



*I held a knife against his breast /
As into my arms he pressed / He cried,
'My love, don't you murder me' /
I'm not prepared for eternity*

*I wandered home 'tween 12 and one /
I cried, 'My God, what have I done?' /
I've killed the only man I love /
He would not take me for his bride*

'Delia's Gone, but I'm Settling the Score': Gender, Vocal Aesthetics, and the Murder Ballad

By Chanda VanderHart

Abstract

This article explores the intersection of vocal aesthetics, gender, and performance in the tradition of murder ballads, a genre rooted in historical narratives of femicide and gendered violence. Once serving as a blend of journalism, entertainment, and (moralizing) cautionary tales, these ballads evolved from impersonal storytelling to largely centering the interiority of male perpetrators, further reinforcing implicit misogyny and stereotypical portrayals of women, yet have also been continuously appropriated by female performers for their own, varied purposes. Following a personal reflection on this author's relationship to an admittedly problematic genre, the issue of vocal aesthetics and performance is centered. Thereafter the genre's more recent developments vis-à-vis gender and performance are traced, noting trends within the 20th century. Finally, 21st century reinterpretations by female artists who use the ballad both to reclaim power, adopting male-coded violence, and/or as a form of protest, are examined more closely. By foregrounding marginalized voices and addressing intersections of race, class, and gender, contemporary murder ballads may sometimes transcend their origins, becoming vehicles for social critique and resistance.

Keywords

Murder ballad, gender, aesthetics, Voice, ballad, performance

Author information

Chanda VanderHart, PhD
vanderhart@mdw.ac.at
chanda.vander-hart@donau-uni.ac.at

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2055-273X>
mdw—University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna
University for Continuing Education, Krems

Introduction: Murder Ballads in the Classroom

I first encountered murder ballads in a roundabout way. As a burgeoning pianist, my childhood teacher assigned me Johannes Brahms' 'Edward' Ballad op. 10 no. 1, and I was captivated by its D-minor, somber melancholy. I sensed an epic story behind the composition, even without Brahms' subtitle, 'Nach der schottischen Ballade, "Edward" aus Herder's Stimmen der Völker'. The faded, regal, declamatory style of the opening, and the simmering drama and aching despair which then unfold through relentless triplets and open-chord voicings gripped my angsty preteen soul, providing me an outlet to feel all my feelings from the safety of an upright piano tucked inside a suburban duplex in the American Midwest.

Brahms's 'Edward' ballade is more accurately known as Child ballad 13B, based on the categorization created by 19th-century scholar Francis James Child in his publication of over 300 Scottish, English and American ballads which he gleaned both from broadsides and oral sources. Brahms came to this tale in translation, through the widely circulated collections by 18th-century German historian, philosopher, and cultural theorist Johann Gottfried Herder. Like most murder ballads, it has undergone numerous iterations—parts appear in other ballads, with roots traced to Scottish, Irish and Swedish origins over 250 years old. Its narrative details, musical settings and styles, and textual languages are fluid—and in Brahms' case, the text has been rendered entirely instrumental. This, too, is typical for the ballad, which Adrian Daub calls 'the most itinerant of forms'; the genre is fluid, easily spanning mediums and languages and resists fixed origins or forms (Daub 2023: 24).

Brahms likely used a German translation of a version reworked by Bishop Thomas Percy, which Percy presented as authentically Scottish in his 1765 *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*.¹ The ballad is a dialogue between mother and son, told in simple, strophic verse. The mother

confronts her son about blood on his sword; he hedges, admits to killing his father, then reveals that she orchestrated the murder (Hastings 2008). It features a sensational crime of passion—a classic example of the murder ballad subgenre.

Most murder ballads are performed as popular or folk music, not romantic instrumental 'art' music, making my first encounter via Brahms unusual. But what makes Child Ballad 13 interesting is also the gender of the victim. To be clear, plenty of murder ballads feature children being murdered, men killing men, or even occasionally violent women (Gammmon 2000; Kane 1996). Yet the most common trope features a woman as victim—and a specific type of woman. She is young, violently murdered by her lover, then buried or dumped into a river. Often the reason is illegitimate pregnancy or infidelity, generally only implied. Enduring examples include 'Omie/Naomi Wise' (Roud Folk Song Index No. 447), 'Pearl Bryan' (Slade n.d.), 'Little Sadie', 'Tom Dooley', and 'Delia's Gone'.

Many well-known murder ballads originated in Europe. While some are supernatural or fictional, many were created and distributed around public hangings. English balladeers visited jailed murderers, wrote and performed their stories in the streets, and distributed broadsides, (or broadsheets), at courthouses and executions (Skeaping 2005). These cheap prints, known elsewhere as *Flugblätter*, *skillingtryck*, or *pliego suelto*, revolutionized ballad distribution. They travelled to North America with immigrants, were adapted to local events, and took on new moralizing ideologies (Hastie 2011). Murder ballads remain central to many North American music traditions—folk, bluegrass, country, jazz, soul, and rock—becoming staples of major 20th-century singer-songwriters, which is where I fell in love with them a second time, via Johnny Cash, Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin, and Dolly Parton.

While I am hardly morbid, something about a simple, minor-key melody, or a casually recounted horrific tale haunts me, like *Black*

Mirror's unveiling casual horror in idyllic settings. Others may love murder ballads like they love true crime, drawn to dissecting and ruminating on actions seen as beyond conceivable human behavior, but I prefer the band-aid ripped away quickly, and murder ballads are famously unflinching.

Murder ballads often exhibit a fatalistic melancholy, and in my favorite 'sad-ass songs', to quote Dolly Parton (Oliaee & Abumrad n.d.), brutal details are related with a clinical detachment. The facts are not sugar-coated, the tune is simple, and the underpinning music varies—whatever your preferred style, there is a murder ballad for you. They are easy to internalize thanks to short, rhymed refrains which repeat after each verse—choruses everyone can sing along with (Friedman 2024)². This helps explain why Welsh football fans happily chant Tom Jones' catchy power ballad, 'Delilah,' at matches without registering that it is about a jealous lover stabbing a woman to death, then implicitly blaming her: 'forgive me, Delilah, I just couldn't take any more', the chorus concludes (Sizer & Dadlez 2024).³

To explore my complex fascination with the genre, I taught seminars combining artistic practice with musicological / cultural studies approaches at music universities in both Graz and Vienna, Austria. Students first critically engaged with the genre from historical and gender studies perspectives and then created and contextualized their own murder ballads, or designed performances centering the theme of violence within song, highlighting the role of vocal aesthetics and gender. This experience led me to examine intersections between gender, vocality, aesthetics and power in murder ballads, which are generally considered in light of its textual aesthetics, sociological and/or legal significance, or gendered politics more broadly (Atkinson 1999; Hastie 2011; Kane 1996). While prior work (Mehring 2021, Newman 2020) has compellingly traced the murder ballad's cultural evolution, my analysis centers vocal embodiment as a critical vector for considering gendered violence in song.

