

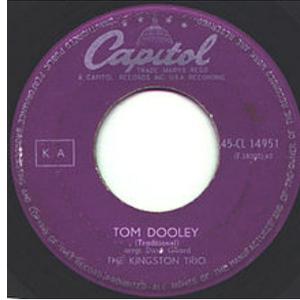
“Tom Dooley”—The Kingston Trio (1958)

Added to the National Registry: 2008

Essay by William J. Bush (guest post)*



Tom Dula



Original label



The Kingston Trio

It is one of the great surprises (some might say flukes) of popular music: a simple two-chord song about a confederate veteran named Tom Dula who stabbed his cheating girlfriend, Laura Foster, in a jealous rage and was hanged in Statesville, North Carolina, in 1868, igniting the great Folk Music Revival of the late 50s and early 60s.

While the song is credited to numerous sources, including old time banjoist Frank Proffitt, and even his Aunt Nancy Prather, the song has its origins in North Carolina in the late 1860s and maybe even earlier.

Even more unlikely, the song propelled three newly-graduated college students into international stardom, the likes of which was matched only by the Beatles years later.

The song, of course, was “Tom Dooley” recorded by The Kingston Trio--Dave Guard, Nick Reynolds and Bob Shane--who quickly became one of America's most popular and influential folk music groups.

Guard and Shane were born in Hawaii and met at Honolulu's pricey Punahou School, which later became Barrack Obama's alma mater. Reynolds was born in San Diego, the son of a Navy Captain, and raised across the bay in Coronado, California. Shane and Reynolds would meet in 1955 at Menlo School of Business Administration, near Stanford where Dave Guard was a business major.

Soon the three came together in various trio and quartet permutations, and eventually evolved into the Kingston Trio. *How* they discovered “Tom Dooley” was as improbable as the enormous success it later brought them virtually overnight.

By late 1957, the Kingston Trio had become a popular San Francisco attraction, playing in various North Beach clubs including The Purple Onion at 140 Columbus Avenue. One afternoon, the group was rehearsing in the Purple Onion's empty basement showroom when a "white-haired gentleman" approached the three with a song he had just sung in an

audition for a weekly spot at the Onion. The Trio asked the man to write down the lyrics, thinking they were public domain, which they then changed to fit their own version.

The song was “Tom Dooley” and the lyrics were not quite public domain--and the Trio was eventually sued. Ironically, the Trio never thought it would be a hit song; it was just a "neat ballad" to them, something to help fill out their first Capitol LP, “The Kingston Trio” (T996), released in February of 1958.

“Tom Dooley” would go on to sell millions of singles as well as push huge sales of their album. It was voted “Best Country and Western Performance of 1959,” received the Grammy Hall of Fame Award in 1998, and was, in 2008, chosen for inclusion in the Library of Congress’s National Recordings Registry. In 2011, Bob Shane accepted the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award on behalf of The Kingston Trio.

“Tom Dooley” introduced America to its own rich traditional musical heritage as no other song could. It was a prime mover in the evolution of popular music.

It certainly moved me--and still does.

William J. Bush is a writer, music journalist, author and perennial student of Martin guitars, Buddy Holly and The Kingston Trio. In 2006, he appeared in the PBS documentary “The Kingston Trio: Wherever We May Go.” In 2013, his in-depth biography “Greenback Dollar: The Incredible Rise of The Kingston Trio” was published by Scarecrow Press.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.