

Michael Row The Boat Ashore

START

Michael row the boat ashore, hal - le - lu - jah. Michael

row the boat ashore, hal - le - lu - jah.

Lyrics

The Highwaymen version that went to #1 on the Billboard charts had these lyrics:

Michael row the boat ashore, hallelujah.
Michael row the boat ashore, hallelujah.

Sister help to trim the sail, hallelujah.
Sister help to trim the sail, hallelujah.

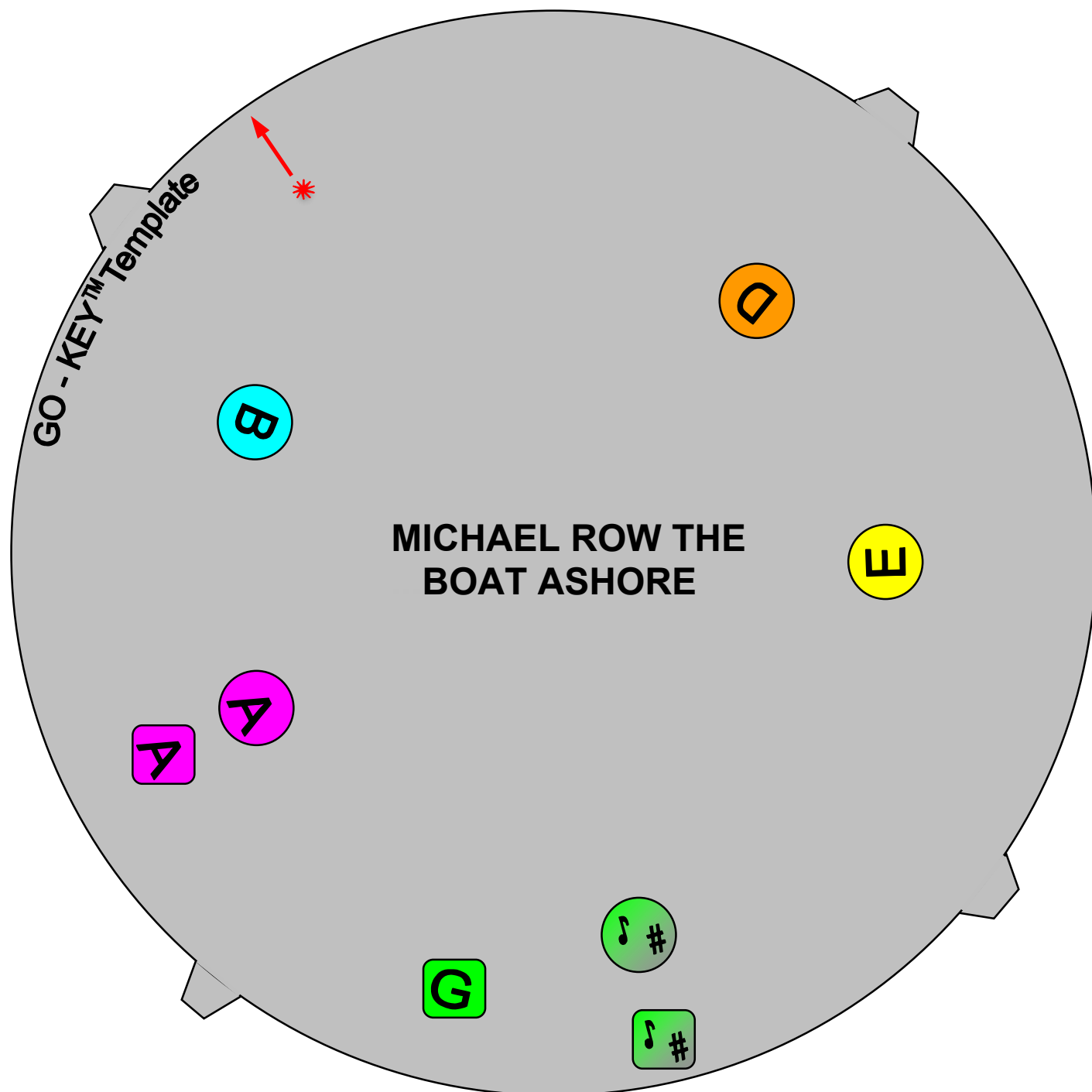
Michael row the boat ashore, hallelujah.
Michael row the boat ashore, hallelujah.

