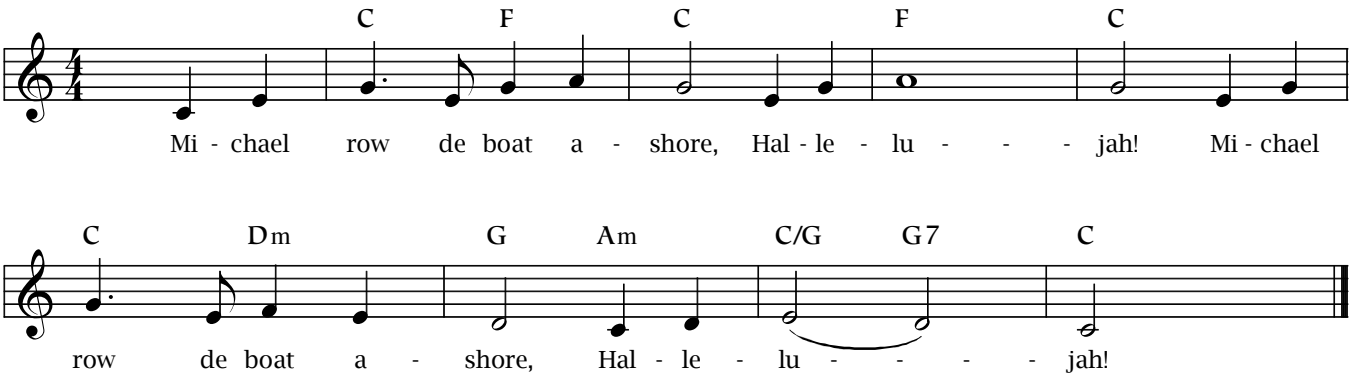
Michael Row De Boat Ashore

Traditional Gullah song (Roud #11975)



The Gullah (also called the Geechee) are a culturally and linguistically distinct group of African Americans found in the coastal plains and Sea Islands of South Carolina, Georgia, and (historically) Florida. The people are descendants of slaves captured in West Africa, mostly from present-day Angola, Senegambia, Sierra Leone, and the Gold Coast. These ethnic groups were specifically targeted for kidnapping because they had knowledge and skill in growing African rice, which was a major plantation crop along the southeast US coast by the mid-1700s. Gullah culture developed and survived partly because of geographic and cultural isolation (these white slave owners often lived in urban areas, fearing malaria and yellow fever which were common in the lowland rice paddies) and partly from a continued influx of slaves who reinforced pre-existing elements of African languages and cultures.

During the American Civil War, slaves were freed in the Sea Islands before any other place in the South, and many Gullah men served in the Union Army. Many former slaves remained farmers in these rural areas, and Gullah culture continued to thrive. Penn Center, founded on Saint Helena Island (SC) in 1862 by Pennsylvania Unitarian missionaries, continues to be a leading force in documenting, preserving, celebrating, and promoting Gullah language and culture. Recent cultural achievements include the first Gullah translation of the New Testament (published 2005), and the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor established by an Act of Congress in 2006.

"Michael Row De Boat Ashore" was collected on Saint Helena Island in 1863, sung by former slaves rowing across Station Creek. It was first published in *Slave Songs of the United States* by Charles Pickard Ware, William Francis Allen, and Lucy McKim Garrison in 1867 (A. Simpson & Co., New York). Boston folk musician and educator Tony Saletan "rediscovered" the song in this book in 1954; Saletan taught it to Pete Seeger, who taught it to The Weavers. Connecticut folk quartet The Highwaymen recorded the song in 1960; their "easy listening" version was #1 in the UK, and was listed as Billboard's #3 song of 1961. Many artists have recorded versions of the song, including Lonnie Donegan, Harry Belafonte, The Lennon Sisters, Pete Seeger, The Smothers Brothers, and Peter, Paul and Mary.

Gullah people were recorded singing the song on Johns Island in the early 1960s, by American musicologists Guy Carawan and Candie Carawan. This recording was released by Smithsonian Folkways Records in 1967.

While there are many versions of the lyrics, all refer to Michael (the biblical archangel) taking souls across the River Jordan (from earth to heaven). These are the verses given in Ware-Allen-Garrison's 1867 book (song #31, pg 23).

1. Michael row de boat ashore, Hallelujah!
2. Michael boat a gos-pel boat.
3. I wonder where my mudder deh. *[there]*
4. See my mudder on de rock gwine home.
5. On de rock gwine home in Jesus' name.
6. Michael boat a music boat.
7. Gabriel blow de trumpet horn.
8. O you mind your boastin' talk.
9. Boastin' talk will sink your soul.
10. Brudder, lend a helpin' hand.
11. Sister, help for trim dat boat.
12. Jordan stream is wide and deep.
13. Jesus stand on t' oder side.
14. I wonder if my maussa deh.
15. My fader gone to unknown land.
16. O de Lord he plant his garden deh.
17. He raise de fruit for you to eat.
18. He dat eat shall neber die.
19. When de riber overflow.
20. O poor sinner, how you land?
21. Riber run and darkness comin'.
22. Sinner row to save your soul.