STEADY AS SHE GOES

Songs and Chanties from the days of Commercial Sail
Louis Killen • Jeff Warner • Gerret Warner • Fud Benson
On July 4, 1976, the tall ships came to New York Harbor from many nations to help celebrate America's 200th birthday. The entire country was thrilled as the TV cameras captured the spectacle. Such grace! Such beauty! Ah, to have been a sailor in the early days on one of those glorious vessels, climbing the tall masts, unfurling the billowing sails to catch the ocean breeze.

Well, it never came through on television, but the plain fact was that a sailor's life in the days of commercial sail was pure Hell. He had no union to speak up for him. There were no regulations or laws to protect him. And the captain's power and control over his men was as absolute as any plantation owner over his slaves.

Richard Henry Dana, Jr. worked on one of those sailing ships in the 1830's and in his classic Two Years Before the Mast describes the brutal flogging administered by his captain, Frank Thompson, to a poor sailor who had the audacity to ask a question about one of the captain's actions:

When he was made fast, he turned to the captain and asked him what he was to be flogged for. "Have I ever refused my duty, sir? Have you ever known me to hang back or not to know my work?"

"No," said the captain, "it is not that I flog you for; I flog you for your interference, for asking questions."

"Can't a man ask a question here without being flogged?"

"No," shouted the captain; "nobody shall open his mouth aboard this vessel but myself," and began laying the blows upon his back. As he went on, his passion increased, and he danced about the deck, calling out, as he swung the rope: "If you want to know what I flog you for, I'll tell you. It's because I like to do it! —It suits me! That's what I do it for!"

The man withered under the pain until he could endure it no longer, when he called out, "O Jesus Christ! O Jesus Christ!"

"Don't call on Jesus Christ," shouted the captain, "he can't help you. Call on me, Frank Thompson! He's the man! He can help you. Jesus Christ can't help you now!"

At these words, which I never shall forget, my blood ran cold. At length the falling of the blows and the cries of the man ceased, and at a signal from the captain the mate turned him loose.

The captain, swelling with rage, and with the importance of his achievement, walked the quarter-deck, calling out to us:

"You see your condition! You see where I've got you all! I'll make you toe the mark, every soul of you! Yes, a slave driver — a nigger driver! I'll see who'll tell me he isn't a NIGGER SLAVE!"

If a thought of resistance crossed the minds of any of the men, what was to be done? What is there for sailors to do? If they resist, it is mutiny, and if they succeed, and take the vessel, it is piracy. If they ever yield, their punishment must come; and if they do not yield, what are they to be for the rest of their lives? Bad as it was, they saw it must be borne.

Music helped make the harsh life of the sailor bearable. Chanties sung to the rhythm of the work — whether it was bringing up the anchor or hauling in the sails — made the backbreaking work go better. "A song is as good as ten men," said the sailors of those days. In the forcastle or on the bows or ballasts and songs about life on the seas and misadventures in port lifted worn spirits or sometimes rekindled old dreams about leaving the lonely life of the sea for a farm and a family on land. But for most sailors it was "off to sea once more" cussing the elements and the officers and trying to survive one day at a time.

LOUIS KILLEN was brought up in a singing family in the industrial and mining region of the river Tyne in Northeastern England. He arrived in the United States in 1966 with a bag full of hundreds of marvelous traditional British songs of sailors and fishermen, miners and milkmaids, farmers and weavers. Britain's loss has been America's gain. His subtle, full-bodied interpretation, sometimes mournful, sometimes hilarious, has delighted audiences from coast to coast. He has recorded for Topic and Front Hall records.

JEFF WARNER has been singing, song-leading, teaching and producing folk music concerts for more than a decade. He is presently Director of Productions for the Guitar Workshop in New York, administering grants designed to promote traditional American folk music. He is the traditional singer at Old Bethpage Village Restoration, has appeared at the Newport, Philadelphia, and Smithsonian Folk Festivals, and has recorded for National Geographic Records.

GERRIT WARNER teaches film and English at Dover-Sherborn High School in Massachusetts. He has been singing traditional songs for more than a decade—many of them learned from his own family's collection of ballads and lore gathered from rural folk along the Eastern seaboard. He has appeared at the Newport, Philadelphia, and Smithsonian Folk Festivals, and was co-director of the 1973 concert tour of the Hudson River Sloop CLEARWATER.

JOHN (FUD) BENSON was born in Newport, Rhode Island and grew up sailing the waters of Narragansett Bay. Coming from a musical family, his interests in sail and song find a rich field of expression in the traditional music of the sea. John (Fud) Benson is an artist in stone and other materials. He is the man who designed the front cover of this album.

THE PERFORMANCE