

Shenandoah: Our Thirst for Home

Astonishingly, this gorgeous American folk song has no story, no source, and no author. For more than a century we've associated it with the battle-weary Civil War soldiers or flatboat rivermen--maybe even freed slaves, or lovesick sweethearts far, far, far from home. Maybe you've always thought its honey-coated saga, set somewhere in the mythical American west, starred a white man who fell in love with the beautiful daughter of Native chief. "Shenandoah," is an all-American favorite, and, oddly enough open book.

It belongs primarily to the Shenandoah River valley, I suppose, although I can't help thinking that I own at least some of it, living here, less than an hour from the song's own breathtaking "wide Missouri." The river itself is only 55 miles long. Compare that to the Missouri's 2300 plus.

It winds through the Blue Ridge Mountains, a range that just somehow seems to fit. It curls around between the hills and finally flows honorably into the Potomac, right there at Harpers Ferry. It is, just like those places, all-American.

Right now, you're listening to an English choir, who've no more or less right to its riches than some guy with a rifle and coonskin cap. "Shenandoah" is totally American, but it belongs to all of us.

Someplace, somewhere, there's a grave--maybe it's unmarked--where a man or woman is buried in American ground, someone who, once upon a time, listened to a blend of notes in his head and simply started to sing or play what he or she heard. Listen.

Didn't get a penny for it either, but I can't help thinking that somewhere today he smiles when yet another high school choir picks it up for fall concert or

some fresh-voiced singer/songwriter plays with it a little, then throws it into her mix.

Tons of lyrics and endless variations exist. Everyone who is anyone has sung it. Listen to Chanticleer, Tennessee Ernie Ford, or the St. Olaf Choir. The list is endless. Try Harry Belafonte or maybe the great Paul Robeson. Been done often in the great Mormon Tabernacle.

"Shenandoah" has no birthday, no debut, not even a creator--and therefore no copyright. No one gets royalties, but we do.

In the human repertoire, it's among the most beautiful hymns to life and memory and our unquenchable thirst for home, for something to believe in. This great flowing river of a ballad is so broad that it's come to feature the precious landscapes that each of us finds home.

Life itself is enriched by "Shenandoah."