

Interview with Chandra Manning (Professor, Georgetown University) “John Brown’s Body” Song

1. Meet the Song (2:09)

The song, “John Brown’s Body,” consists of tune and words. And oftentimes in the 19th century, new words got set to familiar tunes because it was an easy way to learn songs. So the tune to “John Brown’s Body” had been around for a while.

*John Brown's body lies a-moulderin' in the grave,
John Brown's body lies a-moulderin' in the grave,
John Brown's body lies a-moulderin' in the grave,
But his soul is marching on.*

*Glory, glory hallelujah,
Glory, glory hallelujah,
Glory, glory hallelujah,
His soul is marching on.*

The words to “John Brown’s Body” went through several different variations. Original John Brown that it’s singing of was not even the John Brown that we think of, John Brown, the anti-slavery figure. He was a soldier in the Union Army in a Massachusetts regiment who had the name John Brown and the song was initially a way for his fellow soldiers to tease him. But the song caught on and passed beyond his regiment. When other regiments sang the song “John Brown’s Body,” they probably had no idea that there was a Massachusetts soldier named John Brown. They thought they were singing about John Brown, the anti-slavery figure.

And the words, again they changed and they evolved over the course of the war. Different groups would add different verses that fit their experiences. And what makes this song so interesting to me is that the image of John Brown, the anti-slavery figure, did the same thing. It changed so much over time and also varied depending on who you ask. So different groups would ascribe certain characteristics just like different soldiers would add different lyrics.

It becomes one of the Union Army’s favorite marching tunes. Partly because it’s quite a stirring melody and you can envision marching to this song. But also because the anti-slavery cause that John Brown came to stand for in the public mind takes on such added importance as the Civil War progresses, among Union soldiers and among the Northern public. So the popularity of the song far outstrips the popularity of John Brown. The song’s fate during the war is really quite telling about how attitudes about slavery and anti-slavery changed over time, but particularly within the war itself.

2. Analyze (2:03)

The first thing I would ask is: What does it sound like? In terms of tune, is it slow or fast? Is it the sort of thing you would use to sing a baby to sleep or is it the sort of thing that you would march to?

I would also listen for repetition. Why do particular words recur again and again? Why this word as opposed to another word? What might this verse be talking about? There's clearly a lot of military and army overtones. "A soldier in the Army of the Lord."

What do they think that means? There's a war going on at the time so it could mean a couple of things. Does it mean the original John Brown? What does that tell us about how John Brown saw himself and saw his quest to free the slaves? We could talk about "Army of the Lord" in that symbolic sense in John Brown's eyes.

What does that mean to the soldiers who are singing it in the Union Army? What does that tell us about how they think about their own cause in the Union Army?

*He's gone to be a soldier in the army of the Lord,
He's gone to be a soldier in the army of the Lord,
He's gone to be a soldier in the army of the Lord,
His soul is marching on.*

Where the verses are in relation to each other. Why do certain ideas follow from certain other ideas? Might just be nonsense. We all make up nonsense songs. But not always. And in this case, I think where verses fall in relation to each other really does tell us something about how the war changed many of the men who fought it.

Lyrics that don't quite make sense to them, that they don't quite understand because their context is different. And that context matters. That's where sometimes you have to be careful because how we use words, what we mean by words, that can change over time. It's worthwhile to spend time really looking at lyrics and what they would've meant to somebody in the 1860s.

I think it's also important to make sure that you have a version of the tune that is as close as possible to how 19th-century people would've heard it. Many recordings are very soft and lyrical which is exactly how 19th-century people would *not* have heard this song.

3. Songs (0:58)

Songs are a wonderful way to get at 19th-century life, because so much of people's entertainment had to be self-created. A way to entertain yourself was get together and to sing. The way that it gets produced formally is in sheet music, pieces of paper with the words and the notes. But more often, how people learn music is word of mouth. Words to songs are often set to tunes that people already know. That's one way in which songs can spread so quickly. Learning a song is learning new words as opposed to learning both words and music.

People do change the words as they go along. And that's why you'll see so many different versions and different lyrics.

