

Salty Dog Blues: A Ragtime-Blues-Hillbilly-Swing Band-Bluegrass Standard and the Concept of Originality in the 1920s and 30s

"Salty Dog Blues," like many blues songs circulating in the rural South during the 1920s, has an uncertain trail of authorship. Papa Charlie Jackson, an African-American vaudeville, ragtime, and blues singer from New Orleans, appears to have been the first to record it in 1924. While it may have been known as a popular or folk song, Jackson is credited with authorship in the copyright filing. Other jazz and blues performers, such as Freddie Keppard and Clara Smith, covered it in later years, stamping it with their own signature while adhering closely to Jackson's original. In 1927, two white performers from east Tennessee, the Allen Brothers, reworked the song and achieved a modest hit in the "old-time music" series (later to be known as hillbilly, then country music). They followed it with "New Salty Dog Blues," which was a minor adaptation of the original, as well as a second recording of "Salty Dog Blues." Austin Allen is credited with the words and melody for both. Ten years later, two other brothers, Zeke and Wiley Morris from western North Carolina, significantly reworked it again, shortening its title to "Salty Dog," and the song achieved success as one of the most-played bluegrass tunes in that repertory. Since then it has performed by swing bands, folk musicians, and even Jerry Garcia in his pre-Grateful Dead days. All three root versions—Jackson, Allen, and Morris—bear a musical and textual relationship to each other. The demands of the recording industry for copyrightable works led to a liberal interpretation of "original," yet the practice of individualizing an existing work and claiming authorship was widespread and accepted among "folk" musicians. Studies of this practice are often bounded by a specific genre, such as country music or blues; this paper traces the cross-genre history of "Salty Dog" in order to provide insight into how music circulated in the United States during the early decades of the twentieth century and what constituted originality in the vernacular practice of that period.

Paula J. Bishop, PhD candidate, Boston University, pjbishop@bu.edu, 508.572.4597