

Harrell, David: A Rockyhock Christmas ^[1]

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David Harrell: A Rockyhock Christmas

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 12/12/1999. Copyrighted.
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Christmas serenaders don't visit Rockyhock anymore, but their spirit can still be heard at David Harrell's music jamborees. Every Friday night, he hosts a crowd of country, bluegrass and gospel musicians at an old barn in this small fishing and farming community near Albemarle Sound. There is no charge to hear them, but donations and a covered dish are always welcomed.

Now 70, the former commercial fisherman still gets excited thinking about Christmas when he was a boy. During the years of the Great Depression, several groups of disguised and gaily bedecked troubadours- called "serenaders" or "shanghaiers" - used to brighten up the Christmas season.

That sort of serenading is a Christmas tradition that dates at least to English "mumming" way back before the Roman Conquest. Here it flourished most famously on the Outer Banks, [Old Christmas](#) ^[3] in Rodanthe. Bill Mansfield, a talented Greenville folklorist who introduced me to Harrell, has also heard stories of Christmas serenading in Chowan and Hyde counties up to the 1940s. Coastal slaves had a similar Christmas tradition, known as Jonkunnu, with roots in the Caribbean and Africa.

All serenaders came in the bleakest days of winter. People called it the "dying time of year," when the fields lay fallow and nights grew so long that darkness seemed to wrap around their bones. Then, almost magically, the serenaders appeared. Singing and laughing and "cutting up," they insisted that the human spirit could snatch joy and hope away from winter and maybe even Death itself.

In David Harrell's words:



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In Rockyhock, the best thing of all was, somewheres around Christmas, you have a gang of people coming down the road there. They'd show up anytime. Some of them would be beating a tin pan or something another like that. Some had a fiddle. They'd be dressed up in everything under the world! Some of them wore masks. Some would wear paint, big hats, dress up in old clothes. They'd find wigs to put on. Sometimes a man would dress up like a woman, a woman dress up like a man. Whatever they could find that would be odd, that's what they would put on you. You didn't know who in the Sam Hill was coming down the road!

Everybody used to go see your neighbor on a Sunday evening. You'd sit on the front porch and just jam out. Some of them would play music. Some of them would just sit and talk until they give out. But the shanghai was a Christmas thing. If you didn't know what was going on, it would really scare you! Oh yes sir, when I was a little young'un, I'd run and get under the bed. Peek my head out! We'd go up to the house, get up on the porch and go to dancing on the porch! After you did it a many a time, from when I was a little teeny fellow. You'd all pile in the car and take off like a bunch of gypsies! Young people, old people, it didn't make no difference. Some of them would be real old. It was funnier if you got an older I. My uncle Carey Bass was really good, too. He played banjo, and he'd come in on a horse.

My uncle Frank, my uncle John, they were funniest folks you've ever seen shanghaiing. Now my uncle Percy, he played the piano. He could play the piano as pretty as anybody ever listened at. When they come in shanghaiing, you talk about if they were going into a house and somebody was sickly, well, they'd do things to cheer him up. Break out with two or three hymns. Sometimes they'd sing "Old Rugged Cross," "What a Friend We have in Jesus," something like that. And once we played hymns, bluegrass music, country music. Sometimes one would break out with "Jingle Bells," but the main thing was entertaining. Sometimes, one would have a skit he'd do. They'd do anything that they could do to make you laugh. There's always been shanghai ever since I was born, and it went way on back from that. I couldn't tell you to save my life how in the world it ever started. It probably come from the Old Country, that's what I think. It was something or another. The thing about it is, nowadays you'd get yourself shot before they realized what you were doing. It's not like it used to be. See, used to, I knew everybody in Rockyhock. But now you don't know who in the world lives next door to you. And even serenading is something you just love. I'll tell you why they got away from it. Television. After television come in, everybody just sat home and looked at TV! But everybody loved to go serenading. It was just a plain good time!

This is an excerpt from the "[Listening for A Change](#) ^[4]" project of the [Southern Oral History Program](#) ^[5] at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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Origin - location:

[Chowan County](#) ^[11]

From:

[Listening to History, News and Observer.](#) ^[12]

12 December 1999 | Cecelski, David S.

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