

Story Songs

The **ballad** is a poem that is typically arranged in quatrains with the rhyme scheme ABAB. **Ballads** are usually narrative, which means they tell a story. **Ballads** began as folk songs and continue to be used today in modern music. (From emaze¹)

A good story has a beginning, a middle and an end. This is true of narrative story-songs as well as novels or short stories. Granted, in general most songs tell a story, but they are uncommonly narratives. Many are happy, some are sad. Some have the ABAB rhyme scheme, most do not but most have some sort of rhyme scheme. My purpose is to introduce you to some narrative songs which tell a good story. I will also include some of the well-written rhyme schemes within these songs and some description of the characters – not all – and perhaps a portion of the plot or story-line. In addition, although it is sailing into the wind, I wish to opine that modern songwriters are among the last remaining poets for those enjoy meter and rhyme and even these are disappearing into the mists of time past. Perhaps it is for this reason that the Nobel Prize for literature for 2016 was given to Bob Dylan, as per the citation: "*for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition*". Others, such as Paul Simon or Carly Simon or James Taylor are often called poets. Some of the selections discussed below are chosen because their rhyme and meter appeal to my poetic ear as well as their narrative quality.

One of the more well-known modern narratives, at least to those with a more silvered look, is *MTA* or *The MTA* song², made famous by the Kingston Trio in 1959. Here we have the tale of poor, ol' Charley who boards the Boston subway and finds himself a nickel short for a new "exit fare" so he couldn't get off of that train. We are asked: "*well, did he ever return?*". We don't know. Here is a narrative with no real completion, since he may still be riding that train. So, narratives don't have to have an ending but leaving the listener wondering about the outcome.

Another Kingston Trio song with an ambiguous ending is *San Miguel*³. It tells the story of a ranch hand, Manuel, on the hacienda of La Donna Maria Elena Cantrell. The song mostly describes his daily tasks and how he comes to consider his overseer,

*I dream of the mission San Miguel
And it says to me, the mission bell
"She is married, Manuel
The wife of the rancher Don Carlos Cantrell*

Here we see the ABAB rhyme scheme. But the song ends with great uncertainty. To avoid giving up a spoiler of the unanswered ending, let us just misquote from a near contemporaneous ad slogan, "Does she or doesn't she?" It's up to the listener to imagine and likely depends on one's own salaciousness.

Western themed ballads are quite common. One is by Marty Robbins, *El Paso*⁴ the story of Faleena (also spelled Falina) and the cowboy. This is sung in a first-person account by the cowboy. After doing the deadly deed,

*Out through the back door of Rosa's I ran
Out where the horses were tied
I caught a good one, it looked like it could run
Up on its back and away I did ride*

Note the internal rhyme of the third line. Also, if recited in appropriate tempo, this verse (and much of the song) has a galloping rhythm. This narrative has two endings, one in this song where the cowboy dies in Faleena's arms, the other, a sequel that Robbins wrote called *Faleena*⁵ being an extended story of her life. A curious fact about *El Paso* is that when released (1959) as a single, because of the length of the story-song, it was far longer than other 45 rpm singles of that time and it was thought it might not get as many on-air plays as others. An abbreviated version was constructed but the longer version was preferred and is the classic played today.

Country and Western singer Willie Nelson sings quite a few lyrical songs, but only a few are narratives. For example, *On the Road Again*⁶ tells something of his life on the road, but not really a story song as it doesn't have a middle or an ending, he just keeps singing while going on down the road. On the other hand, *Seven Spanish Angels*⁷ popularized by Nelson and Ray Charles, has an ending, though not a happy one. Here, I'll give you the ending:

*And she knew the gun was empty
And she knew she couldn't win
But her final prayer was answered
When the rifles fired again.*

Both of these songs have a definite ending as all the principal characters die of lead poisoning.

