

The Murder Ballad

Gender Violence; Gendered Interventions

The Murder Ballad, a literary and musical tradition reaching back in recorded history well into the middle ages. It has been passed down and disseminated through oral tradition, written broadsheets and more recently through streaming services and recordings; by the 17th century traditional broadsheet ballads were distributed at the gallows of a murder, recounting an actual crime in detail, often while the murderer was still swinging. The most common form depicts a woman who has fallen pregnant, and her lover who murders her to avoid marriage, dumping her body in a shallow grave or into a river.

These ballads serve a journalistic as well as voyeuristic and therapeutic functions; they recount a gruesome tale, often one based in actual fact, and preserve it in cultural memory, thereby simultaneously glorifying, but also publicizing and performatively protesting gendered violence which regularly intersects with class and race. Their popularity, despite being called into question for their misogyny and glorification of femicide, is unbroken, raising deeper questions about their widespread appeal — Johnny Cash notably recorded “Delia’s Gone” three times and made it the opening track of his critically lauded *American Recordings* Album in 1994.

This paper first addresses the varied functions of the murder ballad, then focuses on recent interventions from female artists, including Hurray for the Ruff Raff’s “The Body Electric,” and “Mama’s Cryin’ Long” by Rhiannon Giddens and Our Native Daughters. These are juxtaposed with earlier interventions by female artists Ella Fitzgerald’s, The Chicks, Dolly Parton and Patsy Montana. Though all, arguably, are protests — the female voice centered instead of made the subject either in performance or as the lyrical I— a wind change is evident. Whereas previously subversion was welcomed through the female voice appropriating the murderer’s voice and/or employing humor, direct protest within this complex genre is increasingly welcomed.

Chanda VanderHart, PhD enjoys an interdisciplinary career as a historical musicologist and collaborative pianist. She is currently a faculty member at the mdw- Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst Wien where she researches performance cultures between the 19th and 21st centuries (Institute for Music Acoustics / Wiener Klangstil) lectures (Institute for Musicology and Performance Studies) and coaches/accompanies singers. Her research interests include historical music performance, artistic research, gender studies, popular music, music sociology, institutional studies and salon culture. VanderHart has published for the Sorbonne, the

Albert-Ludwigs-University Centre for Popular Culture and Music in Freiburg, and is completing a monograph on song recital practices in Vienna for Cambridge University Press. She has performance degrees from the Eastman School of Music and received three graduate collaborative piano degrees from Milan and Austria before completing a PhD in musicology with the dissertation, “Die Entwicklung des Kunstliedes im Wiener Konzertleben zwischen 1848 und 1897.

vanderhart@mdw.ac.at

chandavanderhart@gmail.com