

Folk Song: I Know Moonlight, I Know Starlight

This folk song originated as an African-American spiritual during the era of slavery. It has been sung in South Georgia as a funeral song for sailors for many years. Below is an excerpt from a historical record book that has a few more details about the origins of the beautiful, haunting song.

The following text is from *Slave Songs of the United States*, by William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, xlv, 115 p. New York, A. Simpson & Co. 1867

(The full book may be found here: <https://docsouth.unc.edu/church/allen/allen.html>)

[This is probably the song heard by W. H. Russell, of the London Times, as described in chapter xviii. of "My Diary North and South." The writer was on his way from Pocotaligo to Mr. Trescot's estate on Barnwell Island, and of the midnight row thither he says:

"The oarsmen, as they bent to their task, beguiled the way by singing in unison a real negro melody, which was unlike the works of the Ethiopian Serenaders as anything in song could be unlike another. It was a barbaric sort of madrigal, in which one singer beginning was followed by the others in unison, repeating the refrain in chorus, and full of quaint expression and melancholy.

And then some appeal to the difficulty of passing the 'Jawdam' constituted the whole of the song, which continued with unabated energy during the whole of the little voyage. To me it was a strange scene. The stream, dark as Lethe, flowing between the silent, houseless, rugged banks, lighted up near the landing by the fire in the woods, which reddened the sky--the wild strain, and the unearthly adjurations to the singers' souls, as though they were palpable, put me in mind of the fancied voyage across the Styx."

We append with some hesitation the following as a variation; the words of which we borrow from Col. Higginson. Lt. Col Trowbridge says of it that it was sung at funerals in the night time—one of the most solemn and characteristic of the customs of the negroes. He attributes its origin to St. Simon's Island, Georgia.

"'I'll lie in de grave and stretch out my arms,' Never, it seems to me, since man first lived and suffered, was his infinite longing for peace uttered more plaintively than in that line." — Col. Higginson.]

O grave-yard, O grave-yard I'm wal-kin' through the
grave-yard Lay this bo-dy down.

1. O graveyard, O graveyard,
I'm walkin' troo de graveyard;
Lay dis body down.]
2. I know moonlight, I know starlight,
I'm walkin' troo de starlight;
Lay dis body down.
3. I walk in de moonlight, I walk in de starlight;
I lay dis body down.
4. I know de graveyard, I know de graveyard,
When I lay dis body down.
5. I walk in de graveyard, I walk troo de graveyard,
To lay, &c.
6. I lay in de grave an' stretch out my arms;
I lay, &c.
7. I go to de judgement in de evenin' of de day
When I lay, &c.
8. And my soul an' your soul will meet in de day
When we lay, &c.