

## The Black Ball Line



1. I served my time on the Black Ball line  
To me way-ay-ay O Ri-o  
On the Black Ball line I served my time  
Hurrah for the Black Ball line!
2. The Black Ball ships they are good and true  
And they are the ships for me and you.
3. For once there was a Black Ball ship  
That fourteen knots an hour could clip.
4. They'll carry you along through frost and snow  
And take you where the wind don't blow.
5. You will surely find a rich gold mine  
Just take a trip on the Black Ball line.
6. Just take a trip to Liverpool  
To Liverpool, that Yankee school.
7. The Yankee sailors you'll see there  
With their high-top boots and short-cut hair.
8. At Liverpool docks we bid adieu  
To Poll and Bet and lovely Sue.
9. And now we're bound for New York Town  
It's there we'll drink, and sorrow drown.

---

This tune is a halyard chanty and is a variant of 'Blow the Man Down', which originated in Western Ocean sailing ships. This tune seems to be in the rather rare Phrygian mode. The Black Ball Line was a passenger line founded by a group of New York Quaker merchants headed by Jeremiah Thompson and included Isaac Wright & Son (William), Francis Thompson and Benjamin Marshall. All were Quakers except Marshall. The line initially consisted of four packet ships, the Amity, Courier, Pacific and the James Monroe. All of these were running between Liverpool, England and New York City. This first scheduled trans-Atlantic service was founded in 1817. In operation for some 60 years, it took its name from its flag, a black ball on a red background.

In 1851, James Baines & Co. of Liverpool entered the packet trade using the same name and flag as the New York company, despite its protests. Thus, for about twenty years, two "Black Ball lines" under separate ownership were operating in direct competition on the transatlantic packet trade. For the first ten years the passages of the fleet averaged 23 days outward and 40 days to the westward. The fastest outward passage was made by the Canada in 15 days, 18 hours, and her total averages — 19 days outward and 36 days homeward — were the best of that period.

Recorded by A. L. LLoyd and Ewan MacColl.