While a few narratives revolve around one character, most tell stories of two people, be they lovers or otherwise. For the "otherwise" category, *Mario y Maria*⁸ Butch Hancock's very fast paced song about two star-crossed people and their unusual fates, destined not to be together, but fated to be carved into wooden statues placed face-to-face. There are three principal characters in this ballad, Mario:

*Mario was a perfect stranger
Even in the face of danger
Nobody knew if he'd hang around or turn around and run
From Heaven to the other side of Hades
He was attractive to the ladies
Some said he was an angel and some said he was the Devil's son*

and Maria:

*Maria was the lonely one
And Mario was the only one
Who ever meant anything more to her than a fast "how do you do?"
With a roof over her prayerful head
And a gun under her feather bed
She had nightmares every day, and all of them came true*

And the sculptor, Angeline:

*Angeline carved wooden dreams
An artist of the world it seems
A chisel cut her finger off, the one that wore the ring
And the doctor swore he heard her say*

*"It never fit me anyway
I would have sold it yesterday, but it wasn't worth a thing."*

The complexities and turns of this narrative would take a whole 'nother essay to describe. Suffice it to say that the wooden busts of Mario and Maria carved by Angeline wind up face-to-face after being stolen from the Vatican:

*And the real Maria spits in her mirror
And the real Mario spits in his beer
And both of them on separate paths, still drift from place to place
There are those who never come home.*

Another unusual story is John Prine's *Donald and Lydia*⁹. For these two lovers, in fact, their paths never cross, but their stories are most amusing and they wind up with similar experiences, though not as crying wooden busts. Here, the chorus is not rhymed, but has a natural sentimentality.

*But dreaming just comes natural
Like the first breath from a baby,
Like sunshine feeding daisies,
Like the love hidden deep in your heart.*

Some narratives are more conventional tales, often of separation and reunion. A classic folk song is *Oh Shenandoah* or *Across the Wide Missouri*. This, too, doesn't have a known outcome, but tells of the longing of a *voyageur* returning home to see the daughter of an Oneida Indian chief, named Shenandoah. I suspect he will see her again. The songs plaintiff character makes the listener feel some of that longing.

The Beatles have a Western narrative: *Rocky Raccoon*¹⁰. The story is well developed. There is a good lyricism within both end-line and internal rhyme.

*Rocky Raccoon checked into his room
Only to find Gideon's bible
Rocky had come equipped with a gun
To shoot off the legs of his rival
His rival it seems had broken his dreams
By stealing the girl of his fancy
Her name was Magil and she called herself Lil
But everyone knew her as Nancy*

And, much like several of the songs mentioned, there is an ending but it is ambiguous.

Another favorite story-song of many is Harry Chapin's *Taxi*.¹¹ This has a good narrative and good rhyme. This is the story of Harry (a pot smoking taxi driver) and Sue (a suburban housewife of ambiguous morals) that meet again by chance, long after an adolescent tryst in the back of a Dodge. He reflects on their past and their present.

*And she said, we must get together
But I knew it'd never be arranged*

*And she handed me twenty dollars
For a two fifty fare
She said, Harry, keep the change.*

The ending here is not ambiguous (he drops her off at her fancy house) but does leave the listener wondering what subsequently happened. Chapin must have thought so, too. He wrote a sequel, called, unambiguously, *Sequel*,¹² and this brings us to the end of both stories with some resolution to boot.

*Yes, I guess it's a sequel to our story
From my journey between Heaven and Hell
With half the time thinking of what might have been
And half thinkin'..... just as well
I guess only time will tell.*

A well-known story-song is *Piano Man*¹³ by Billy Joel. It is not so much a narrative but a description of the singer's life in a piano bar. The author has well developed characters as bar patrons, in one or two line stanzas, and everyone in the story is unhappy, except the manager,

*It's a pretty good crowd for a Saturday
And the manager gives me a smile
'Cause he knows that it's me they've been comin' to see
To forget about life for a while
And the piano, it sounds like a carnival
And the microphone smells like a beer
And they sit at the bar and put bread in my jar
And say, "Man, what are you doin' here?"*

A famous single-person-narrated story-song is Simon and Garfunkel's, *The Boxer*.¹⁴ There are several interesting facts about this story: it is largely autobiographical about Paul Simon; there are no words to the chorus just "lie-la-lie" which may be onomatopoeic for the blows hitting the boxer; several of the lines in the song are Biblical references, such as "seeking out the poorer quarters" and "workman's wages"¹⁵. *The Boxer* was originally written with a stanza not often played in later versions, which gives some ending to the story not present in the more familiar version.

*Now the years are rolling by me—
They are rockin' evenly.
I am older than I once was,
And younger than I'll be.
That's not unusual;
No, it isn't strange:
After changes upon changes
We are more or less the same;
After changes we are more or less the same.*

Simon and Garfunkel's first big hit, *Mrs. Robinson*, is also a well-known story, but more of a critical description of suburbia rather than a narrative of seduction by an older woman.