When there are many versions, you have to be a little bit careful not to assume that everybody is (a) singing the same thing, or (b) means the same thing. But watching how words change over time and looking at particular words that are chosen and what certain lyrics might refer to can, I think, really be helpful in understanding what do people have on their minds at the time. They

start to insert their experiences and things from the news and their ideas and attitudes into these songs.

4. Background (2:00)

John Brown's raid happens in the year 1859 and then the Civil War breaks out in 1861. Northerners and Southerners have been growing apart on the issue of slavery. But the question that has really been dividing Northerners and Southerners at the time that John Brown's raid happens is: What should the ultimate fate of slavery be as the nation expands? New territories are being added. Should they be slave or should they be free?

Northern opinion is very divided. Some just don't want to talk about it. Others think: Slavery exists in the Southern states and it's not really our business to touch it there. You can keep it if you already have it, but we don't want to send it anywhere else.

Then there's Southern opinion which says: We need this institution. It's central to our way of life. Not allowing it to spread, first of all goes against the will of God and, second of all, is going to be dangerous. What if we become so outnumbered that all the other states in the Union can get together in Congress and can outlaw slavery.

For many white Northerners, it can be kind of an abstract issue; it isn't something they live with every day. Most white Southerners live among slaves every day, whether or not they actually own any. The institution of slavery is an inherently violent institution. So for Southerners, the fear of a slave uprising is never absent. When somebody like John Brown, an outsider, a man from the North, comes into the South to incite an uprising of slaves, it sounds like your worst nightmare. That clearly shows that we have to take dramatic steps to protect ourselves. And for some white Southerners, the only step that will really protect us is to separate, to leave the Union.

So John Brown is one man. He's certainly not indicative of majority opinion. He only gets 19 people to help him. The rebellion doesn't work. It lasts less than 36 hours. He's tried and executed. The great uprising, all the slaves flocking to him, that he had envisioned never happened. But its impact shouldn't be underestimated. Because he really does stand for so much of what white Southerners fear by 1860.

5. Soldiers' Lives (1:29)

"John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back." I would want to talk with students about what's a knapsack. And what they think that one might mean.

*John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back,
John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back,
John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back,
His soul is marching on.*

That verse seems to me to be a clear outgrowth of the experience of being in the army for so many soldiers. That's new. They have likely not been away from home before, much less in an army. So I think that verse gives us a chance to talk about the experience of being a soldier.

A lot of students carry a knapsack to school with them every day and in their knapsack they'll put the things that they're going to need from day to day. If a soldier is in the Union Army and he's away from home, sometimes for the first time, what might he put in his knapsack? What would he need for his day-to-day life? What kinds of things do soldiers carry with them? What's it like to be a soldier?

He'd probably have to carry his food, so what would he eat? He would have to carry a blanket. What would sleeping be like if you were on the march? How much can you really carry if you have to carry it all day long? Not that much. So if you had to think about the few things you could carry with you, what would you take? Two pairs of socks and your uniform and not a lot else. How does that affect your life?

I can see why singing songs would look like such a good time because you don't have much else with you. Maybe a pack of cards. It becomes possible to talk about the bareness of life with that knapsack.

6. Soldiers' Beliefs (1:53)

We go from this verse about the experience of being a soldier—trudging and carrying things, stomping through the mud—and then we go right into “John Brown died that the slaves might be free.” That's an interesting juxtaposition because it suggests that this tromping through mud and being cold and being hot and being lonely actually has come to be for the purpose that this institution of slavery might come to an end.

*John Brown died that the slave might be free,
John Brown died that the slave might be free,
John Brown died that the slave might be free,
But his soul is marching on.*

They first enter the Union Army for all kinds of different reasons. Some so that slaves might be free, but others might enter the Army because they really think that keeping one United States matters. So they might enter for patriotic motives. They might enter because they're 19 years old and tired of working on a farm and they think it will be a big adventure. They might enter because other young men from their town are entering and they don't want to look like a coward. So there're all kinds of reasons why a person might decide to enter the Union Army.

