

The Wild Rover

The story and musical analysis of a traditional folk classic

Milton Mermikides

You may have heard *The Wild Rover* sung at a football or rugby match, or perhaps you know it from relatively contemporary Irish bands such as The Pogues, The Dubliners or U2. Despite its ubiquity in popular culture it is in fact a traditional song that originated at least 180 years ago, and is even likely to be much older. Although these days it's most commonly known as an Irish drinking song, the real history – as is often the case with folk music – is far more convoluted and interesting. Before the advent of widespread recording, music publishing or cataloguing of folk music, the only way for a song to be shared is by listening to other musicians play it, learning it by ear (or instruction) and then relying on memory to pass it on to others. A song then might spread in several directions from its place and time of origin, mutating as if in a game of Chinese whispers and then end up in variegated forms miles away. If you bear in mind that a song could also absorb musical features from its new locality, have its lyrics translated, adapted or replaced then you start to appreciate how hard it is to discover a song's precise origin, composer or even defining it as a unique tune. It is therefore understandable that *The Wild Rover's* origins are unclear. What's known is that it was first published in 1845 in an American collection of folk-songs, however there's evidence to suggest that copies existed in England some twenty years earlier. Things are complicated by the existence of an earlier song with a similar melodic and textual elements known as *The Green Bed* which reached the height of its popularity in Australian 'Bush' in the late 19th century. There's also a folk song from Germany with unclear origins which shares the same melody. Some musicologists have made a convincing case that *The Wild Rover* is in fact of Scottish origin and written as a *temperance* song – that is a song which extols the virtues of abstinence (or moderation) when it comes to alcohol – which is quite a departure from its modern identity as an Irish drinking song. I do try to educate Irish pub audiences on these finer details when possible but it doesn't always come across that well.

The Wild Rover attained its contemporary popularity and identity when it was championed by English folk singer Sam Larner in the 1950s, with its first recording made in 1960 by singers Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger. Irish singer Louis Killen's subsequent midnight concert in May 1963 in London (*Hootenanny in London* Decca) and *The Dubliners* massive hit version in 1964, thereon made the tune inextricably linking with Irish folk music and is an ever popular staple of the pub folk singer. An early 70s recordings by the Clancy Brothers, kept the tune in mainstream consciousness bridging the generations to later bands such as *The Pogues*, *Stiff Little Fingers* – who infuse it with a punk abandon, *The Dropkick Murphys* and even *U2* who have included it in their stadium gigs. In addition, its popularity with rugby and football supporters – with lyrics adapted

accordingly for each team – seems almost inevitable given the tune’s distinctly rousing effect.

The *oral tradition* – the passing on of songs without scores or recordings – is imperfect in that it creates confusion about a song’s origin, and much fine music may have been lost. However it does have a remarkable advantage, namely that what is *most memorable* about a melody and a story is what is passed on. The fact that musicians in an oral tradition rely on their memories to spread music means that over time there is an evolutionary process at work which distils down a song to its most effective components; A polished gem which resonates with a range of cultures both in terms of the story’s content and its musical features.

The Wild Rover tells the story of a man who after years wandering distant lands squandering his wealth, returns back to his home-place vowing never to behave like that again – somewhat reminiscent of the biblical prodigal son parable. As you can see the message of lyrics are in direct opposition to its use as a drinking song. Incidentally, a ‘wild rover’ is sometimes used to mean someone who squanders their money beyond their means. The resolve of the narrator to never return to his old habits is embodied in the ‘No Nay Never’ lyric of the chorus which apparently very few drunk people can resist singing at that point of the song. Musically, the tune’s melody is entirely in one key (G major) here, and it only uses three basic chords. G, C and D, which are the three major triads in the key of G. The D can also be played as a D7, which can be thought of as a more elaborated version of the D major triad creating a bit more tension to resolve. What is remarkable, and testament to the oral tradition’s power, is how effective a tune can be constructed from these elemental building blocks. The tune is in a 3/4 meter – three beats in each bar – that gives a waltzing sway to the song cajoling the listener further into boisterous submission. There is a tendency for some people who are really into the guitar to be a bit snobby about playing ‘simple’ music with 3 chords. It’s also easy to resent requests to ‘play a song we know’ when one is playing your hard won 7 minute solos to a group of people. The reality is, however that making a tune work is always a challenge and opportunity to improve one’s technique, repertoire, understanding of music and general musical experience.

This arrangement begins with a picked melody echoing the melody in the verse and setting up the song – a series of 5 alternating verses and choruses with indicated strummed chords. The backing track follows the form of the song sheet exactly, starting as a minimal arrangement of percussion, accordion and double bass and ending with an epically rousing ensemble of strings, electric guitars and woodwinds that if played right should bring home even the wildest rover.

If you like the Wild Rover you may also enjoy:

Danny Boy
The Chieftains
Tears of Stone

This Frederic Weatherly ballad – actually set to the tune of an ancient Irish piece Londonderry air – has a powerful simplicity.

Dirty Old Town

The Pogues

Very Best of The Pogues

This 1949 tune by English folk-singer Ewan MacColl an endearing nostalgic quality.

Whisky in The Jar

Thin Lizzy

Whisky in The Jar

This ever popular Irish traditional song is given the classic 70s rock treatment by Lynott and co.