*I asked my love to take a walk / Just
a little ways with me / And as we walked and
we would talk / All about our wedding day*

*Darling say that you'll be mine / In our
home we'll happy be / Down beside where
the waters flow / On the banks of the Ohio
I took her by her pretty white hand /*

*I let her down that bank of sand /
I pushed her in where she would drown /
Lord, I saw her as she floated down*

To illustrate, my Austrian students wrote and performed murder ballads as social commentary often drawing on current events, including modern-day femicide. One male student wrote and performed a chilling song, 'Nadine, Gasoline', recounting the 2021 murder of a 35-year-old tobacconist in Vienna. After months of stalking, Nadine's ex assaulted her at work—he strangled her, doused her in gasoline, set her ablaze, and locked the shop, tossing the key in a nearby bin. She died of severe burns weeks later, her killer unapologetically telling police that he had 'wanted to teach her a lesson' (Reibenwein 2021).

Horried, the student wanted to avoid sensationalization, but admitted discomfort repeatedly, both concerning the compositional process and performance. Songs and stories are admittedly more aesthetically effective—more gripping—when musically set and performed more dramatically, and he felt torn between condemning the horror, and his instinct to heighten its drama. At the core was his own role as the male narrator of violence. He worried performing it risked condoning or even voyeuristically reveling in the

very horror he meant to critique. This was heightened by a sensation of feeling instinctively drawn to make the recounting more dramatically gripping from his position as a popular music singer-songwriter. Ultimately, he felt unable to protect his honest intentions from being misunderstood.

These tensions, I argue, are deeply gendered. Especially when femicide is the focus, the murder ballad is a storied medium which has commemorated and perhaps condoned, but also protested gendered violence. The duality of the genre—as both an artifact of cultural fascination with murder and a potential medium for intervention—is therefore central to this analysis, as is the powerful and gendered role vocal aesthetics of the ballad performer play, and how performers have engaged with murder ballads in unique ways.

Gendered Interiorities & the Lyrical She

First disseminated orally, murder ballads gained new popularity with the invention of the printing press in the 15th century as broadsheets,

blending journalistic and voyeuristic functions (Amable 2021). These songs often recounted real crimes in vivid detail, and by the 17th and 18th centuries, they were performed at public hangings, with singers sensationalizing the most gruesome details to heighten effect (Nebeker 2011; Wiltenburg 2004). Since most hanged criminals were male, this sensationalized the murder, while also codifying a gendered, binary trope: helpless, young, white female victims, and male murderers.

Cheap printing gave broadsheet ballads unprecedented reach across social strata, and it was after these ballads that most of what scholar Albert Friedman terms literary ballads were fashioned, not traditional or folk ballads (Friedman, *Ibid.*). They subsequently travelled to North America with English, Irish, Scottish, and German immigrants (Bayard 1955). There, murder ballads flourished, particularly in the religious south, where their moralizing intensified (Donalson 2020). As music became a public industry, not only did male singers dominate, but narratives became increasingly focused on the interiority of male perpetrators, who were portrayed more fully,

and sometimes even sympathetically, while female victims were largely victim-blamed or objectified (Newman 2017). One example is 'Banks of the Ohio', recorded by folk legends including Bill Monroe, Clarence Ashley and Doc Watson:⁴ (as seen on the front page).

Notably, the tale here is told exclusively from the perpetrator's view. His thoughts, intent, remorse, and punishment are all detailed. The female victim is voiceless, textually reduced to a 'pretty white hand.' This echoes older traditional ballads, where figures were often flatly characterized: victims reduced to symbols such as 'lily-white hands' and male suitors to 'gay gold rings,' devices that universalized characters and aided memory in performance (Friedman 2024). In this early 20th century version, however, only one character remains flat. The perpetrator is fully fleshed out, but although the victim talked at some point, ostensibly to reject the perpetrator's marriage proposal, her rejection, reasoning, and emotional state are entirely absent. The only other bodily or mental action afforded her textually is passively floating down the river after being pushed in.

This recalls Edgar Allan Poe's 'beautiful corpse' concept, popularized in his contention in The Philosophy of Composition that the death of a beautiful woman is 'the most poetical subject in the world'. The trope pervades art and literature (*Pretty Girls Make Graves – Beautiful Corpses in Art: Part I* 2020) —young, beautiful women immobilized through death, the idealized, dehumanized objects to feed the male gaze (Chambers 2009; Martens 2013).

Johnny Cash's relationship with the murder ballad 'Delia's Gone' indicates that this trope remained alive and culturally accepted throughout the 20th century. Used as a vehicle for his career resurgence, Cash's pivotal re-recording of 'Delia's Gone' for his 1994 American Recordings album blended violence and masculinity (Streissguth 2006). The last version of a ballad he had already recorded three times was reimagined as a haunting tale that

underscored Cash's 'Man in Black' persona. The stripped-down, voice-and-guitar production, amplified the raw narrative, where the protagonist coldly recounts murdering his lover, Delia. Overseen by producer Rick Rubin, this ballad recording allowed Cash's voice to dominate, reinforcing his hypermasculine image—a figure of authority and moral complexity (Delia's Gone 2023). Cash even added a new verse to the ballad, making it yet a degree darker: *'She was lowdown and trifling / And she was cold and mean / Kind of evil, make me want to / Grab my submachine / Delia's gone, one more round / Delia's gone.'*

The accompanying music video, directed by Anton Corbijn, further cements this dynamic. In it, supermodel Kate Moss plays the lifeless corpse of Delia, rendered visually passive as well as voiceless (Alexander 2016). Moss's embodiment as a beautiful, immobilized, white, young woman perpetuates the gaze, reducing Delia to an aestheticized object of male agency and violence. This visual representation of Delia as an object of male control aligns with Cash's broader narrative of reclaiming his place in the cultural zeitgeist. By juxtaposing his commanding presence with Moss's silent, lifeless form, the video reinforces themes of male dominance and the commodification of female suffering, all while positioning Cash as a timeless, near-mythic figure of American music (Eaton 2024).

The actual history of Delia Greene, the 14-year-old African-American girl whose murder inspired the ballad, adds a further layer of historical, gendered context. In 1900, Delia was shot and killed by Moses 'Cooney' Houston, a young man with whom she had a sexual relationship, after a public argument at a Christmas Eve party in Savannah, Georgia (Cohen 2000). The tragedy, itself rooted in themes of male pride, sexual mores and violence, reflects broader cultural dynamics of women's lives being overshadowed by male narratives of honor, ownership, and retribution. This portrayal raises questions about the ethics of reimagining real-life tragedies in art, particularly when the focus shifts from the victim's

actual story to the perpetrator's perspective, in this case both reinforcing patriarchal narratives and whitewashing history.

