

The Oyster Wife Liner Notes

Chelle Fulk, fiddlist extraordinaire and the producer of this album, adds her zesty signature to each of these pieces, whether there's fiddle on them or not. We thank her for her patience, her perseverance and her calming kind words when the project seemed too enormous to tackle. Les Lentz, of Les Lentz Audio/Visual, not only did a wonderful job of recording and engineering, but he laid down the bass parts and fed us good wholesome food when we needed it. We love you Les, and we're sorry that you've moved to Cordova, Md., which is far away from here, even as the crow flies. Unless otherwise noted, Paul DiBlasi and I (Janie Meneely) do the vocals and guitar work.

Billy Taylor

This is an old-old English ballad, commonly called Willie Taylor or William Taylor. In the original story our hero gets pressed into the British navy, his sweetheart goes to sea to find him, and when she does, she's not very happy to discover that he's about to be married so she shoots him dead. Sometimes she finds him dead already (sniff sniff). In one version, she impresses the admiral enough by her, um, marksmanship, that he puts her in charge of the fleet (we like that version). I wondered how the story might have unfolded if Willie and his true love had lived in Baltimore back in, say, 1893, and out came this Chesapeake version. In the late 1880s into the early 1900s dredge boat captains often "recruited" crew from the bars along the Baltimore waterfront. One practice was to get a fellow too drunk to stand and then hustle him aboard the waiting boat. When the fellow came to, he was put to work. This was called being shanghaied, and it is hardly unique to the Bay. Conditions aboard the workboats weren't quite as bad as the song suggests, but the work was cold and wet, the food as good as a cook cared to make it, and once the dredge boats settled on a productive oyster bed, there was no reason to go ashore again for days—sometimes weeks—at a time. If a fellow was idle or was more trouble than he was worth, the skipper might arrange for a sudden swing of the boom (jibe ho!) to knock him overboard. He would drown pretty fast in the frigid water. It has been said that some skippers would "pay off" with the boom in similar fashion, thus reducing the number of payshares at the end of the run. There is some evidence to support this practice, though it wasn't nearly as widespread as folklore suggests. Good workers were always welcome and rewarded, often marrying into the captain's family. I call my hero Billy Taylor, Billy being a more common moniker than Willie here in Bay country. Let's assume his skipper's last name was Brown, hence his marriage to Lucy Brown there in Crisfield, once a hub of Bay oystering. The outcome of my tale is essentially the same as the original. The moral of the story? Don't mess with those Dundalk girls. Craig Williams came up with the arrangement (he's the one on guitar).

Glossary:

- Oyster rock: a dredger's term for the oyster bars or oyster reefs found in the open Bay water; tongers would work the oyster bars in the shallower river water
- Skipjack: a small single-masted oyster dredging boat
- "When the dredge came full of oysters": the oyster dredge (often pronounced "drudge" by the locals) was hauled out of the water using a donkey engine, but once the oysters were spilled on deck it was necessary for the crew to bend over and cull, or sort, through them by hand, before the dredge came full again. Overboard went empty shell, undersized oysters, and any trash or detritus that might come up in the dredge.

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Shanghaied Dredger

And speaking of being shanghaied . . . Jonathan Eberhardt (The Boarding Party) got wind of this little ditty (written by Edward Hammond, he says), tinkered with the tune and filled in some words. We are exceedingly grateful to him and the Boarding Party for its preservation and for letting us record it. Tom Wisner also sings a version of this song, collected, he says, from watermen on the Potomac River. We understand that there are folks in the Norfolk area who play this song, picked up from the oral tradition and perhaps from the songwriter himself or a member of his family. Their version is slightly different still. Aside from the netting songs preserved by the Reedville menhaden fishermen, this is the only song we've been able to find that stems from a working fishery. That's Paul on guitar and vocals. Geoff Kaufman plays concertina, Chelle fiddles and Brad Howard and I chime in on the chorus.

Glossary:

- Pungy: a schooner once used on the Bay for carrying freight and dredging oysters; the term probably derives from the pinky schooners of New England.
- Corn dog and sow belly (or sour belly): self-descriptive food stuff, probably akin to hush puppies and tripe.
- Police sloop: this would have been a member of the dreaded Oyster Navy that patrolled the oyster rocks for poachers. Dredge boats were not allowed into the rivers, which were reserved for hand tongers, but it was easy work for a dredge to strip an oyster bar in shallow water, so the boats were always tempted to go into the “forbidden ground” and catch a “jag”—a dredge full of oysters—or two. Encounters with the Oyster Navy could be bloody affairs, peppered with the frequent exchange of gunfire. Oystermen faced heavy fines for illegal dredging. But there were never enough oyster police for adequate patrol, so few dredgers were ever caught.

