

Song Title: **BOTTOM OF THE RIVER**

Rating: **YES: Caution**

REVIEWERS' NOTE

This song is admissible because it does not contain problematic racial themes or messages. **However, ensembles should be aware that the song's [music video](#) has engendered some concern due its apparent racial themes that might evoke a lynching or capture of an enslaved person** (e.g., [this comment](#) on the music video YouTube page).

It is important to note that the [steppers in the music video](#) are [members of the historically African American fraternity, Phi Beta Sigma](#) and that both in the video and when [performing live](#), Delta Rae does not do any stepping themselves.

Performers who are not Black must NOT attempt to do any form of step dance as this would be culturally appropriative.

While upon closer inspection, the video reveals itself to be about a witch hunt (as described by the band; see [Music Video Analysis](#) section), there are many racial markers/coding in the video that are evocative of slavery and the history of Southern lynching:

- Opening scene of men working in a Southern setting, reminiscent of the enslaved or a chain gang
- Shackles on the lead singer
- The gospel/spiritual feel of the music and its call-and-response structure, whose gospel origins lie in Negro Spirituals, sung by the enslaved. These were often coded and often about escaping slavery via a river to avoid leaving a scent. (Given this gospel/spiritual feel, the sexuality that comes across in the video may be offensive to some.)
- Thus the lyric, *"The wolves will chase you by the pale moonlight"* evokes those escaping slavery being tracked by hounds.
- Harriet Tubman [carried a gun](#) as she lead the enslaved to freedom (evoked by the lyric, *check the cupboard for your daddy's gun*)
- The music also has [Delta Blues](#) elements, another musical tradition originating with African Americans (in the Mississippi Delta).
- The Black fraternity stepping done by some in the mob is distinctly African American ([with its origins in the African gumboot dance](#)) and (together with the call-and-response) may be evocative of the [work songs](#) sung by the enslaved.

There are also parallels between the history of witch hunts and the lynching of Black people in the U.S. (see [Music Video Analysis](#))

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What year was this song written? 2011

Who wrote the lyrics? Ian Hölljes and Eric Hölljes

What did your research tell you about the lyricist?

Ian Hölljes and Eric Hölljes are part of the band named Delta Rae, which was formed in Durham, North Carolina. Wikipedia lists their genres as blues-rock, country rock, folk-rock, and roots rock. Three of the band members are siblings. They don't appear to have been originally from the South but their music – at least this song – seems to be heavily influenced by the [Southern Gothic genre](#). ([Song of the Week – Bottom of the River – Delta Rae | Music Enthusiast - At the junction of rock, blues, R&B, jazz, pop, and soul](#))

What other material has been written by this lyricist?

Singles: "If I Loved You", "Run", "Scared", "A Long and Happy Life", "No Peace In Quiet"

Videography: "Bottom of the River", "Morning Comes", "Dance in the Graveyards", "If I Loved You", "Do You Ever Dream?", "Hands Dirty", "All Good People", "No One Will Miss Me" ([Delta Rae - Wikipedia](#))

Who is the composer of this song? Ian Hölljes and Eric Hölljes

Please provide a link to the original song lyrics. [Delta Rae – Bottom of the River Lyrics](#)

Who and what is this song about, as originally intended by the composer and earlier performers?

The lyrics evoke dark themes from the Old Testament and religious fanaticism:

- *"The Lord's gonna come for your first born son"* could reference, either the story of Abraham (asked to sacrifice his son, Isaac) or the story of Passover (Before God's last plague, Moses warned people to mark their homes with lamb's blood. Death came for the first-born son in every family that didn't paint blood above their doors) or possibly the story of baby Moses who was floated down the Nile in a basket by his mother to escape the clutches of the murderous Egyptian pharaoh.
- *"(His hair's on fire and his heart is burning)/(So go to the river where the water runs)/Wash him deep where the tides are turning"* could reference demonic possession and baptism to cleanse the soul.
- *"Drive your son like a railroad spike/(into the water, let it pull him under)/Don't you lift him, let him drown alive/(The good Lord speaks like a rolling thunder)"* could be in reference to the old notion, common in many spiritual disciplines, that submersion in water would cleanse the body of sickness and the soul of evil."