What makes Cash's reinterpretation particularly disturbing is the merging of vocal authority with lyrical brutality. His weathered baritone—imbued with cultural associations of authenticity and moral gravity—becomes a vehicle not for reflection or remorse, but for domination. The lyrical addition of 'she was lowdown and trifling' converts the song from a melancholy narrative into a defense, positioning the speaker's violence as not just justified, but inevitable. The contrast between the stark, stripped-back musical arrangement and the lyrical content mirrors the dynamic of intimate partner violence itself: the seemingly calm exterior masking brutality. By choosing to lean into this cold violence, Cash not only embodies the murderer, but he also reinforces a cultural script in which male rage is both aestheticized and excused. This becomes especially potent considering Delia Greene's age, race, and circumstances; Cash's version, stripped of these historical specifics, not only silences Delia further but participates in the erasure of the social conditions that made her vulnerable to violence in the first place.

How the texts of murder ballads are constructed also arguably change along gendered lines, and in various ways. Revisiting 'Banks of the Ohio', it is notable that the women who have recorded it have tended to alter the text.⁵ Joan Baez, who first recorded the ballad in 1959 for her album *Folksingers 'Round Harvard Square* uses the following text:

I asked my love to take a walk / To take a walk, just a little walk / Down beside where the waters flow / Down by the banks of the Ohio.

And only say that you'll be mine / In no other's arms entwine / Down beside where the waters flow / Down by the banks of the Ohio.

I held a knife against her breast / As into my arms she pressed / She cried, 'oh, Willie, don't murder me, I'm not prepared for eternity.'

I started home 'tween twelve and one / I cried, 'my god, what have I done? / I killed the only woman I loved / Because she would not be my bride.'

And only say that you'll be mine / In no other's arms entwine / Down beside where the waters flow / Down by the banks of the Ohio.

Notably, not only is the victim here killed by a knife instead of simply pushed into the river, but in the third verse she both moves—pressing herself against her lover—and speaks, begging Willie not to kill her, because she is 'not prepared' to die. Even the introduction of the phrase 'in no other's arms entwine' indicates two interlocking sets of limbs, implying a great deal more reciprocal, physical agency than in the Monroe / Ashley / Watson: version where the perpetrator 'took her by her pretty white hand'.

Olivia Newton John, in her 1971 recording built on these lyrics, but went a step further, switching the gender to make the perpetrator female by further adjusting the text and swapping pronouns:

I held a knife against his breast / As into my arms he pressed / He cried, 'My love, don't you murder me' / I'm not prepared for eternity.

I wandered home 'tween 12 and one / I cried, 'My God, what have I done? / I've killed the only man I love / He would not take me for his bride.

Gendered, Classed Performances and Marginalized Voices

The performance and circulation of murder ballads have always been shaped by the intertwined dynamics of gender, class, and race. Many of the women who sang ballads in public spaces during the 18th and 19th centuries were not simply morally judged—they were economically and socially marginalized. Often poor, unmarried, and supporting dependents, these women used street balladry as one of the few viable survival strategies within societies that policed both their gender and class status; ballad performance was one of few options,

along with selling matchsticks, thievery, and prostitution, which allowed them to feed themselves and their dependents. As Fulford (2006) notes, female street singers were routinely perceived as transgressive, yet they played a vital role in sustaining oral and printed ballad culture. The cheap broadsides they sold catered largely to working-class audiences, reinforcing the genre's association with the underclasses, even as the content often moralized against the very people who consumed it.

Simultaneously, racialized voices and subjects were often erased from dominant versions of these ballads or filtered through white narrators and performers, as in the case of Delia Green.

This erasure underscores how racial dynamics have long shaped which stories are told, who gets to tell them, and how they are remembered. In both historical and contemporary contexts, the murder ballad has reflected the violence of the social order: where class and race both intersect with gender to determine who is deemed disposable, who is centered, and whose voice is amplified or silenced. Domestically, where it was not morally suspect, primarily women sang ballads, and did so extensively (Duggan 2023). This was an activity conducted while working or relaxing, creating spaces where (self-)entertainment intersected with autobiography, collective mourning, and acts of cultural remembrance, and many of these texts prioritized women's concerns and perspectives (Clark 2002). Moreover, while the songs that women sang overlapped largely with their male contemporaries, there are gendered differences which have been noted between which ballads were performed most frequently (Wollstadt 2002).

Ballads sung in public are characteristically performed by a single narrator or duo who reportedly employed a stoic, impersonal storytelling style, one of the consistently defining tenets of a genre that has stubbornly defied neat categorization (Porter 1980; Sams n.d.; Trener 1915). Yet despite the central claim of impersonality or impartiality within the context of this narration, there are consistent admissions that per-

formers—minstrels, or street ballad singers—inserted their own 'voice', in the sense of their own, embodied perspectives and attitudes, actively into performance long before Johnny Cash came along. Friedman is quite clear: while strongly delineating folk or traditional balladry, a practice which he sees as the purview of the common people in small, private groups, from public, popular performance in the form of minstrelsy, he notes that performers regularly imbued their personal perspectives into ballads within performance, taking creative license including retexting, arranging, and commenting (Friedman, Ibid.):

In violation of the strict impersonality of the folk ballads, minstrels constantly intrude into their narratives with moralizing comments and fervent assurances that they are not lying at the very moment when they are most fabulous. The minstrels manipulate the story with coarse explicitness, begging for attention in a servile way, predicting future events in the story and promising that it will be interesting and instructive, shifting scenes obtrusively, reflecting on the characters' motives with partisan prejudice.

This is part and parcel of the role of expressive vocal performance in popular music, an embodied and interpersonal act (Juntunen et al. 2023), which demonstrably communicates both ideas (through text) and emotions to the audience (Juslin & Laukka 2004). While the common conflation of vocal performance with the performer's own, personal expression is highly problematic (Kobel 2020), there is undoubtedly overlap; singers performing what is perceived as—at least to a degree—as their own personal story or 'truth' is understood as particularly authentic in 20th century popular music (Peterson 1997).

This returns us to my student's concern that men singing murder ballads may be inherently problematic due to the gendered nature of vocal aesthetics and the role of the performer within them. While the genre's historical textual misogyny, reinforced by male perspectives and stereotypical portrayals, poses

significant ethical and aesthetic challenges, in addition, the implicit blurring in the mind of the audience between the singer and the lyrical I of the text further complicates the matter. In other words: if the ballad text is about committing a murder, centers the perspective of the murderer, and is performed by a man, his role—as soon as any emotion is imbued—quickly slips from that of an impersonal narrator to embodying the voice of the perpetrator (Groom 2013).

When a woman performs a murder ballad it is therefore disruptive in numerous ways. First, a woman is speaking and becoming the storyteller, a centuries-old role ascribed cultural authority. More significantly, due to the tendency to conflate the voice of the performer with both the lyrical I while working within the clearly gendered narratives laid out in the text, the female voice is a mismatch and causes a perturbation for the listener. A woman taking the place of an implicitly male lyrical I—by singing a song about a woman being murdered by a man—is therefore a shift that changes the song fundamentally (Blackman 2014). They may be implicitly understood as giving voice to the victim, and, through singing, infusing victimized characters with humanity by embodying them, another aspect I hear in Joan Baez's version of 'Banks of the Ohio'.