Oyster Wife

And speaking of poaching . . . I wrote this song after interviewing Deltaville, Va. waterman “Uncle Willy” Willis for a story I did for *Chesapeake Bay Magazine* way back when. He talked of running his boat at night pell-mell out the Rappahannock and up to the oyster grounds on the Potomac River (forbidden territory to Virginia’s power dredgers; Maryland outlawed power dredging in the 1880s). He and his crew would “dredge the hell outta them oysters” then hightail it back to Virginia waters where they would scrape them overboard into some protected creek, still under the cover of darkness. Then they would harvest their stash at their leisure, in broad daylight, with none the wiser. Of course the Maryland Oyster Navy patrolled the Potomac River up through the 1950s (Uncle Willy’s heyday), and they fired real bullets. “We’d duck down behind the oyster shell and hope we didn’t get hit,” Uncle Willy said. I imagined how “Mrs. Willy” must have felt hearing those guns go off (you know how sound carries over the water), and that’s how the song happened. When I played it for the two of them, Mrs. Willy said, “It was just like that! It was just like that.” Uncle Willy said, “We were older’n that—we musta been 24, 25 when we got married.” Unfortunately there are two many syllables in the words 24 and 25 to keep the meter of the song. So it goes. But everything else is true enough. Uncle Willy and his wife were married just before World War II. In their first year of marriage, the oysters were so plentiful they were able to pay off the loan on the boat Willy used for dredging (there’s a reason why oysters were often referred to

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as White Gold); the second season out they had enough cash to buy a modest dwelling in Deltaville, where they remained the rest of their lives. Then the bottom began to fall out of the oyster catch; prices were low and the oyster bars, or reefs, were no longer as productive as they had been. (This is about the time, some say, that the diseases Dermo and MSX began taking their toll though the specific organisms weren't identified until much later). After World War II, there was a mini oyster boom, since the bars had lain fallow while the boys went to war. Then things went downhill pretty fast. Alas, Uncle Willy passed away before I could get the song recorded, but at least he and his wife heard it, live, in their Deltaville kitchen.

Note:

In the days before there were a lot of electronic navigational aides, people who lived along the water would set a lamp in their window at night to help guide boats down the river. Some folks still maintain what is a lovely (and thoughtful) tradition, and you'll see their flickering lights shining through an attic window if you're headed downriver in the dead of night, perhaps smuggling in a load of poached oysters or . . . something else.

Boatbuilder

The lyrics and tune for this just fell out of Paul's guitar one day when I had nothing better to do, apparently, then tinker with someone else's pride and joy. The song goes out to the likes of my good buddy John Swain (builder of the *Kalmar Nykel* and the *Sultana*, among other stalwart vessels) and the many other talented boatwrights still plying their trade here in the Chesapeake region. Alas, boatbuilders are a vanishing breed on the Bay. While the skills are still handed down from one generation to the next, the current batch of kids has had to relegate their tools to a basement workshop and their hammering to weekends and holidays while they move on to more lucrative pursuits. What you'll find now in the boatyards is a system of hull-up boatbuilding: a boatwright will take a ready-made fiberglass hull and finish it to suit a buyer ("He'll finish out a hull or two, just to pay the bills . . ."). Even so, old boat shops remain a gathering place in the evenings, when the lawyers and the car mechanics and the rest of the community that grew up together, mostly, still manage to drop by to "check on things." That's when stories and beer mingle with the smell of sawdust and curing fiberglass. This is a good sing along, we think. The chorus is a litany of many of the different kinds of boats unique to the Chesapeake Bay, but in case you can't pick up on it, it goes like this:

*A skipjack or a sharpie; catboat or canoe [as in log canoe, the sailing kind]
For working or for pleasure, there's nothing he can't do
A skiff, a launch, a deadrise, brogan or bateau [sic: that's how it's spelled, really]
He'll build them all by wrack of eye, and Lordy, watch 'em go.*

Old Bill

When I was a kid a pair of watermen kept their boats at the end of my street in downtown Annapolis. This honors them, but the Old Bill in the song is really a composite character. Those of us who grew up on the Bay probably knew someone just like him at one time or

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another. These guys were hard as a toadfish tooth, with scars and tattoos and “arther-itus.” They had spent their youth working on oyster boats and spending their ample and hard-earned cash carousing in Baltimore bars or the burlesque houses on Baltimore’s nefarious “Block.” They spent their middle age weathering bad times in the oyster industry that never went away. In my lifetime, they were poor as dirt, but too old or too ornery to try their hand at anything else. The Old Bill of the song is finally able to buy his own boat, a sweet little deadrise (the ubiquitous Bay workboat). These boats are always white (folks will tell you lots of reasons why, but it’s really because white paint is cheap). Bill names his boat *Miss Fern* after his mother, because he wants to stay in good with the Lord, a pretty important fellow in the waterman’s community. He meets his untimely (and mysterious) end in a winter storm, and his boat is dragged into the marshes to rot. This was done as homage to the boat and its owner. If Bill had a son or a best friend to keep her afloat, she might have remained active; truth is, these wooden boats only lasted as long as their owners anyway, and with miles and miles of empty marsh, they could just “melt away” with dignity rather than succumb to a chain saw. Bob Zentz offered me the “tangled in the yarns of the past” line (chorus), for which I am eternally grateful. The lovely bouzouki part on this piece is played by our friend Cliff Long.