The River Jordan is chilly and cold, hallelujah.
Chills the body but not the soul, hallelujah.

Michael row the boat ashore, hallelujah.
Michael row the boat ashore, hallelujah.

The river is deep and the river is wide, hallelujah.
Milk and honey on the other side, hallelujah.

Michael row the boat ashore, hallelujah.
Michael row the boat ashore, hallelujah.



History and Origin

"Michael Row the Boat Ashore." is an African-American spiritual made popular by folk band The Highwaymen as their signature song. It was first noted during the American Civil War at St. Helena Island, one of the Sea Islands of South Carolina. It was sung by former slaves whose owners had abandoned the island before the Union navy arrived to enforce a blockade. Charles Pickard Ware was an abolitionist and Harvard graduate who had come to supervise the plantations on St. Helena Island from 1862 to 1865, and he wrote down the song in music notation as he heard the freedmen sing it. Ware's cousin William Francis Allen reported in 1863 that the former slaves sang the song as they rowed him in a boat across Station Creek. The song was first published in 1867 in *Slave Songs of the United States* by Allen, Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison. This song originated in oral tradition, and there are many versions of the lyrics. The River Jordan was where Jesus was baptised and can be viewed as a metaphor for deliverance and salvation, but also as the boundary of the Promised Land, death, and the transition to Heaven. According to William Francis Allen, the song refers to the Archangel Michael. In the Roman Catholic interpretation of Christian tradition, Michael is often regarded as a psychopomp or conductor of the souls of the dead.

The Highwaymen had a #1 recording which made song popular in 1961. The recording begins and ends with one of the singers whistling the tune a cappella, later accompanied by simple instruments, in a slow, ballad style. All the Highwaymen sang and harmonized on the Michael lines but individual singers soloed for each set of additional lyrics. This version differs from the Pete Seeger version by changing "meet my mother on the other side" to "milk and honey on the other side." "Milk and honey" is a phrase used in the Book of Exodus during Moses' vision of the burning bush. The original Negro spiritual mentions the singer's mother but the hit version does not.

Notable Uses:

- 1954, Adapted by Boston folksinger and teacher Tony Saletan, who taught it to Pete Seeger.
- 1955, Seeger taught it to the Weavers, who performed it at their 1955 reunion concert.
- 1957, Recorded by folksinger Bob Gibson, who included it on his 1957 Carnegie Concert album.
- 1960, The Weavers included an arrangement in *The Weavers' Song Book*.
- 1961, Seeger included it in his songbook, *American Favorite Ballads*, with an attribution to Saletan.
- 1961, The Highwaymen had a #1 on both the pop and easy listening charts under the title of "Michael."
- 1961, On Top 40 radio station WABC in New York City, the song was #1 for three weeks.
- 1961, Lonnie Donegan reached #6 in the UK Singles Chart with his cover version of the song.
- 1962, Harry Belafonte recorded a popular version of it for his *Midnight Special* album.
- 1963, Pete Seeger included it in his *Children's Concert at Town Hall*.
- 1964, Trini Lopez had a minor hit recording.
- 1964, The Israeli-French singer Rika Zaraï also recorded a French version under the title "Michaël".
- 1965, The African-American duo Joe & Eddie recorded it for their "Walking Down the Line" album.
- 1967, The Caravans' recording was released on the album, *Been in the Storm So Long*.
- 1976, Recorded by The Beach Boys for their *15 Big Ones* album but was left off the final running order.
- 1980, The counselors sing the song in the opening scene of the horror film, *Friday the 13th*.
- 1981, German disco group Dschinghis Khan recorded a version of the song.
- 2013, Used in the end credits of *The Librarian and the Banjo*, Jim Carrier's film on Dena Epstein.