But the experience of being in the Union Army really does begin to make many soldiers think about things they might not have really wanted to think a lot about before. And they're doing this thinking in states that have slavery and most of them have never seen slavery before. They knew it existed, but it's different to see it in person. So for many of them, seeing slavery in person really changes their minds.

And really does make them think that all this mucking around in the mud and loneliness and fear and boredom and all the other things that being a soldier entails is for a purpose. So I think the juxtaposition of those two verses, the very ordinary verse about a knapsack and all of a sudden

this moral verse about “died that the slaves might be free,” I think that’s more than an accident. I think that those things got put together for purpose.

7. Later Lyrics (1:53)

The second version is a later version. The lyrics are more elaborate. They look to me like lyrics that somebody actually sat down and thought about as opposed to the lyrics that somebody made up as they were going along. They talk even more explicitly about exactly who was John Brown, exactly what did he do. There doesn’t seem to be much confusion at all about John Brown. John Brown’s a hero.

“Old John Brown’s Body lies mouldering in the grave, While weep the sons of bondage whom he ventured all to save. But tho' he lost his life while struggling for the slave, His soul is marching on.” It starts right off not with the experiential part about a knapsack, but instead here is who John Brown was. And he was a person willing to sacrifice his life to end slavery.

And then the next verse, it’s even more clear that the writer of the song really admires John Brown. This verse says: “John Brown was a hero, undaunted, true and brave, And Kansas knows his valor when he fought her rights to save. Now, tho' the grass grows green above his grave, His soul is marching on.”

The writer of the second verse is a fairly educated person who must know something about John Brown’s life. Before John Brown decides to lead this uprising in Virginia, he goes to be part of this struggle to free Kansas.

And then the second verse has a lot of details about his raid in Virginia. “He captured Harpers Ferry with his nineteen men so few, and frightened 'Old Virginy' till she trembled through and through.”

“They hung him for a traitor, themselves the traitor crew” must happen after secession because many Northerners see secession as the work of traitors. Again, it’s quite detailed. This person knows that there were 19 men involved in the raid. It’s not clear that the writer of the first version has that kind of detailed knowledge.

*He captured Harpers Ferry with his nineteen men so few,
And frightened old Virginia till she trembled through and through.
They hung him for a traitor, themselves the traitor crew,
But his soul is marching on.*

8. The Union (1:21)

“The conflict that he heralded, he looks from heaven to view, On the army of the Union with its flag red, white and blue. And heaven shall ring with anthems o’er the deed they mean to do, For his soul his marching on.”

Now this is a fascinating verse. It draws a direct link between what John Brown does and the outbreak of the Civil War. But what I find even more interesting is this explicit connection between John Brown and his raid on Virginia and the Union flag of red, white, and blue.

John Brown saw the United States government as protecting slavery. He led this raid in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, against the Union government. He chose to attack a federal arsenal which is where the United States government keeps its firearms. It was the United States government that was partly guilty for this institution. John Brown's cause becoming attached to the United States government, again, I think is a very interesting glimpse at how much the war changed things and changed peoples' views about slavery.

And then we go on to "Ye soldiers of Freedom, then strike, while strike ye may. The death blow of oppression in a better time and way, For the dawn of old John Brown has brightened into day, And his soul is marching on." The connection between the cause of John Brown and the cause of the Union Army, "Ye soldiers of Freedom," becomes clear. But again, I suspect this is a song that comes in the second year of the war or later.

9. Early John Brown (1:59)

John Brown was born in 1800 to a family of very stern religious convictions and a father who was very sternly anti-slavery. Both of those things rubbed off on John Brown. And he's never very successful at making a living. From a sort of material point of view, his life is a failure.

When he starts to become important is in the 1850s when Kansas Territory opens up for white settlement and the question arises, "should Kansas be slave or free?" To John Brown, this is not even a question. It should be free. And so he goes to Kansas to participate in the struggle to make Kansas a free state. In December of 1855, the town of Lawrence, Kansas, a town committed to making Kansas free, was attacked by pro-slavery forces. And Brown's involved in the defense of Lawrence.

