

John Henry

1870's & 1880's

The song explores race, adultery, sex, manhood, reconstruction, Industrial Revolution, etc. There are over 80 verses to *John Henry*. This song demonstrates how music was passed on and expanded upon in the 1800's.

John Henry is a thought to be the mythical representation of a group of the working class in the 1800's. It is important to remember that no one knows for sure if John Henry existed. The myth of John Henry may have been based on actual people. Researchers believe that John Henry represents a black man who was born a slave in the 1840's or 1850's. According to the legend he grew to stand 6 feet tall, 200 pounds - a giant in that day. John Henry serves as a folk hero for all American working-class people during changes entering the modern age in America. In almost all versions of the story, John Henry represents the futility of fighting technology or modernization of the workplace.

In order to construct the railroads, companies hired thousands of men to smooth out the land and cut through obstacles that stood in the way of the proposed tracks. One such chore that figures heavily into some of the earliest John Henry ballads is the blasting of the Big Bend Tunnel -- more than a mile straight through a mountain in West Virginia.

Steel-driving men like John Henry used large hammers and stakes to pound holes into the rock, which were then filled with explosives that would blast a cavity deeper and deeper into the mountain. In the folk ballads, the central event took place under such conditions. Eager to reduce costs and speed up progress, some tunnel engineers were using steam drills to power their way into the rock.

In the most popular version of the story, John Henry is born into the world big and strong. He grows to become the greatest "steel-driver" in the mid-century push to erect the railroads across the mountains to the West. When the owner of the railroad buys a steam-powered hammer to do the work of his mostly black driving crew, to save his job and the jobs of his men, John Henry challenges the owner to a contest: himself alone against the steam hammer. John Henry beats the machine, but because he is so exhausted he collapses and dies.

One legend says that John Henry was a slave born in Missouri in the 1840s and fought his famous battle with the steam hammer along the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway in Talcott, WV. A statue and memorial plaque have been placed along a highway south of Talcott as it crosses over the tunnel in which the competition may have taken place.

Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Henry_\(folklore\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Henry_(folklore))

LYRICS

http://www.ibiblio.org/john_henry/early.html

RELATED TOPICS

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Freed Blacks

Reconstruction

West Virginia

Mountain Tunnels

BOOKS

Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry, the Untold Story of an American Legend by Scott Reynolds Nelson

John Henry, An American Legend by Ezra Jack Keats.