This [April 2022 YouTube comment](#) on the music video page provides a religious gothic interpretation of the lyrics, to which Delta Rae replied "You're actually more right than you can imagine," and that they're working on a musical to tell the whole story.

The music video depicts a woman being led away in chains and is meant to evoke witch trials. One of the tests against witchcraft was to bind the accused and throw them in a body of water, if they

sank they were innocent.

[Delta Rae – Bottom of the River Lyrics](#) | [Women in Music Videos: Delta Rae Revels in Feral Feminism \(pt. 1\)](#)

What did you learn about the history OF THE SONG?

Delta Rae initially performed and recorded this original song. This song features on Delta Rae's first album, *Carry The Fire*, as a pounding, bluegrass-tinged work song with disturbing themes of persecution by religion.

For the song's composition, traditional instruments were set aside in favor of a reliance on the six voices that make up the band for beats, snaps, hums, and choruses. The only notable addition outside of the voices is the beat, which is kept by the sound of shaking chains, adding to the work song impression by evoking the rhythms of toiling prisoners or the enslaved. [This video](#) explains the genesis of the song, which came to one of the brothers in a dream. The two brothers wrote the song as "an old testament, biblical, gothic story" with a gospel-song flavor. Ian Hölljes explains the music video (produced by [Alex Wong](#) and directed by [Lawrence Chen](#)) this way (in this [WaPo blog](#)):

I was like 'I know this isn't literally the story of the song, but I've always felt like this song has the feeling of a witch trial.' We seized on that idea and ran with it. Brittany, our sister, was just able really to carry the character in such a way that — I couldn't even necessarily have envisioned that. We loved the idea of her starting off the role as a victim, and by the end of it having transformed into the leader of this mob. The audience starts off thinking that she's being falsely accused as a witch, and by the end of it, she's more powerful than anyone would have imagined. I thought the story ark of it was really exciting, so we just ran with it. You feel scared for her then you feel scared of her.

See Music Video Analysis below.

"Bottom of the River" (released in 2012) became one of Delta Rae's best-performing and most well-known songs to date. It's been covered by four a cappella groups: Yale Out of the Blue, Vocal Rush, The Graduates, and What's on Tap.

Share a link to the earliest performance of this song that you can find. [Delta Rae - Bottom Of The River \[Official Music Video\]](#)

Music Video Analysis

Includes edited and excerpted content from [Women in Music Videos: Delta Rae Revels in Feral Feminism \(pt. 1\) - The Fandomentals](#)

That the main character (lead singer) is preternatural is evident from the outset, after the opening scene of the men working outside her window as she hums, seated at a mirror. Upon the door bursting open, the woman turns around but her reflection does not, and it blows out the lantern. The struggling woman is chained at her wrists and dragged from the house (presumably toward a witch trial at a river). While no details are given, the viewer is meant to sympathize with her plight. As the mob progresses down the path and the "witch" grows more powerful, the two workers' eyes turn black and when she ultimately frees herself—magically, the chains are gone and the townspeople have disappear and her abductors lay at the foot of a tree—the two workers walk away with her as she hums and they literally disappear into blackness.

While [Sing Out!](#) points out that the mob and its chained prisoner evoke a chain gang and attribute to it "racial coding of the video's imagery," we see only a woman in chains, and her physical appearance

and white-slip attire implies vulnerability. (Her abductors learn soon enough their mistake of underestimating her.) American racism and the witch trials are linked in terms of violence and fear-mongering – an insight from [Philosophy Tube](#) (15:57-21:01) on the parallels between witch hunts against women and Klan lynchings of Black Americans. And indeed, among the first three to be accused of witchcraft during the Salem witch trials (1692-1693) is [Tituba](#), an enslaved woman and among the last to be murdered as a witch (1730) is [Sally Basset](#), an enslaved African woman from Bermuda.

But the chained imagery doesn't seem to apply in this context. The mob's antagonism of the witch recalls specific class-based, misogynistic violence. The image of white women in chains alludes to sexual slavery, an intersectional threat to women throughout humanity's history of war, pillaging, and rape; one that Indigenous and Black women suffered on top of slave labor in the colonies. So while race definitely connects to sexual violence in the South, *Bottom of the River* aims at mixed imagery, telling a fuller story about witchcraft, women's empowerment, and the cultures that would burn it all away.

