of passion. Therefore, women often received harsher sentences for similar crimes.[31] In protest of these injustices, Washburn has her female protagonist speak of dominating her aggressor and making him pay for what he did to her. By doing so, the protagonist circumvents the corrupt system that favors men to ensure that she will receive justice. This woman is in the uncommon position of control, and she uses it to take revenge. Furthermore, she escapes the defamation received by Frankie Silver, despite both women being antagonized by a man. Here it is the original transgressor who is "no good."[32]

The lyrics of murder ballads pose the main issue that Washburn protests, but the customary performance style is also problematic. Traditional ballad singers adopted a dispassionate delivery style when they sang, so as not to interject too much of their own opinions into the story. However, according to scholar Lydia Hamessley, the lack of emotion in their delivery may be interpreted by uninformed listeners as a tacit acceptance of the violence in the song. This creates a problem for the audience who does not realize that old-time balladeers regard themselves as living newspapers

rather than performers. They may feel it is unacceptable or misogynistic to listen to these songs, although they may enjoy the musical elements.[33] Despite being a modern performance, Washburn's version of "Pretty Polly" is informed by historical performance practice. Her vocals are dispassionate, save for a few key moments in the song. Washburn gives a slightly more intense inflection to her voice the second time she sings "Willie, oh Willie I'm afraid of your ways" and the line "your guess is 'bout right." However, the effect is extremely subtle, and may not even be noticed on the first few hearings. Additionally problematic for audiences who do not understand traditional ballad aesthetics is the up-tempo music that often accompanies murder ballads. Indeed, this music would be perfect for dancing. Washburn removes this barrier by choosing a more contemplative tempo. However, her style of banjo playing does conform to tradition. The banjo accompaniment is repetitive and hypnotic, and after a few moments, one no longer pays much attention to it and is free to focus on the lyrics. Washburn may have chosen to maintain this tradition to emphasize Polly's helplessness and passivity; just as the listener cannot do anything but be hypnotized by the music, Polly cannot resist her demise.

"Shotgun Blues," however, is impassioned, and that is another way that Washburn demonstrates her opposition to misogyny. The opening of the track features a percussive banjo line that leads into wild-sounding staccato vocals from Washburn. She plays more with her vocal timbre in this track, creating a wide variety of sounds. At times her singing is irregularly timed, creating an improvisatory effect. Washburn ignores the traditional performance practice of ballads entirely to portray a woman no longer bound by rules. In so doing, she gains the agency that "murdered girls" have lacked for so long. There is no doubt that she is fully capable of getting revenge on her male enemy. In the first stanza, she says "I'd hunt you down and tell you / You're no good." Furthermore, the chorus finds her proclaiming:

> . . . gimme a shotgun
> and don't you run now
> Cause if you run now
> you know what I have to do.[34]

No angry father, brother, sheriff, or posse here—this young woman is getting her own justice. Furthermore, Washburn sings the entire song from the woman's perspective. The man never speaks, a direct contradiction of ballad tradition where the story is told by the man or a third-person narrator. Indeed, the fact this young woman is still alive suggests that she is stronger than her sister-victims. However, unlike the "hot, uncontrolled" men of the nineteenth century,[35] the woman still has some restraint, proclaiming that she will chase her target down with a shotgun, not hang him like she would if she was "a big girl."[36] She also maintains a conscience, telling the man she would not seek retribution if he showed remorse, but alas " . . . boy you're just too mean."[37] The instrumentals also depart from ballad tradition in "Shotgun Blues" to challenge the sense of female passivity. The banjo lines change frequently and alternate accompaniment roles with virtuosic solos. Even in the accompaniment sections, the banjos provide attention-getting action that changes to reflect what Washburn is doing vocally. This is a direct contrast to "Pretty Polly," where the banjos live in their own

world and do not interact with the vocalist. The sonic landscape of "Shotgun Blues" is powerful and active, reflecting the character of the female protagonist.