This act offers those literary murder ballad victims a degree of agency, thereby challenging the gendered conflation of passivity and femininity. Alternatively, a woman taking the position of the lyrical I in these songs could be understood as flipping the script entirely, making women either implicitly or explicitly the violent perpetrators in these songs (Schemmer 2020). While in Olivia Newton John's rendition of 'Banks of the Ohio' the pronouns and text were adjusted, artists including Shirley Collins, and Molly O'Day also intervened in standard murder ballads simply by singing from the perpetrator's perspective, unsettling audiences and subverting traditional gender roles. The lyrical and performative differences between male and female versions of 'Banks of the Ohio' illustrate how even subtle shifts in

text and tone can radically reframe a narrative. While male renditions emphasize the killer's remorse—or lack thereof—female performers like Joan Baez complicate this structure by infusing the victim with both voice and personhood. A woman's voice pleading, 'Oh Willie, don't murder me, I'm not prepared for eternity,' interrupts the murderer's control of the narrative and offers a glimpse of the victim's interiority. Not only does this rehumanize her, but it also restores a fragment of agency in a genre known for its aestheticization of passive, silent women. Moreover, Baez's vocal tone—at once plaintive and composed—serves to dramatize the imbalance of power without resorting to melodrama.

Olivia Newton-John's gender inversion takes this further, flipping the narrative so that the woman becomes both subject and agent. Yet even here, the act of violence is tinged with ambiguity: it is not celebratory but mournful, and the killer's regret—'He would not take me for his bride'—complicates a straightforwardly feminist reading. These variations highlight how murder ballads can be effectively reframed as counter-narratives, but also how easily those reinterpretations can drift into more murky territory.

Explicitly Female Murder Ballads in the 20th century

Besides performing well-known murder ballads generally sung by men and written from a male point of view, women also introduced novel murder ballads to the world in other ways in the 20th century.

One method involved singing novel murder ballads written from the perspective of a female aggressor. Often employing wit, such songs allowed women to invert the genre's typical gender dynamics, using humor to shield their transgressions. Two examples include Hank Fort's 'I Didn't Know the Gun Was Loaded,' and Rogers and Hart's 'To Keep My Love Alive'.

'I Didn't Know the Gun Was Loaded,' was composed by Hank Fort, born Eleanor Hankins, and Herb Leventhal in 1948. It subverts traditional gender roles through its portrayal of a gun-toting Miss Effie, who repeat-

edly shoots people, excusing her actions with the refrain, 'I didn't know the gun was loaded.' This statement, when paired with a chirpy voice, both underscores female helplessness while still allowing the protagonist to casually disregard the consequences for committing murder while challenging the demure archetype ascribed to women in mid-20th-century culture.

Fort, a prolific songwriter with over 400 compositions, had a knack for writing songs from a humorous Southern viewpoint, which became a hallmark of her work. The song's popularity, bolstered by recordings from Betsy Gay, The Andrews Sisters, Patsy Montana, and others, largely in 1949 and 1950, reflects its resonance with audiences navigating shifting gender dynamics in post-war America (Peterson 1997). Fort's 'I Didn't Know the Gun Was Loaded,' notably, both uses female stereotypes to challenge them, while its humorous caricature simultaneously risks reinforcing the 'irrational woman' trope.

'To Keep My Love Alive' is a darkly comedic murder ballad composed by Richard Rodgers with lyrics by Lorenz Hart in 1943. It was written for the revival of the 1927 musical A Connecticut Yankee and first introduced by Vivienne Segal, but was sung by a host of stars, including Ella Fitzgerald, Nancy Walker, Blossom Dearie, Sophia Loren, and Anita O'Day. This song holds the distinction of being the last Hart wrote before his death from pneumonia. The ballad is sung from the perspective of a serial bride who has 'bumped off' her fifteen husbands—ostensibly to avoid being unfaithful. The protagonist describes various methods she used to dispatch her spouses, including poisoning, stabbing, crowning with a harp, tossing from a balcony, and performing an appendectomy. 'To Keep My Love Alive' is particularly intriguing due to the extreme juxtaposition between its gruesome subject matter and Richard Rodgers' sprightly melody.

This contrast creates a cognitive dissonance for listeners (Sizer & Dadlez 2024). While exaggerated for comedic effect, this is a key feature of many murder ballads which force listeners to reconcile upbeat music

with morally reprehensible lyrics (Wollen 2024).

On the other end of the aesthetic spectrum, in the 1960s we can also mark the emergence of female singer-songwriters including Dolly Parton and Wanda Jackson who engaged with the murder ballad in novel ways. Instead of employing humor, they instead wrote and sang songs which not only centered the victim's perspective, imbuing their characters with agency and interiority, but also telling new types of stories from a particularly female point of view. Dolly Parton's 'The Bridge' (1968) and Wanda Jackson's 'The Box it Came In' (1966) both depict women grappling with abandonment, betrayal, and revenge.

'The Box It Came In' was written by Vic McAlpin and recorded on September 24, 1965 at the Columbia Recording Studio in Nashville, Tennessee by Jackson. It was released as a single in 1966 and reached number 18 on the Billboard Magazine Hot Country Singles chart, marking Jackson's first major hit on the country songs chart since 1961 and initiating a series of charting country songs for her between 1966 and 1971. The song is sung from the perspective of a destitute woman abandoned by her husband, and ends with a murderous threat:

He took everything with him that wasn't nailed down / Bet he's got a new sweetheart to fill my wedding gown / But somewhere I'll find him then I'll have peace of mind / And the box he comes home in will be all satin lined.

'The Bridge' is a very different tale, a haunting ballad written by Dolly Parton in 1967. The song recounts the story of a young woman who becomes pregnant after a romantic encounter with a man under a bridge. When the man abandons her, the woman returns to the bridge and ultimately commits suicide, at which point the song abruptly ends:

Tonight, while standing on the bridge / My heart is beating wild / To think that you could leave me here / With our unborn child / My feet are

moving slowly / Closer to the edge / Here is where it started / And here is where I'll end it.

From an Appalachian background, Parton was not only steeped in classic murder ballads, but soon began to create them herself (Schemmer 2020). 'The Bridge', touching on taboo subjects such as unwed motherhood, abandonment, and suicide, was considered too strong for radio airplay at the time (Lynskey 2020). The plaintive, clear vocal aesthetic imbues the lyrical I, who serves as both victim and (self-harm) perpetrator here with a great deal of humanity, and Parton has spoken publicly about her interest in telling personal stories about the real-life suffering of actual women (Goeres 2021).