[The Fine Art Diner](#) (a Christian blog available by invitation only) notes: "The members of the band [abductors] symbolize: the professional/business class (the man in the vest and tie), the other man [in work clothes] symbolizes the working class, and with her 'traditional femininity' and feelings of disgust towards the witch, [the female band member] character functions as a stand-in for women conspirators to misogyny. College step dancers portray the hooded men who form the dancing crowd and when the witch realizes her powers, they and the mob suddenly wear Chinese demon masks [though the mob's masks are red and white, while the dancers' are black and white]. The masked figures remain ambiguous, possibly demons." But they could be interpreted as the faceless masses that make up a community, while the band members play the archetypal figureheads. These masses follow whatever figure holds the most power, hence [they easily fall] under the witch's control. They are so ephemeral, they disappear after she frees herself and disposes of the figureheads.

Read more interesting details and analysis:

<https://www.thefandomentals.com/delta-rae-feral-feminism-pt-1/> and the [referenced video](#) (15:57-21:01).

Did this song, originally or subsequently, demean a marginalized racial/ethnic group (a group considered at a social disadvantage) through idiomatic expressions, metaphors, jargon, or message? And/or does the song present a sanitized/idyllic or false narrative regarding the American South and the life of the enslaved or newly freed OR of other marginalized racial/ethnic groups and their history? No

Additional Questions to Consider (do not pertain to Admissibility)

The remaining questions pertain to Diversity, Equity & Inclusion issues other than those of race. As such, **THESE QUESTIONS DO NOT AFFECT A SONG'S ADMISSIBILITY**. They are provided to encourage your group to consider factors that may affect members of your audience and/or your performers with regard to religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, and more. **Please refer to the Music Choices section of [Chapter Choices to Address Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](#) (in the [Chorus Toolkit](#)) for details and strategies related to these factors.**

Could the message/lyrics of the song, original or subsequent, limit any singer or audience member's ability to engage, related to the following? A YES answer does not imply that the song is demeaning or exclusionary. [Please see instructions here.](#)

Age: No
Disability: No
Gender: No
Religion: Yes
Sexual Orientation: No
Visible Physical Difference: No
Other? **Yes**

Please explain your reasoning for YES/UNSURE answers and any NO answers you wish to explain.

Religion: The song contains references to *the Lord* and evokes an Old Testament vibe.

Other: Lyrics may be disturbing to audiences/ensemble members:

The Lord's gonna come for your first born son ... / Drive your son like a railroad spike / (Into the water, let it pull him under) / Don't you lift him, let him drown alive

Gun lyrics may be triggering for some: *Check the cupboard for your daddy's gun*

Are there any adjustments to the lyrics that would make it more inclusive or current to our chorus culture or societal norms? * No, lyric changes will not address identified categories.

Write any suggested changes to the lyrics (if applicable) or explain why changes to lyrics will not address identified categories (if applicable). *

Religion: The "Lord" lyrics and gospel feel are integral to the song's message

Other: Lyric changes would not be appropriate as the disturbing lyrics are integral to the song's style and message, although ensembles might consider opting to leave out the most disturbing lyric: *Don't you lift him, let him drown alive*. Consideration should be given to ensemble members' and audience sensibilities.

Please see Lyric Considerations in Section II-B of the [Judging Category Description Book](#), which addresses "respect for the audience." See also Appropriateness in [Basic Criteria for Public Performances](#), which states that "Subject matter, lyrics, or presentation should not be offensive to members/audience."

***These decisions are left to the discretion of ensembles based upon their assessment of member and audience sensibilities.** Please consult the *Music Choices* section of [Chapter Choices to Address Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](#) (in the [Chorus Toolkit](#)) for details and strategies related to these factors.

- For information on **important considerations for lyric changes**, especially in contest songs, see Topic II. D. in the Music Category section of the [Judging Category Description Book](#).

Final Questions

Are there any other comments you want to provide or is there other information you think might be useful about this song?

There is a genre of fiction called Southern Gothic. Once used as a pejorative, per Wikipedia, it “employs the use of macabre, ironic events to examine the values of the American South. ... It uses the Gothic tools not solely for the sake of suspense, but to explore social issues and reveal the cultural character of the American South – Gothic elements often taking place in a magic realist context rather than a strictly fantastical one.” Delta Rae often writes songs in line with this genre.