Later in 1856, there are a series of assassinations and executions of free state settlers. And in response to (1) those assassinations, (2) another attack on the town of Lawrence and, (3) an event that happens back in the United States Congress in which a pro-slavery senator attacked an anti-slavery senator, these three events just boil up in John Brown. In May of 1856, he decided that if pro-slavery forces are going to try and force slavery on Kansas with violence, then anti-slavery forces have to react with violence. So he killed five pro-slavery settlers. The justification was that those who are willing to kill for slavery should be willing to die for slavery. To most people it was a gruesome act.

Brown denied that he did it. And he began to travel back among the eastern states to gain support for anti-slavery settlers in Kansas. He says he's raising money for free state settlers in Kansas, but actually he had begun to plan his raid on Harpers Ferry. He is back in Kansas in 1859 and his last hurrah is to cross over into Missouri and to free 11 slaves and to escape with them to Canada.

10. Harper's Ferry (1:32)

Harpers Ferry. He found six wealthy Northeasterners, mostly New Englanders, who thought that they were supporting Kansas who really are the people who financed his raid. They're known as the "Secret Six." He also met with a number of free African American Northern leaders to try and get them to help him recruit men. Frederick Douglass told him that the plan was insane and

wouldn't help him. So Brown entered the raid disappointed. He had hoped for more widespread support.

He and some of his sons and some other compatriots, for a grand total of eventually 19 people, rented a farm house in Maryland, just seven miles from Harpers Ferry. His hope was that he would seize this federal armory, the symbol of the United States government which he blamed for helping to keep slavery. And then slaves from all around would flock to his banner and they would march to the South and free slaves as they went.

They seize the armory without too much difficulty. They do it in the middle of night. Nobody's expecting a raid on Harpers Ferry. But after that, it's a little mysterious as to exactly what Brown thought would happen because he really just stayed put. Probably he was waiting for all of these slaves to rush to his banner and they didn't. So eventually the locals surround Brown. Brown and his men eventually congregate in one building at the Harpers Ferry arsenal, the engine house.

Meanwhile, local people have contacted the United States military. A force of Marines under Colonel Robert E. Lee comes to Harpers Ferry and is able to capture Brown and his followers. A few of them escape. Some of them are killed. Most of them are captured and will go on trial.

11. Trial (1:30)

Brown goes on trial very quickly, so speedily that the judge will not even wait for a lawyer to arrive to serve as John Brown's defense lawyer. That decision turned out to be important in first beginning to shift Northern opinion. They thought, first of all, this is a nutty idea. What on earth did he think he was going to achieve? And they did not see themselves as advocating the use of violence. And they did not see themselves as advocating marching into a Southern state and physically attacking slavery. And they certainly didn't want Southerners to think that they advocated that kind of thing.

Then the judge makes the decision not to wait for the lawyer. Northerners begin to think that due process is being taken away. These Southerners are so worried about slavery that they're willing to overlook civil liberties. They're willing to overlook the Bill of Rights. Now John Brown is beginning to look a little different. He's beginning to look like somebody who's sacrificing himself in a greater cause. He's beginning to look a little bit like a martyr.

Most Northerners are not on board with that view yet. But then he's executed and he comports himself with great dignity. He gives a very eloquent last speech. He writes a very eloquent last letter in which he says: I once thought it would be possible to end slavery by shedding just a little blood. Now I see that the crimes of this guilty land are too great and they will only be expiated with the shedding of a lot of blood.

So, Northern opinion begins to shift a little more. And Southern opinion becomes a little more nervous about Brown. Once the war happens, that's when Brown really becomes elevated in Northern opinion. He might've tried to end slavery by shedding just a little blood. Now, we have this great war that has shed a lot of blood. Suddenly he looks like a martyr and a prophet.

12. Northern Opinions (1:08)

That this is certainly not a man who's a hero right away.

So you begin to see a shift in newspaper articles when John Brown is hanged. But then you really see a shift as the war progresses. One thing that would be really useful would be to find some newspaper articles about John Brown from those three different times: when the raid first happens; when he is executed; and then the during the war. And I think you'd see a big change in how people thought about John Brown.