'The Bridge' diverges sharply from Jackson's revenge ballad or comic murder ballad models by denying the listener any easy resolution or catharsis. Here, the woman's suffering is not redirected outward but is internalized, culminating in her own self-destruction. Parton's understated vocal delivery—delicate, mournful, and crystalline—imbues the song with devastating intimacy, transforming it into a lament rather than a spectacle. Importantly, this ballad stands out for how it centers female shame, abandonment, and the crushing weight of social expectation, particularly around unwed motherhood in a conservative, rural setting. Unlike traditional murder ballads in which female characters are flattened into victims or warnings, Parton's protagonist is given emotional and psychological depth, and the song's refusal to sensationalize her death reads as an implicit critique of the very murder ballad genre from which it draws. Its exclusion from radio play at the time of release underscores how deeply transgressive its emotional realism was—perhaps more so than its violent content.

Another watershed moment for the genre appears in the 1990s, likely prompted by legal and cultural shifts, such as the recognition of marital rape and the passage of the Violence Against Women Act, which brought domestic violence

into public discourse. This decade, while producing Johnny Cash's fourth recording of 'Delia', ended with The Chicks' 'Goodbye Earl', the third single from their 1999 album *Fly* which was released early in 2000. The ballad celebrates female solidarity and justice through a narrative of vigilante violence against an abusive husband. While controversial, the song's popularity indicates a growing appetite for feminist reinterpretations of the murder ballad (Lewis 2000).

Written by Dennis Linde, the song follows the story of Mary Ann and Wanda, two high school friends who conspire to murder Wanda's abusive husband, Earl, after legal interventions fail to protect her. Their method—poisoning his black-eyed peas—adds a macabre but humorous twist to the song's dark subject. The ballad's upbeat melody and playful delivery contrast sharply with the grim narrative, complicating its reception within country music and broader discussions on gender, violence, and justice.

The Chicks' vocal delivery plays a crucial role in shaping the song's tone with lead singer Natalie Maines employing an edgily bright quality. The harmonized choruses and bright instrumentation, complete with a singalong-style refrain, contribute to an atmosphere of camaraderie rather than despair. This playful aesthetic contrasts sharply with the severity of the song's themes, further challenging conventional narratives of domestic violence by refusing to frame Wanda as a passive victim. Instead, she and Mary Ann reclaim agency through both their actions and the song's buoyant musical presentation.

'Goodbye Earl' sparked significant debate upon its release. While some critics objected to the song's perceived endorsement of vigilante justice and a number of radio stations refused to play it, many praised the song for shedding light on the issue of domestic violence (Sawyer 2021; Smurthwaite 2000). Notably, several media outlets used the song as an opportunity to promote domestic violence hotlines, underscoring its potential as a tool for

advocacy. The comedy risks trivializing violence—yet its mass appeal forces mainstream audiences to confront domestic abuse, leveraging entertainment to bypass ideological resistance.

The song's music video, directed by Evan Bernard, reinforces its dark comedy. Featuring recognizable actors including Dennis Franz as Earl, Jane Krakowski as Wanda, and Lauren Holly as Mary Ann, the video presents the murder and subsequent cover-up as slapstick, with the corpse of Earl joining along and dancing within the colorful, closing scene (Scott 2020). The video's success—earning awards such as the Academy of Country Music and Country Music Association Video of the Year—helped solidify it as one of *The Chicks*' most recognizable songs. It continues to resonate with audiences and ranked among *Rolling Stone*'s Top 500 Best Songs of All Time in 2024 (Rolling Stone 2024).

While 'Goodbye Earl' is often lauded as a feminist anthem of female solidarity and justice, it is worth noting the calculated use of camp and dark humor to mask the severity of the violence depicted. Rather than aiming for catharsis or mourning, the song reframes the act of murder as an act of necessity carried out with confidence and levity. This tongue-in-cheek tone functions as a form of subversive protest, particularly powerful within the constraints of the conservative country music industry of the late 1990s. However, this aesthetic decision also raises important questions about the limits of irony—does humor allow listeners to comfortably sidestep the deeper trauma of domestic abuse? Or does it provide an empowering outlet for rage? *The Chicks*' decision to turn Earl into an almost cartoonish villain simplifies the moral calculus, allowing for a form of revenge fantasy that is emotionally satisfying but ethically complicated. These tensions demonstrate the layered strategies employed in reclaiming the murder ballad form for feminist purposes.

Contemporary Reimaginings: Self-Awareness, Subversion, and Inclusion

In the 21st century, murder ballads in 'classic' styles have continued to be taken on by women, with increasing self-awareness and with the addition of a strong visual aesthetic. Examples include Britain's Sarah Vista, who writes her own murder ballads with a throwback, twangy country/western style and sports an aesthetic that nods to Johnny Cash, but with vintage blond Marilyn Monroe locks (Rock 2022).

Jennifer Lawrence's rendition of 'The Hanging Tree' within the film *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part 1* likewise comes to mind. The song was composed in the style of an old folk tune, but was created for the franchise, with author Susan Collins providing the text to a melody by James Newton Howard in collaboration with Jeremiah Fraites and Wesley Schultz of the Colorado-based indie folk band 'The Lumineers' (Sasaguy 2023). Director Francis Lawrence instructed the composers to create a melody that could be sung either by an individual or a large group, emphasizing simplicity and emotional resonance (Bennett 2024).

The song serves as a revolutionary flashpoint throughout the *The Hunger Games* film franchise, but also became a commercial hit after its release, with Jennifer Lawrence's raw vocals cited as one of its strengths. It peaked at number 12 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 in the United States and reached high positions internationally, including number 12 on Australia's ARIA chart and number 14 on the UK Official Singles Chart (Annie Martin 2014). The song also topped charts in Germany, Austria, and Hungary. It was eventually certified double platinum in the United States and platinum in Canada and Germany, drawing comparisons to other iconic protest anthems, including Billie Holiday's 'Strange Fruit' (Mendez 2023).

SZA's '*Kill Bill* (I might kill my ex)', blends the murder ballad with pop/R&B in a revenge fantasy which, combined with the music video,

might be the most vocally relaxed yet visually gruesome example listed here. The song reached number 1 on the *Billboard* Global 200, amassed hundreds of millions of streams, and went viral on TikTok (A. Hopper 2023). From her 2022 album *SOS*, the song reimagines the modern murder ballad within the framework of contemporary pop and R&B. Themes of toxic obsession, jealousy, and emotional volatility are presented by a narrator who fantasizes about enacting revenge on an ex-lover and his new partner, while oscillating between heartbreak, rage, and self-awareness (Records 2024).

Rawly emotional, somewhat contradictory lyrics are juxtaposed with a vocal style that emulates detached self-reflection, culminating in the narrator's final declaration that she would 'rather be in hell than alone.' This dynamic interplay between romantic fixation and destruction aligns 'Kill Bill' with the broader tradition of murder ballads, which historically have blurred the lines between passion, loss, and violence, but also between horrifying content and pleasant, upbeat musical stylings. The song's accompanying music video, directed by Christian Breslauer, is a stylized homage to the film *Kill Bill* (Allen 2023). In it, SZA portrays a scorned lover turned vengeful assassin, mirroring Uma Thurman's character in Tarantino's narrative. The video incorporates high-octane action sequences, anime-inspired animation, and a climactic twist, heightening the song's dramatic arc. A cameo by Vivica A. Fox further cements the connection between the song and its filmic reference point.

