The scariest sound on TikTok

No one on North Sea TikTok ever seems to know how they got there. They were just innocently scrolling their feeds from dance challenge to gardening tip to relationship update to workout video to standup comedy clip, when suddenly, they're dropped into some of the most treacherous waters on the planet.

The videos are almost always the same: 60 seconds of waves crashing over the hulls of unsuspecting ships, workers hanging off of oil rigs while storms roil around them, water coming onto the deck of a boat at such speed, you can't imagine how even the camera survived. "I don't know why my feed is filled with videos of the North Sea," a thousand commenters always say, "but I love it."

I can't say exactly how the trend started (because TikTok's platform search tools are horrifically bad), but I'm pretty sure most people found North Sea TikTok the same way I did. On November 27th, 2023, an account called @ukdestinations — which was for years dedicated to showing viewers unexpectedly cool things around the United Kingdom — posted a North Sea video. It was captioned, "The last clip will truly shock you," and had on-screen text at the beginning that read, "The North Sea: the most treacherous sea in the world."

For more on North Sea TikTok, check out this episode of *The Vergecast*.

That TikTok now has more than 118 million views and was at least one of the first to adopt the clips and cuts that are now core to the North Sea TikTok aesthetic. Even its creator was surprised by the popularity: James Cullen, one of the creators behind the @ukdestinations account, told *The New York Times* that he was "quite blown back by how popular the videos

became" and that the audience came from all over the globe. (No one behind the account got back to me while I was working on this story.)

But the most important thing about that @ukdestinations post was the soundtrack. It begins with a beat of silence, just enough to grab your attention in a sea of TikTok noise, and then, it booms with bass. "YO, HO, ALL, HANDS." For the rest of the minute, the song bellows deep and low and terrifying, singing of the seas and death and survival.

"The music is so distressing," a commenter wrote on that original video. "Imagine your in the middle of the ocean at night and your hear this song out of nowhere," said another. "The song scarier than the video," said a third.

Somehow, I ended up deep in North Sea TikTok, with those videos and those YO HOs all over my For You page. Pretty soon, I started to see the same song alongside TikToks about mythical monsters, phobias, storms, and other things that cause your palms to get sweaty and your body to suddenly get very still. This 60-second clip has become the unofficial soundtrack of the scary side of TikTok.

The song is a cover of from the forgettable 2007 flick *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*. Here's how it sounds in the movie:

It's an eerie song, from an early scene in *At World's End* in which a bunch of pirates (and those suspected of consorting with pirates) are to be hanged. One kid starts singing in the gallows, and soon, it seems everyone on death row is singing along. After that, something something Jack Sparrow, and the movie is off and running.

Bobby Waters had always liked this song. Waters, a musician and (circa 2020) a college student, liked to sing this kind of song. It fit his deep, booming voice perfectly. "They're very bass-anthem-y, these slow minor songs that are almost folksy,

like a sea shanty.” Waters had started posting on TikTok in 2020 during the pandemic lockdown and had found two niches on the app: the sea shanties like “Soon May the Wellerman Come” that were suddenly everywhere on TikTok, and the trend of bass singers adding a low part to viral songs.

Waters started dueting his favorite videos and adding a bass line, and the videos started doing well. One of his early hits was a cover of — you guessed it! — “Hoist the Colours” with a singer named Malinda Kathleen Reese who had become hugely popular singing sea shanties. He went viral again, adding bass to a stairwell-sung rendition of Ariana Grande’s “One Last Time.” And he kept making sea shanties, and the shanties kept doing well.

TikTok, as a platform, rewards ruthless trend-chasing. Pick a trend or a sound, jump on it, and trust the algorithm to take you far. Waters has certainly done some of that — he’s in a group called The Wellermen, after all, which got a record deal in the wake of the shanty craze. But he swears he didn’t set out to soundtrack the creepiest videos on the internet. It just kind of happened.

It was mid-2022, and Waters had recently been part of a chain of duets adding parts to another cover of “Hoist the Colours.” He’d recorded his part not just once but almost a dozen times, layering all that audio into his duet. That video did well, people loved it, and as they do, commenters started asking for a full version.