I think you might also benefit from looking at the letters that Union soldiers wrote during the war. What did they say about slavery before they go to war? When they first go to war? And after they've been there for a while? For some, there's not a change. Some either always thought slavery should go away. Some never wanted to fight for the end of slavery.

But there's a big group in the middle who really hadn't given the topic a whole lot of thought when they went to war but whose minds changed as a result of being in the South, of seeing slavery. And, also, as they fight the war, they think, "if it's slavery that started this war in the first place or if at least without slavery there wouldn't have been a war, then the only way we can assure there will never be another one is to get rid of slavery." So I think soldier's letters will help you see a change in soldiers' views of slavery and also what the relationship between slavery and the war would be.

13. 1860 Election (2:20)

John Brown's raid happened in October of 1859. John Brown was executed in December of 1859. 1860 was a presidential election. Presidential elections, then as now, are year-long events. So we go into the year 1860. John Brown's on everybody's mind and it's time to choose candidates for president. The North has this new political party which doesn't exist in the South. It's called the Republican Party. And it exists for the purpose of stopping the westward spread of slavery. No way can a Republican candidate on this platform get votes in the South, but this platform is gaining strength in the North.

Meanwhile, the lower South states, everyone's nervous about John Brown. So they decide that the candidate that they are willing to support will have to be a candidate who's very committed to something called the Federal Slave Code which would mean that the federal government would have to pass a code promising to protect slavery. And the Democrats in the lower South states, it's only one party there, decide that that's who they need for their president in 1860.

Northern Democrats think that's a terrible idea, but they also think that the Republicans are a terrible idea. They think that the president should run on a platform of "popular sovereignty." The federal government shouldn't have anything to do with slavery in the western territories. Congress shouldn't decide and the president shouldn't decide. Instead, the voters in the territory should decide if they want to be slave or free.

Democrats have their convention to choose their candidates, they split. And the Southern Democrats break away. The Northern Democrats nominate a candidate named Steven Douglas who says, "Let people in territories decide for themselves if the territory should be slave or free."

When that happens, the Southern Democrats split away. We need a candidate who's going to make the federal government protect slavery.

When they split the Democratic Party in two, they nominate their own candidate. So now there are two Democratic candidates and one Republican candidate. What that means is the Democratic vote's gonna be split and the Republican's gonna to get enough to win. He's not going to get a majority but he's going to get enough because he's going to get more than those two Democratic candidates.

Well, that Republican candidate turns out to be Abraham Lincoln and that's precisely what happens. He carries enough of the North to win the election because the Democrats are split. Within weeks, the first state, South Carolina, leaves the Union. Sees the election of Lincoln on this platform of not letting slavery spread west as a clear threat to the Southern states. Six other states leave, too.

14. Virginia (2:15)

Virginia's really a middle state in this growing contest between North and South. Much of the South is reliant on what's called "staple crop agriculture" or "commercial agriculture." People grow one crop and they sell it for cash. They use the cash to buy everything else that they need. So much of the South doesn't grow food. It's not self-sufficient.

Virginia is a little bit more diversified. It is still dependent on a cash crop. You grow lots of tobacco in order to sell it and then you use the money to buy the other things that you need. The problem with tobacco is that it wears soil out very quickly. So by the time Harpers Ferry happens, Virginia has actually been in kind of a state of decline. Its soil is wearing out because of tobacco farming.

There are sections of the state, however, that are more diversified—that grow wheat, potatoes, things that you would need to eat. The big crops grown for money are dependent on a slave labor force. The other crops—wheat, corn, the things that you can live off of—sometimes those are grown with slave labor and sometimes they are not.

As these large plantations become less profitable, the plantation owners find that they have more laborers than they need, but there are big cotton plantations in Alabama and in Georgia. So selling your slaves South is one of the single biggest sources of revenue for the whole state of Virginia. So in that sense, Virginia is very closely tied in to the deeper South.

The North is still a largely agricultural society. The North is also beginning to develop what we would recognize as an industrialized base. So diversified agriculture helps the North because all those people in the factories need wheat and corn and they need things to eat.