'Kill Bill' encapsulates the paradox of contemporary murder ballads in the pop sphere: its minimal, almost dreamy vocal aesthetic belies a brutal, emotionally charged storyline. SZA's delivery—detached yet emotionally transparent—creates a sense of suspended reality, where fantasy and confession become indistinguishable. The narrator's murderous intentions are expressed with a melodic calm that contrasts sharply with the violence of the lyrics, evoking a dissociative state emblematic, perhaps, of trauma responses,

or simply a slightly unreliable narrator. Regardless, this tonal contradiction heightens the listener's discomfort rather than resolving it.

Furthermore, the song resists clear moral closure: the protagonist is neither vindicated nor villainized, but portrayed in full emotional volatility—jealous, heartbroken, and self-aware. The accompanying video amplifies this blend of rage and spectacle, positioning the protagonist as a powerful, morally ambiguous, avenger. Unlike many classic murder ballads where women are silenced in life and glorified in death, SZA's 'Kill Bill' presents a living woman who is both subject and agent—even if her power comes at a cost. In doing so, it aligns with the tradition of subversion while raising new questions about glamorization, genre fluidity, and the aestheticization of violence in the streaming era.

Murder ballads are found today in genres as diverse as country, pop, R & B, blues, goth, rap, and a variety of folk music (Jimenez, 2020). This is significant and heralds a further shift: although generally thought of as a fairly white genre, and most strongly associated with Appalachian bluegrass or white-European Irish and British street singer traditions (Hamessley 2005; D. Hopper 2020), many of the most well-known classic ballads actually

have much more colorful, marginalized backgrounds that long remained obscured (Smith 2021). This has extended not only to the actual stories of the murdered women in murdered ballads, who were, like Delia Green, often minorities and largely from disenfranchised populations, but also to those performers who became most well-known (and best-compensated) for singing them.

A shift towards inclusion of marginalized stories, voices and perspectives is evident in the numerous interventions which have prioritized explicitly a socially conscious and inclusive approach. If 20th-century performers used humor to soften subversion, 21st-century artists often weaponize rawness to indict systemic oppression. Artists like Alynda Lee Segarra of *Hurray for the Ruff Raff* and Rhiannon Giddens of *Our Native Daughters* have both used the genre to address intersections of gendered and racialized violence to great acclaim.

Segarra's 'The Body Electric' from the 2014 album *Small Town Heroes* critiques the normalization of violence against women in popular music, and has been praised for its radical reimagining of the murder ballad tradition, with influential critic Ann Powers naming it the political folk song of the year (Powers 2014).

Segarra, the band's frontperson and songwriter, has openly discussed transforming the murder ballad into a vehicle for feminist critique: interrogating the cultural normalization of such violence instead of romanticizing or sensationalizing the deaths of women (Bigger 2015). Not only is there a reference to Delia Green 'Delia's gone but I'm settling the score', but lyrics like '*Tell me what's a man with a rifle in his hand gonna do for a world that's just dying slow / Tell me what's a man with a rifle in his hand gonna do for his daughter when it's her turn to go*' reframe the narrative, shifting the focus from victimhood to accountability (Berlatsky 2018). This subversion is not merely lyrical but also deeply performative, with Segarra's softly raw, yet earthy vocal delivery becoming a site of self-aware resistance (Garcia 2017).

Rhiannon Giddens wrote '*Mama's Cryin' Long*' for the album *Songs of Our Native Daughters* based on historical slave narratives (McNally 2019). The song centers the perspective of an enslaved woman, highlighting the historical erasure of Black women's experiences in the genre and the intersection of gender, race, and systemic oppression. It narrates the harrowing experience of an enslaved woman who, after enduring repeated abuse from an overseer, kills him.

Her act is inadvertently revealed when her child notices blood on her dress, which leads to her lynching.

The song's deliberate austerity serves to foreground the vocal minimalist arrangement—sparse percussion and handclaps—accompanied by strong, unison call-and-response singing, which highlights both the resilience of those women-based communities and the communal nature of their narrative, and the naked trauma inflicted by systemic oppression (Willis 2019). By centering the text on the interiority and agency of the enslaved woman, the song challenges patriarchal and Eurocentric paradigms that have historically marginalized those perspectives.

These contemporary reimaginings reflect a broader cultural shift toward recognizing the systemic roots of gendered violence and amplifying marginalized voices. By centering the perspectives of women, particularly women of color, these artists challenge the genre's historical complicity in reinforcing patriarchal norms and instead use it as a platform for protest and advocacy. Their reimaginings subvert traditional tropes, foregrounding the interiority

of marginalized women and drawing attention to intersections of race, class, and gender.

Conclusion

The murder ballad has simultaneously been a genre that implicitly condoned—or at minimum normalized—gendered violence and one which also serves as a vehicle for feminist critique and social protest. While there is an argument to be made that performance of these songs by male performers can easily become problematic due to the intersection of gender, vocal aesthetics, narrative voice, and pervasive social hegemonies and patriarchal power structures, women's engagement with these songs, whether through traditional performance or contemporary reinterpretation, also underscores the complexity of music in performance and the power of both art as embodied performance and as a means to challenge systemic injustices, while also raising difficult new questions.

Contemporary murder ballads represent a powerful vehicle for critique and intervention, allowing women to carry, but also to subvert, humanize

and reclaim narratives of violence and sometimes transform them into acts of resistance. By centering the voices and experiences of marginalized individuals, this complex and evolving tradition both sheds light on enduring social inequalities and reimagines a genre long complicit in their perpetuation. Within the web of broader societal conversations about how to manage cultural creations created within highly problematic systems which we may be loath to implicitly perpetuate today, the murder ballad is exemplary, yet perhaps not unique.

Studying its complex history and examining the power dynamics embedded in the narrative voice through the lyrical I of the text but also the embodied storytelling of the performer(s) reveals much about how power can be communicated and subverted through music. In addition, the shift toward self-aware, inclusive, and political iterations of the genre is a welcome development, demonstrating the layered dynamics at work in the performance of even the most problematic cultural artifacts.

Endnotes

1 In the Scottish version, better known as 'My Son Davey', the protagonist has a different name, the victim is often a brother instead of the father, and the narrative focuses primarily on the son's permanent departure from home.

2 This strophic, rhymed structure is a mainstay of ballads from the British-American tradition, while Russian, Danish, Balkan and Spanish ballads have alternate organizational patterns.

3 While I do not condone banning murder ballads, I am not the only one who feels uneasy about the mass sing-along practice, see (BBC News 2023; Andy Martin 2023).

