

Little Songs and Dandling

Charlie over the ocean, Charlie over the sea. . . .
anonymous

“My mom would make up songs about our pets, and although she doesn’t sing too well (to me), she sang with all her heart. Even being tickled had its own mix of vocal sounds.” Kim Ferraro (term paper)

“Q: Do you have music in your head at all? You know, a tune going on in your head?
A: (pause) I did. You know, when my kids were growing up, I didn’t always think of them, but I’d make up little things. And a couple of times, they came out now, when I’m older. So, I kind of get a funny look from them. . . . (laughs) So, I don’t even go on with that.”

"Violet" in My Music (p. 173)

“Give me a song and I can whistle it although you may not understand the song, but I’ll just whistle. Whistle little words, and make up my own little songs. That’s what I like about our keyboard. You can make up your own beat, your own song, and it doesn’t have to be good, and it’s just yours.”

"Lisa"(age 12) in My Music (p. 40)

I remember sitting next to a young mother and her baby in the Athens airport as we waited to return to the USA. Every so often she would bounce the baby very gently on her lap, holding it under the arms and humming a little song to it. And each time the baby’s eyes seemed to twinkle and a little smile brightened up the waiting room. “So this is life! Bouncing, and humming and looking into a friendly face.” The mother was dark, a Caribbean accent, and I thought of all the times in Nigeria I had seen a mother or father bounce a baby or help a baby to dance before it could walk, different kinds of dandling -- there’s a good old verb we don’t use very often. It’s just archaic or obscure enough that I wasn’t sure I would find it in the dictionary. “Maybe it is just some ‘old slang’ that never became a word,” I thought. But it’s there. From the American Heritage Dictionary, pg. 324; “To move (a small child) up and down on the knees or in the arms: ‘*somebody who was dandled on Queen Victoria’s knee must appear an old fogy.*’ (Duke of Windsor)”. I like the way the parentheses (around a small child) suggest the arms hugging the child and that there may be other entities one might dandle --I can’t think of any, can you? -- and then the quote from the Duke arguing that even the most liberating force in child-rearing could be overpowered by the prudishness of the Victorian vibe emanating from Victoria herself. Dandled by anyone else, a child might become a dancer or a singer or a singing dancer.

How can we help more little songs to be sung with the dandling?

Until the Music in Everyday Life study groups collected 200 interviews I didn't realize how many mothers and girls create songs and keep them hidden. Invariably the information comes out in passing. Invariably interviewers pass over the information when it does come out. No mother or girl would say "I'm a composer," or even "I make songs." The songs are "little," private and yours alone, or just for a baby or a pet or a best friend.

I wonder how many mothers invent songs for their children that go unnoticed or are taken completely for granted. We have the concept of "lullaby" -- words, melody, usually a regular movement of cradle or swing to induce sleep -- but "dandleditty" or "sing-and-bounce-a-baby" is not in the dictionary.

I wonder how many children invent songs for friends and special situations that simply disappear over time or are carried deep in the memory banks of the composer and never heard again.

And I wonder if the 19th century and all the preceding centuries in all corners of the world didn't have a lot more little songs to go with much more dandling before the media and advertising jingles filled our heads.

*Dandling is Dandy
Don't Let Dandling Die Out
Do You Dandle?
Dandling With or Without Demand*

Pat Campbell:

"Dandleditties" are so natural, so innate, so everyday in the lives of a mother with child, a father with child, or others who find themselves in the company of babies and toddlers, that they are hardly written about in the literature. Adults babble and bounce their little ones, vocalizing a rhythm in a stream of silly syllables, or chanting a familiar poem, or singing with or without words. Along with the humming comes the hugging, big people giving security and safety to little people. Babies hang high in the air, held by the hands of their parents and grandparents, and are then brought back down into a safe cuddle of gentle rocking. Toddlers are tickled and teased, and rhythmically bounced on the knees of family and friendly neighbors. Young preschool children are swung rhythmically around in circles, or huddled up and hunched in to a high-to-low swoop that may take more than one adult to maneuver. The dandlers and handlers are often singing as they go, bringing delight to the little ones eager for the sensory stimulation. Dandleditties are the songs and chants that go with playful movement, many of them the familiar nursery rhymes of old: "Ride a cockhorse to Banbury Cross", "Charlie over the ocean", "See saw Margory Daw", "Here we go round the mulberry bush", and "Little Sally Walker, sitting in a saucer". They are also the songs-without-names, the songs-without-words, the songs that every one sings that are theirs alone—to be shared.

- The works of John Feierabend are rich with music material that might well qualify as dandleditties. See especially The Book of Bounces, The Book of Wiggles and Tickers, and First Steps in Music for Infants and Toddlers (Chicago: G.I.A. Publications), as they offer a “repertoire” that may trigger memories even as they introduce new combinations of music, language, and movement for the very young. See a complete list, including Cds and Dvds, at http://www.giamusic.com/music_education/artists/.

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Find a rocking chair. Start rocking. See what little dandleditties come forward as you rock along, letting the words and phonemes roll off your tongue. Better yet, watch a mother and baby together, and take note of the movement and the language that are passed between them.