In summary, good stories can be found in narrative songs. Many songs tell a story but there are song-writers who can craft an excellent narrative and set it to music, most often in less than 500 words. Importantly to me, these songs are crafted with rhyme and meter. One might argue that meter is intrinsic to a lyrical setting, yet, the lyricist is also crafting poetry, poetry with rhyme and meter. This to me is essential to poetry.

¹ <https://www.emaze.com/@ACFQICZ/Free-Verse>

² Steiner and Hawes

³ Jane Bowers

⁴ Marty Robbins, El Paso

⁵ Marty Robbins, Faleena

⁶ Willie Nelson

⁷ Seals and Sester

⁸ Butch Hancock

⁹ John Prine

¹⁰ Rocky Raccoon Lennon-McCartney, but it's mostly like Sir Paul

¹¹ Taxi, Harry Chapin

¹² Sequel, Harry Chapin

¹³ Piano Man, Billy Joel

¹⁴ The Boxer, Paul Simon

¹⁵ The reference may be to Leviticus 19:13 "Thou shalt not defraud thy neighbor, neither rob *him*: the wages of him that is hired shall not abide with thee all night until the morning."

Story Songs: Addendum

I will end this with some brief summaries of other musical narratives, some well written. No further attribution is given.

Girl meets boy – boy loses girl – reunion at the candy store. Johnny Cash: *Ballad of a Teenage Queen*.

Boy meets girl – they nervously wander around wondering what to do if *he* shows up – boy gets girl. Roy Orbison: *Running Scared*.

Girl meets boy hitchhiking from Baton Rouge to New Orleans and then they roam the US holdin' hands – she leaves him near Salinas – a lot of *La de da's*. (I think they're metaphorical for you know what but there is also a metaphor for heroine in a red bandana). Janis Joplin: *Me and Bobby McGee* cover of Kris Kristofferson.

Saint meets her adversary – saint tied to the stake – saint achieves smoky redemption. Leonard Cohen: *Joan of Arc*.

Motorcyclist finds hotel in the dessert – meets strange hotel guests and nightman – Motorcyclist wants to check-out but finds he can never leave. More metaphors for drug use. The Eagles: *Hotel California*.

Minnesota mining town goes boom then bust – narrator, a widow, whose husband and then the children leave her – now she's alone. (so much for Capitalism) Bob Dylan: *North Country Blues*.

Texas boy loves Lake Charles, Louisiana. Boy drives off bridge into Lake Charles. Boy drowns. Lucinda Williams: *Lake Charles*.

Indian brave loves Indian maiden - She's on the other side of the river - both drown. Johnny Preston: *Running Bear*.

Canadian leaves his companion for Alberta – Man expresses ambivalence about their relationship – Maybe they'll meet up again, maybe not. Ian Tyson: *Four Strong Winds*.

Husband has eyes for another woman named Jolene – other woman is beautiful – singer pleads to other woman not to take her man – woman keeps begging – and begging - who knows what happens? Dolly Parton: *Jolene*.

Girl leaves New York State – she crosses the country hoping boy will ask her to join him – arrives in Mendocino and looks out on the ocean – I don't understand the outcome (but the melody is beautiful). Kate and Anne McGarrigle: *Talk to me of Mendocino*.

A Man, Johnny, fools around with another woman – The jilted woman, Frankie, shoots him dead (in St. Louis) – She's executed. Elvis Presley and 255 more: *Frankie and Johnny*

A pimp, Stagger Lee, gets into argument with associate Billy Lyons (in St. Louis) – Lyons takes Lee's Stetson hat – Lee shoots and kills Lyons – Lee goes to prison: Lloyd Price (and others) *Stagger Lee*

A railroad construction worker, John Henry, is challenged by a steam-powered drilling machine – A race is on between the two – John Henry wins – John Henry dies immediately thereafter. Burl Ives and many others: *John Henry*

Girl relates her life story in a small town but nothin' good ever lasts, so she's leaving town. Iris Dement, *Our Town*

A true narrative: Boy named Jimmy Brown is born in the valley; Jimmy gets married; Jimmy dies. All with prayerful accompaniment. The Browns. *The Three Bells*. Song was covered from the French Edith Piaf; *Les Trois Cloches* (the three bells).