4 This includes Ashley and Watson's 1961 rendition of Banks of the Ohio, recorded by Alan Lomax and released under the title Ballads, Blues, and Bluegrass. Watson used the same version in his later performances, and it is commemorated in 4 CD anthology titled 'Doc Watson – Life's Work: A Retrospective' released by Craft Recordings, Catalogue No: 8 88072 08483 4, released in 2021.

5 Dolly Parton likewise covered 'The Banks of the Ohio' in 2013 and released it on her album Blue Smoke the following February. In her version, she sets up the story as if she is a journalist interviewing the murderer in jail, recounting his story second hand.

References

- Jimenez, Xia, 'Killing Me Softly: Music's Obsession with Murder Ballads', 7 November 2020 <<https://berkeleybyside.com/killing-me-softly-musics-obsession-with-murder-ballads/>>, [accessed 24 January 2025]
- Alexander, E. (2016, 9. December). *Kate Moss' music-video cameos: A comprehensive timeline*. Harper's BAZAAR. <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/uk/fashion/news/a38891/kate-moss-music-videos/>
- Allen, Z. (2023, 11. January). *SZA Releases Music Video For 'Kill Bill'*. WBLS. <https://www.wbls.com/news/sza-releases-music-video-for-kill-bill/>
- Amable, J. (2021, 30. January). *The Murder Ballad was the Original True Crime Podcast*. Jstore Daily. <https://daily.jstor.org/the-murder-ballad-was-the-original-true-crime-podcast/>
- Atkinson, D. (1999). Magical corpses: Ballads, intertextuality, and the discovery of murder. *Journal of Folklore Research*, 36(1), 1–29.
- Bayard, S. P. (1955). Decline and 'revival' of Anglo-American folk music. *Midwest Folklore*, 5(2), 69–77.
- BBC News. (2023, 1. February). Tom Jones: Delilah banned for choirs at Principality Stadium. *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-64488231>
- Bennett, T. (2024, 18. March). The History of 'The Hanging Tree' Song in The Hunger Games Saga. SYFY. <https://www.syfy.com/syfy-wire/the-history-of-the-hanging-tree-song-in-the-hunger-games-saga>
- Berlatsky, N. (2018, 20. March). *Hurray for the Riff Raff Makes Feminist Murder Ballads for Today's America*. VICE. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/hurray-for-the-riff-raff-emerge-festival-interview-2018-feminist-america/>
- Bigger, K. (2015, 5. January). *Are Murder Ballads Part of the Problem?* Sing Out! <https://singout.org/whole-world-sings/>
- Blackman, P. (2014, 18. January). *Little Sadie - Old Time, Bluegrass, and Beyond - Sing Out! Sing Out!* <https://singout.org/little-sadie-old-time-bluegrass-and-beyond/>
- Chambers, S. J. (2009, 2. October). *Living Poe Girl, Part I: Objects of Desire*. Reactor. <https://reactormag.com/living-poe-girl-part-i-objects-of-desire/>
- Clark, S. (2002). The broadside ballad and the woman's voice. In *Debating Gender in Early Modern England, 1500–1700* (pp. 103–120). Palgrave Macmillan US.
- Cohen, N. (2000). *Long Steel Rail*. University of Illinois Press.
- Daub, A. (2023). *What the ballad knows*. Oxford University Press.
- Delia's Gone*. (2023, 9. April). *Majuscul*. <https://majusculit.com/delias-gone/>
- Donalson, R. (2020). *The Good, the Bad, and the Deadly: Gendered Moral Teachings in American Murder Ballads* [Arizona State University]. <https://hdl.handle.net/2286/R.I.56511>

- Duggan, L. (2023). A woman's tradition? Quantifying gender difference in the Child ballads. *Orbis Litterarum*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/oli.12400>
- Eaton, Q. (2024, 24. October). 'Delia's Gone' Is The Spookiest Song Of Johnny Cash's Catalogue. *Whiskey Riff*. <https://www.whiskeyriff.com/2024/10/24/delias-gone-is-the-spookiest-song-of-johnny-cashs-catalogue/>
- Friedman, A. B. (2024). Ballad. In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/art/ballad>
- Fulford, T. (2006). Fallen ladies and cruel mothers: Ballad singers and ballad heroines in the eighteenth century. *The Eighteenth Century*, 47(2/3), 309–329.
- Gammon, V. (2000). Child death in British and North American ballads from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. In *Representations of Childhood Death* (pp. 29–51). Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Garcia, A. (2017, 4. April). Alynda Segarra of Hurray for the Riff Raff on Navigating Identity and Exploring Her Puerto Rican Roots. *Bandcamp Daily*. <https://daily.bandcamp.com/features/alynda-segarra-hurray-for-the-riff-raff-interview>
- Goeres, K. (2021, 25. March). Dolly Parton's Connection to Her Song, 'The Bridge': 'I've Had Suicide in My Own Family'. *Showbiz Cheat Sheet*. <https://www.cheatsheet.com/entertainment/dolly-parton-connection-song-the-bridge-suicide.html/>
- Groom, N. (2013). "Executioner-Style": Nick Cave and the Murder Ballad Tradition.' *The Art of Nick Cave: New Critical Essays*. *John. Bristol: Intellect*.
- Hamessley, L. (2005). A resisting performance of an Appalachian traditional murder ballad: giving voice to 'Pretty Polly.' *Women & Music*, 9(13). <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A140519199/AONE?u=anon~af49cd0a&sid=googleScholar&xid=0a27878c>
- Hastie, C. R. (2011). 'This Murder Done': Misogyny, Femicide, and Modernity in 19th-Century Appalachian Murder Ballads [University of Tennessee, Knoxville]. https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_gradthes/1045
- Hastings, C. (2008). From poem to performance: Brahms's 'Edward' ballade, op. 10, no. 1. *The College Music Symposium*, 48, 83–97.
- Hopper, A. (2023, 7. February). The Revengeful Meaning Behind SZA's 'Kill Bill' - American Songwriter. *American Songwriter*. <https://americansongwriter.com/behind-the-meaning-of-szas-kill-bill/>
- Hopper, D. (2020, 27. October). Author explores history behind Nick Cave's 'Murder Ballads.' 360° Sound. <https://360degreesound.com/author-explores-history-behind-nick-caves-murder-ballads/>
- Juntunen, M.-L., Arlin, E. P. & Liira, K. (2023). Expression in popular music singing as embodied and interpersonal. *Frontiers in Education*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2023.1092736>
- Juslin, P. N. & Laukka, P. (2004). Expression, perception, and induction of musical emotions: A review and a questionnaire study of everyday listening. *Journal of New Music Research*, 33(3), 217–238.
- Kane, S. A. (1996). *Wives with knives: Early modern murder ballads and the transgressive commodity*. *Criticism*, 38(2), 2.
- Kobel, M. (2020). 'Just a man singing': Scott Walker and the voice of another. *Journal for Cultural Research*, 24(3), 236–251.
- Lewis, R. (2000, 1. April). 'Earl' creates heat--and heated debate. *The Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2000-apr-01-ca-14748-story.html>
- Lynskey, D. (2020, 30. November). When Dolly was dark: How Dolly Parton went from bard of death and cruelty to avatar of goodness. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/music/story/2020-11-30/dolly-parton-songteller-lyrics>
- Martens, E. (2013). *The representation of women in the works of Edgar Allan Poe*. https://libstore.ugent.be/fulltxt/RUG01/002/060/296/RUG01-002060296_2013_0001_AC.pdf
- Martin, A. (2014, 2. December). Jennifer Lawrence song 'The Hanging Tree' reaches Top 20 charts - UPI.com. https://www.upi.com/Entertainment_News/Music/2014/12/02/Jennifer-Lawrences-The-Hanging-Tree-reaches-Top-20-charts/4441417533566/
- Martin, A. (2023, 1. February). Bye, bye, Delilah: Wales rugby choirs banned from singing Tom Jones hit. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2023/feb/01/delilah-welsh-rugby-union-choirs-banned-from-singing-tom-jones-hit>
- McNally, D. (2019, 3. May). Our Native Daughters: Songs Of Our Native Daughters. *KLOF Mag*. <https://klofmag.com/2019/05/our-native-daughters-songs-of-our-native-daughters/>
- Mehring, Frank, "'Blood-Thirsty Blues': The Sonic Politics of American Murder Ballads", in *Crime and Music* (Springer International Publishing, 2021), pp. 87–100.
- Mendez, M., II. (2023, 17. November). The Meaning Behind 'The Hanging Tree' Song in *The Hunger Games Prequel*. *Time*. <https://time.com/6336331/hunger-games-hanging-tree-song-prequel/>