Conclusion

The trope of the "murdered girl" and nineteenth-century cultural norms explain women's lack of agency in murder ballads. Within the context of nineteenth-century gender ideals, the victim's passivity and the killer's seemingly unprompted decision to murder his beloved make more sense than when viewed through a twenty-first century perspective. However, this historical perspective also serves to highlight the inequality of the sexes both in murder ballads and in the real-life homicides that inspired them. Abigail Washburn seeks to remedy the injustice of the inequality and powerlessness suffered by the victims of traditional murder ballads through her song "Shotgun Blues." Although it came too late to aid the victims depicted in nineteenth-century murder ballads, perhaps it is the best way to honor their memories without romanticizing their fate.

Notes

1. Bela Fleck and Abigail Washburn, "Shotgun Blues" from *Bela Fleck and Abigail Washburn*, CD, 11661-36262-02, 2014. Liner Notes.
2. Peter Wilton, "Ballad" in *The Oxford Companion to Music*, Oxford Music Online. Accessed March 9, 2017; W. H. Cummings, "Ballad" in *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.
3. Alan Jabbour, "Folk Music in America" in *The International Cyclopedia of Music and Musicians*.
4. Although there are ballads ("Frankie and Johnny" and "Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight," for example) that feature a woman killing a man, there are few of these in ballad collections, suggesting they were not as familiar to collectors' contacts and thus, not very widespread, or numerous in the first place.
5. Fleck and Washburn, "Shotgun Blues."
6. Daniel A. Cohen, "The Beautiful Female Murder Victim: Literary Genres and Courtship Practices in the Origins of a Cultural Motif, 1590–1850," *Journal of Social History* 81, no. 4 (1995): 285–86.
7. Ibid., 277.
8. Anne B. Cohen, *Poor Pearl, Poor Girl! The Murdered-Girl Stereotype in Ballad and Newspaper* (Austin: University of Texas Printing Division, 1973), 4–5.
9. Ibid., 8–38; Daniel A. Cohen, 278; Lydia Hamessley, "A Resisting Performance of an Appalachian Traditional Murder Ballad Giving Voice to 'Pretty Polly,'" *Women & Music* 9, (August 2005): 15.
10. Anne B. Cohen, *Poor Pearl*, 10–21.
11. Daniel A. Cohen, *Murder Victim*, 277.
12. Anne B. Cohen, *Poor Pearl*, 10–21.
13. Daniel A. Cohen, *Murder Victim*, 277.
14. Ibid.
15. Anne B. Cohen, *Poor Pearl*, 6.
16. C. Kirk Hutson,"'Whackety Whack, Don't Talk Back': The Glorification of Violence Against Females and the Subjugation of Women in Nineteenth-Century Southern Folk Music," *Journal of Women's History* 8, no. 3 (1996): 130.

17. The Lenoir Topic, "The Ballad of Frankie Silver." Accessed August 20, 2017. www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/5458.
18. Fleck and Washburn, "Shotgun Blues."
19. Ibid.
20. C. Kirk Hutson, '*Whackety Whack*,' 126.
21. Kenneth D. Tunnell, "Blood Marks the Spot Where Poor Ellen Was Found: Violent Crime in Bluegrass Music," *Popular Music & Society* 15, no. 3 (July 1991): 101.
22. Daniel A. Cohen, *Murder Victim*, 286–88.
23. Ibid., 284–86.
24. Ibid.
25. Alan Lomax, *The Folk Songs of North America* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1960), 267–68; Anne B. Cohen, 39–101.
26. C. Kirk Hutson, '*Whackety Whack*,' 114–15.
27. Ibid., 114–16.
28. Fleck and Washburn, "Shotgun Blues."
29. Susan C. Cook, "Gender and Power in American Balladry," in *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music*, (University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago, 1994), 211.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Fleck and Washburn, "Shotgun Blues."
33. Lydia Hamessley, *Resisting Performance*, 18–21.
34. Fleck and Washburn, "Shotgun Blues."
35. Susan C. Cook, *Gender and Power*, 211.
36. Fleck and Washburn, "Shotgun Blues."
37. Ibid.

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