Virginia in parts has a mixed economy, too. The largest ironworks in the country is in Virginia. There are factories and textile mills. It has clear links to the staple crop, plantation, slave-based agriculture of the lower South. It also, though, has more diversified agriculture than much of the South. And it also is beginning to develop industry like the North. So when John Brown happens and when the Civil War happens, Virginia's really torn.

Many Virginians feel ties to the South, but many feel ties to the United States as well. So it's a very interesting state to look at in 1860. It's a crossroads for many of the different ways of life in the United States at the time.

15. Civil War (2:24)

Lincoln takes office in March of 1861. Seven states have left the Union and formed the Confederacy. The standoff comes to center on a fort outside of the city of Charleston called Fort Sumter. The governor of South Carolina demanded the surrender of the fort to South Carolina and the United States Army officer inside said no. He couldn't give a United States fort to a state that had left the Union because that would be treason.

So Abraham Lincoln takes office and he immediately learns that here is this fort in the harbor outside of South Carolina and the soldiers have no food left. Lincoln decides that what he must do as Commander in Chief is supply food to those soldiers. So he writes to the governor of South Carolina and he writes to Jefferson Davis who has now become the president of this new Confederates States of America. And he tells him: I'm sending a ship with food and I'm not sending arms. If you fire on us, we will fire back. But we're just sending food and not arms.

Then Jefferson Davis and the governor of South Carolina have to decide what to do. Do they want the United States, who they now see as an enemy, sailing into Charleston harbor or not? And they decide not to take the chance. They fire on Fort Sumter before the food gets there. To Lincoln and to much of the Northern public, now we have an open rebellion.

So Lincoln calls for 75,000 volunteers, soldiers, to put down the rebellion. Virginia and three other states—Tennessee, Arkansas and North Carolina—were hoping not to have to choose. But when Lincoln calls for 75,000 troops to put down the rebellion, they have to decide. Are we going to fight with or against the Union or the Southern states? And Virginia decides to go with the Southern states. It's a hard decision for many white Virginians.

It feels links with the states that have left, but it also feels links with the Union. The other reason why this is a difficult decision for Virginia is because it is located so close to the national capitol. It was pretty clear to Virginians that a lot of the fighting was going to take place in Virginia. And they were right.

West Virginia is more tied to the North. There are very few slaves. Agriculture there is very diversified. There's not a lot of tobacco grown for cash. It looks much more like a Northern economy than a Southern economy. The state of Virginia has decided to secede, to leave the Union, but we don't want to. We actually see that as being a traitor to the United States. So these counties decide to secede from Virginia and they enter the United States in 1863 as the state of West Virginia.

16. Teaching (1:49)

The first thing that I think that I would do is ask students, "what do they notice?" What stands out to them. And I would use that as the starting point, to invest them in the song. How does the

sound of the song make you feel? Does it make you feel energetic? Does it make you feel sleepy? Does the song seem to praise Brown? Does it seem to condemn him?

And then I think I would look at particular verses. That knapsack verse, for example. And ask them, what's a knapsack? And, what do you put in your knapsack? What would a soldier put in his knapsack? And use that verse as a way to talk about what being a soldier is like.

*John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back,
John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back,
John Brown's knapsack is strapped upon his back,
His soul is marching on.*

I would move immediately to the next verse about "John Brown died that the slaves might be free" and ask them to think about why those two verses come right next to each other.

*John Brown died that the slave might be free,
John Brown died that the slave might be free,
John Brown died that the slave might be free,
But his soul is marching on.*

I would start at the big level, what do you notice? I would then go to, how does it sound? How does the sound make you feel? And then have them imagine that they are soldiers in an army on a march making up their own lyrics. Maybe some could be Union soldiers and some could be Confederate soldiers. And if they were to sing a song about John Brown as they were marching along, what kinds of words might they add? Which would do two things—one is emphasize the self-creating aspect of music in the 19th century, the participatory aspect. But also really get them thinking about what John Brown and what he stood for would mean and how that would change over time.