

Album tells lost tale of Civil War

'Sultana' to be released on anniversary of ship's demise

By Chris Kocher

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Earlier this month, the whole world paused to remember the 1,514 passengers and crew members who perished aboard the RMS Titanic on the 100th anniversary of its icy demise. Director James Cameron's epic 1997 film was re-released in 3-D, television networks showed various dramas and documentaries, and newspapers and websites featured hundreds of stories about the luxury liner's fate.

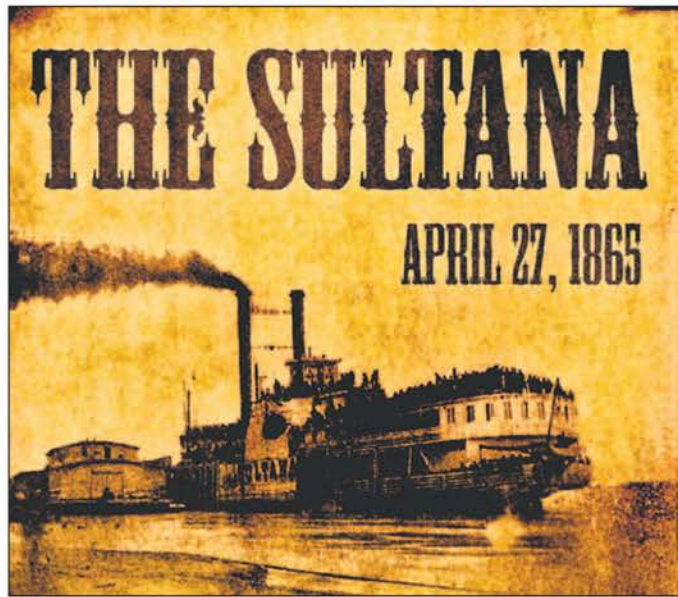
Mention the SS Sultana, though, and most folks draw a blank. The explosion of the Mississippi River steamboat near Memphis, Tenn., on April 27, 1865, claimed the lives of an estimated 1,600 people — most of them U.S. soldiers returning to the North from Confederate prison camps at the end of the Civil War.

Why has the Sultana been forgotten? At the time, the country had its attention elsewhere: Four years of bloody brother-against-brother conflict finally had ended, President Abraham Lincoln had been slain at Ford's Theater in Washington, and federal troops tracked down his assassin, John Wilkes Booth, who was killed in Virginia the day before the Sultana sank.

Local musician Jeff Stachyra (best known as the frontman for country-rockers Dirt Farm) first heard of the Sultana in 2008, after singing a spontaneous lyric on a down-tuned guitar: "Burn down the wheel/Burn down the riverboat." The haunting words led him online to a list of riverboat disasters; there were many, but the Sultana's casualty count surprised him and he wanted to know more.

"The whole thing with the Titanic versus the Sultana, where the Titanic gets all the attention and the Sultana gets none, I'm for the man on the street, the average Joe, the 99 percent," Stachyra said in an interview last week.

"Here are the poor guys



The cover of "The Sultana" uses a photo from shortly before its destruction that shows all the passengers crammed on deck.

ON THE WEB

» For more on the project, go online to thesultana.com.

who are coming home from the war after serving their country and creating the freedom we have today, and they don't get any recognition for that. In our world of fancy and glitzy, we're all driven toward the glamorous story."

Stachyra learned the full story on and off over four years — as long as the Civil War lasted, he realizes now — by reading every book on the Sultana and also doing his own research in St. Louis, Memphis, New York City and elsewhere.

Many elements of the sorry tale resonate today. War profiteering may have played a role: The Sultana's legal capacity was only 376, but more than 2,400 were crammed onboard in Vicksburg, allegedly because the captain had taken bribes to transport as many soldiers as possible. Also, one theory posits that poorly repaired boilers were sabotaged by a Confederate agent getting one last act of revenge on the North.

Then, there are the parts of the story too crazy for fiction, such as the alligator mascot that lived in the Sul-

tana's hold. When the boilers exploded and lit the ship ablaze, one enterprising soldier went below decks, killed the alligator with a bayonet and used its sturdy wooden crate to ride to shore.

As a songwriter and the owner of NewClear Studios in West Windsor, Stachyra slowly began to record an album — and on Friday, 147 years to the day of the tragedy, "The Sultana: April 27, 1856" is being released at an annual "reunion" in Cincinnati. There, Stachyra will gather with Sultana scholars and Civil War aficionados who want to keep alive the memory of those who perished.

The album covers an impressively broad range of musical styles. Songs about the soldiers' freedom from prisoner-of-war camps and their celebratory stopover in Memphis have an old-time feel appropriate to the period, but atmospheric instrumentals and a few rock moments also serve as a soundtrack to the deadly night.

Perhaps the most striking track is a suite built around the spiritual "Sweet Hour of Prayer," which is mentioned in historical accounts as a popular hymn around the time of the disaster. Stachyra recruited the Madrigal Choir to sing

the piece; then he played and re-recorded it at an 1850s-era church in Pennsylvania, complete with its original pump organ. The effect is moving, especially when paired with the ethereal "Under the Water," which imagines the Sultana victims' final resting place.

Through the Library of Congress, Stachyra also discovered sheet music for an orchestral piece called "Sultana" that was written in 1879, 14 years after the disaster. A full orchestral version, which is among the album's bonus tracks, may be the first recorded version of the memorial waltz.

About 60 musicians took part in the "Sultana" sessions, including the choir, members of the Binghamton Philharmonic and others. Stachyra has worked with over the years. He would record the basic tracks, he said, and then flesh them out with other players.

Although the album will be released on CD, Stachyra thinks the liner notes — fashioned like a newspaper of the time — also would do well in an old-school format.

"It would make a perfect vinyl release, because back then so much of it was about sitting in front of the record player and having something in your hand, because you couldn't be out driving," he said. "That was your 'video' when you listened to that music, to get a feel of what the artist was trying to do."

At least three different groups have approached Stachyra about turning his "Sultana" cycle into a stage play, and one local history teacher plans to integrate the story into her Civil War lessons. That kind of response makes his labor of love worth it, Stachyra said.

"My goal is to bring it to the people who don't know the story and get them interested," he said. "Of the 60 musicians that play on this record, every one of them — well, let's say 98 percent of them — now know about it and did not know. I've talked to so many Civil War buffs who do not know, but when they find out, they're interested."