

Folk Song: John Henry

“John Henry” is a song about an African-American folk hero with deep, storied roots. There is no one author history can point to, but the lyrics are thought to have originated among railroad workers during the late 19th century, passed down and shaped by each person who sang them.

There are two versions of the song, one sung in the style of a ballad, with an upbeat tone and quick tempo, and one in the style of a hammer song, sung at a slower, more measured speed. Hammer songs were often sung to keep pace while workers swung a hammer or went about heavy, physical tasks. Thus, the slower rhythm helped them keep working steadily without driving themselves to exhaustion, a theme prevalent in the lyrics of the song itself.

The lyrics of “John Henry” take the listener back to the days of the Industrial Revolution, when men built railroads using tools like pickaxes, dynamite, hammers, and nails. By the sweat of their brows, workers would tunnel through mountainsides, creating flat, even ground on which the railway tracks could be laid.

John Henry, the song’s protagonist, was one such worker, a steel driver whose job was to hammer a steel drill by hand into the mountain, creating a hole where dynamite could be placed. But his work was threatened by the invention of steam drills, machines that were said to be faster and more efficient than men. Henry challenges this new invention to a contest, driving his hammer with such force and speed that he beats the steam drill, though at a heavy cost. He has driven himself so hard that he dies of exhaustion. Even so, it was not in vain; the workers who come after him revere him, carrying on his legacy and name.

Though the lyrics of this ballad sound fantastical, the roots of the story are likely not. John Henry is believed to have been a real railroad worker, a 19-year-old prisoner convicted of petty theft and sentenced to labor alongside other convicts at the C&O Railway. Henry may have indeed challenged the steam drill to a contest, given that there are records of the machines being used alongside the men in certain tunnels. He likely passed away due to overwork and exhaustion, or from lung disease brought on by exposure to dust during his drilling.

His tale served as a reminder for workers to pace themselves as they went about their tasks, something that may very well have saved lives. Though the real John Henry died long ago, his story of grit and tenacity has been immortalized in song, and he has inspired generations of American workers and laymen alike, ensuring that he is never forgotten.

Folk Song: John Henry Lyrics

Please Note: *There are multiple lyrics for this song, as is the nature of true folk songs passed down through time. We have chose to use the lyrics of one of the videos we linked.*

When John Henry was a little baby boy,
No bigger than the palm of your hand,
John Henry's mamma looked down at him and said,
"Johnny's gonna be a steel-drivin' man, Lord, Lord,
Johnny's gonna be a steel-drivin' man."

Well, the man who invented that old steam drill,
He thought it was mighty fine,
But John Henry drove steel down fifteen feet,
While the steam drill only made it nine, Lord, Lord,
The steam drill only made it nine.

John Henry's captain, he sat on a rock,
He said, "Boys, this tunnel's cavin' in."
John Henry smiled at his captain and said,
"Boss, that's my hammer catching wind, Lord, Lord,
Boss, that's my hammer catching wind."

John Henry hammered in that old mountainside
Till his hammer caught on fire.
The last poor words that John Henry said:
"Give me a cool drink of water before I die, Lord, Lord,
A cool drink of water before I die."

Well, John Henry had a little woman,
Her name was Polly Ann.
When Johnny got sick and had to go to bed,
Polly drove that steel like a man, Lord, Lord,
Polly drove that steel like a man.

Well, they took John Henry to the graveyard,
And they laid him six feet under the sand.
And every time that old train goes rollin' by,
They say, "Yonder lies that steel-drivin' man, Lord, Lord,
Yonder lies that steel-drivin' man."

John Henry



John — Hen - ry was — a ba - by — boy —



Sit-ting on his ma - ma's knee, Said the big ben tall — on the —



sea — ? — ? — Well, it's gon-na be — the death of



me, ——— Lord, it's gon-na be — the death of me.