“One morning,” Waters says, “I don’t know why, I just woke up, and as soon as I woke up, I was like, ‘Screw it, let’s do it.’” He sat down at his computer and started emailing some of the other bass singers on TikTok. He eventually ended up with six other low-voiced compatriots, all of them also TikTokers. Waters arranged tracks for all seven voices — “I spent a couple of weeks arranging the piece because I like to take my time with this stuff,” he says, in a world where a couple of

weeks is only slow in TikTok time — and sent each singer a couple of parts to sing. All seven singers recorded each of their parts a few times and uploaded them to a shared Google Drive folder. “If we had seven voices on this, and layered it,” Waters says, “it would sound cool, but all of them layered with a ton of choices sounds like a choir. We all couldn’t sing together because we were all over the world, so we just recorded a ton of different tracks.”

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Waters finished the track, tapped a couple of friends for help with some strings on the intro and some mastering experience, and pretty quickly had . It felt big, it felt ominous, it felt powerful. “I wanted the song to essentially sound like you’ve got a giant ship full of mountains just rowing through treacherous seas,” he says. “Like if earthquakes were singing.” He thought about adding a higher part to the melody but ultimately wanted to let the bass do the work. “I wanted everyone to feel how much bass you can put in something,” Waters says. “The bass just cuts so hard, and you feel it right in your chest. I love that feeling so much.”

Waters made a music video to go along with the song on YouTube and then uploaded the track to Soundrop, a platform that distributes your music to basically every music and social platform you can think of. He even gave the group a (not terribly creative) name: the Bass Singers of TikTok. The song premiered on YouTube on September 23rd, 2022. For more than a year, it did… perfectly well. No mega-viral moments, no new record deals or late-night appearances, but it was Waters’ most successful YouTube premiere yet and a strong release for a bunch of friends from TikTok. Waters wasn’t even really paying attention to how the song was doing on social, anyway; he’d made the TikToks, then made the full song, and the full song was what he cared about most.

Then, more than a year later, North Sea TikTok took off. There had been a few “North Sea is scary!” videos before, some even with similar crashing-wave footage, but things really got rolling around the time of that @ukdestinations video in early November. According to TikTok’s data, videos with #northsea have been viewed a total of 2.9 billion times — 2.2 billion of them from the beginning of November to the beginning of January. That’s a 315 percent increase in views during that time. Over on #northseatiktok, TikTok has seen 109.5 million total views, 98.9 million of them in that same time period. North Sea TikTok happened big, and it happened all at once.

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Waters started to notice “Hoist The Colours” going viral in two ways: the stream numbers on YouTube, Spotify, and elsewhere started growing much faster, and he started getting texts from friends who had just mindlessly scrolled onto a creepy video and heard his booming bass underneath it. Right now, the song has just shy of 8 million views on YouTube and nearly 12 million on Spotify. (When you search “Hoist The Colours” on Spotify, the Bass Singers’ version shows up above the original.)

Meanwhile, on TikTok, more than 197,000 videos have been made with the same 60-second clip from “Hoist The Colours.” It’s the North Sea; it’s “the scariest doll in the world”; it’s “NASA has a megalodon”; it’s occasionally videos that have nothing to do with any of this but are just trying to catch the viral wave. The song is No. 5 on TikTok’s Viral 50 list and No. 26 on its overall Top 50 chart. Anecdotally, North Sea TikTok is slowing down a bit at least on my For You feed, but “Hoist The Colours” is still absolutely everywhere. It’s so big that popular creators like Chris Olsen can get mad at the song in their own videos, and people know exactly what they’re talking about. There are now even parodies of the cover, which is how you know you’ve really made it.

Waters says he’s not trying to capitalize on this or find some other corner of TikTok in need of big bass. He’s got other projects, other sea shanties, other things to do. He hasn’t even listened to “Hoist the Colours” much recently. But he seems to love that the song found its perfect home on the internet. “You have these massive boats,” he says, “and you see these giant Krakens and whales and stuff, and if you imagine them speaking, it’s not like,” and here, he throws his voice smaller and up an octave, “‘Hi, I’m a whale!’ You imagine something massive.” Those deep waters and those deep voices make you feel something — Waters just wants everyone to feel it.

Just before Waters and I hung up, I asked him, hypothetically, what might you do if you were going to ruthlessly trend chase and just try to do this over and over? He thought about it for a minute. Then, he had his really big idea. “Maybe a little Merry Bass-mass next year?” Watch your back, Mariah. The Bass Singers of TikTok are coming.

https://www.theverge.com/24041562/tiktok-north-sea-hoist-the-colours