- Nebeker, E. (2011). The Broadside Ballad and Textual Publics. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 51(1), 1-19.
- Newman, D. (2017). *Murder ballads: Nick Cave and his approach to killing in song*. *Musicology Australia*, 39(2), 96-115.
- Newman, D. (2020). *Murder ballads and death in song*. *Australian Feminist Law Journal*, 46(1), 17-38.
- Oliaee, S. & Abumrad, J. (n.d.). *Sad ass songs*. WNYC Studios. Retrieved February 3, 2025, <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/dolly-partons-america/episodes/sad-ass-songs>
- Peterson, R. A. (1997). *Creating Country Music: Fabricating authenticity*. University of Chicago Press.
- Porter, J. (1980). Principles of ballad classification: A suggestion for regional catalogues of ballad style. *Jahrbuch für Volksliedforschung*, 25, 11.
- Powers, A. (2014, 11. December). The Political Folk Song Of The Year. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2014/12/11/370125443/the-political-folk-song-of-the-year>
- Pretty Girls Make Graves – Beautiful Corpses in Art: Part I*. (2020, 25. October). Byron's Muse. <https://byronsmuse.wordpress.com/2020/10/25/pretty-girls-make-graves-beautiful-corpses-in-art-part-i/>
- Records, B. (2024, 29. January). Unpacking SZA's 'Kill Bill' Meaning: A Tale of Reclaiming Power. *Stay Free*. <https://www.stayfreeradioip.com/post/sza-kill-bill-meaning>
- Reibenwein, M. (2021, 27. September). *Mordprozess: Kamera filmte Nadines Leiden mit*. *kurier.at*. <https://kurier.at/chronik/wien/mordprozess-kamera-filmte-nadines-leiden-mit/401748849>
- Rock, V. (2022, 26. April). *Soundtrack Of My Life – Sarah Vista*. *Vintage Rock*. <https://www.vintagerockmag.com/2022/04/soundtrack-of-my-life-sarah-vista/>
- Rolling Stone. (2024, 16. February). *The 500 greatest songs of All Time*. *Rolling Stone*. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/best-songs-of-all-time-1224767/the-animals-house-of-the-rising-sun-1224866/>
- Sams, E. (n.d.). Ballad. The 19th century art form. In *The New Grove* (p. 75ff). Retrieved February 9, 2025, from <https://ericsams.org/index.php/on-music/articles-work-lists/867-ballad-the-19th-century-art-form>
- Sasaguay, C. (2023, 2. December). 'Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes' reveals 'the hanging tree' song's origins. *Collider*. <https://collider.com/ballad-of-songbirds-and-snakes-hanging-tree-song/>
- Sawyer, B. J. (2021, 15. January). 'Goodbye Earl': The Story Behind The Chicks' Controversial Hit. *Wide Open Country*. <https://www.wideopencountry.com/goodbye-earl-story-behind-song/>
- Schemmer, C. (2020, 17. March). *The History of Murder Ballads and the Women Who Flipped the Script*. *She Shreds Media*. <https://sheshreds.com/the-history-of-murder-ballads/>
- Scott, J. (2020, 9. March). *Behind The Song: Dixie Chicks, 'Goodbye Earl'*. *American Songwriter*. <https://americansongwriter.com/dixie-chicks-goodbye-earl-behind-the-song/>
- Sizer, L. & Dadlez, E. M. (2024). Why, Delilah? When music and lyrics move us in different directions. *Philosophical Studies*, 181(8), 1789-1811.
- Skeaping, L. (2005). *Broadside Ballads: Songs from the Streets, Taverns, Theatres and Countryside of 17th Century England*.
- Slade, P. (n.d.). *Pearl Bryan*. Retrieved February 3, 2025, from <https://www.planetslade.com/pearl-bryan.html>
- Smith, C. E. (2021, 21. July). What We Lose When We Ignore the Real Roots of Murder Ballads. *Esquire*. <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/music/a37078255/history-of-murder-ballads-stagger-lee-true-story/>
- Smurthwaite, E. (2000, 13. April). *Country stations say 'Goodbye' to song about murder*. *BYU Daily Universe*. <https://universe.byu.edu/2000/04/13/country-stations-say-goodbye-to-song-about-murder/>
- Streissguth, M. (2006). *Johnny Cash: the biography*. Cambridge.
- Trenery, G. R. (1915). *Ballad collections of the eighteenth century*. *The Modern Language Review*, 10(3), 283.
- Willis, S. (2019, 29. March). 'Songs Of Our Native Daughters' Gives Ancestors Voice. *DownBeat Magazine*. <https://downbeat.com/news/detail/songs-of-our-native-daughters-gives-ancestors-voice>
- Wiltenburg, J. (2004). True crime: The origins of modern sensationalism. *The American Historical Review*, 109(5), 1377-1404.
- Wollen, A. (2024, 12. May). *The Philosophy of Murder Ballads*. *Going Awol*. <https://wollenblog.substack.com/p/the-philosophy-of-murder-ballads>
- Wollstadt, L. (2002). Controlling women: 'Reading gender in the ballads Scottish women sang.' *Western Folklore*, 61(3/4), 295.