Katie Allen

Some of you may be familiar with the version of Katie Allen that I recorded on my “Give Me a River” album. Well . . . this one’s a little different. William Pint and Felicia Dale added octave mandolin and hurdy-gurdy, while Paul took over the vocals. The result is a darker version of the simple ghost story I first heard around a campfire at Echo Hill, a kids’ camp overlooking the northern Bay. The names are changed to protect the rhyme scheme, and there is no historical basis for the tale whatsoever. Who cares? The story is plausible enough. Skipjacks carried freight in the summertime, and traffic between the Eastern Shore town of Chestertown and the metropolis of Baltimore was quite common, though the trek up the Chester River was arduous. One particular bend in the river is called the Devil’s Reach, because the wind there is so fluky boats under sail had (and still have) the devil’s own time getting past it. A place like that just begs for a ghost story, don’t you think?

Toadfish

I wrote this song many years ago for the first-ever toadfish tournament, hosted by the Tilghman Island Inn. I think there was never a second tournament, but the song remains as a testament to a great idea. It’s our paeon to tournament fishing here on the Bay, an extremely popular pastime these days, and often worth a lot of prize money. Many of the watermen have swapped their tongs for captain’s licenses to make a living as fishing “guides” or charter boat captains. It is the practice on some boats (though not so much any more) to charge a fee for every fish you catch—presumably “keepers” or eatable ones. Hence the protagonist’s surprise when the captain suggests payment of another dollar. Toadfish are nasty fish that fight like the devil when they’re caught; toss ’em back and by gum they’ll bite that hook again. Like so many things, they are said to taste like chicken, but heck, even chicken doesn’t

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really taste like chicken any more. I sure wouldn't eat one. That's Cliff Long on the jaw harp (it's really a khomus from Tuva in Siberia, but you can't tell that by listening).

Point Lookout

Point Lookout Light, which sits at the confluence of the Potomac River and the Bay, is probably the most haunted edifice on the Chesapeake shore. It looks like a house with a bit of a cupola on top, where the light sits. The keeper and his family lived in the building, which dates back to the 1830s. The light was replaced long ago with a buoy that lies well offshore, but the lighthouse remained occupied as a residence for park service employees until the end of the last century (the 1990s). They tell plenty of stories about their spectral "roommates" who in all probability ignored the eviction notice and now have the place to themselves. This song provides a brief rundown of the most commonly heard stories about this desolate spot that once held Confederate POWs. It's an interesting place to visit, but only open to the public once a month. [See also Salvagers, below.] Cliff Long adds bouzouki.

Islands

This is the first song I ever wrote about the Chesapeake Bay (about 24 years ago), and it opened the floodgates to a raft of material that reflects my experience growing up on, in and around this shining water. An interesting aspect of Bay country is the monochromatic color scheme. It's sometimes hard to distinguish the difference between water, land and sky. One sure sign that you've spotted a harbor is when you see the stark white of a church steeple blazing against the horizon in vivid contrast to everything else. Once ashore in high summer, you'll find clumps of orange day lilies lining the roadside and rising from the ditches. You'll also get chiggers and pick up ticks, but enough . . . I think the song speaks for itself.

Salvagers

Speaking of Point Lookout, I'm told there was once a community of salvagers who lived on the beach there back in the 1600s. They made their living off the flotsam and jetsam of the boats that ran afoul of the shoals. Navigators had no idea how long the Potomac River was, so they often underestimated the stretch of shallows at the river's mouth and the treacherous cross currents they would encounter there. (It remains the thorniest part of the Chesapeake, to the chagrin of cruising boaters.) I'm not aware of any "false lights" (like the one at Nags Head, for example) here on the Bay. No need to run a false light where "nature's rogue enough, enough." Parts of this song were recorded at Blue Ewe studio on Whitby Island, Washington.

Waterman's Kiss

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There is no mermaid tradition on the Chesapeake Bay, but I don't see any reason why there couldn't be. This is the only naughty-ish song on the album, and it's actually pretty tame (by my standards). In the world of sea music, mermaids are always getting knocked up by sailors, and I was pondering the mysteries of the mermaid's anatomy and trying to figure out how (I missed that class, maybe). At any rate, I'd heard that kissing can make you pregnant, and suddenly I realized why my Mom told me never to kiss a waterman—'nuff said.

Anthem

This is what I would want engraved on my tombstone if I were the kind of person to have a tombstone, which I'm decidedly not. Still, I'm speaking from the heart here. I hope the song touches you with the wonder and joy I felt in the writing of it.