

Ella Speed

The musical score is written in 4/4 time and consists of four staves. The lyrics are: "Now come all ye and take heed Concernin' the death of Ella Speed. Now come all ye and take heed Concernin' the death of Ella Speed." Chord markings are placed above the notes: C for the first two staves, G7 for the third staff, and F, C, G7, C for the fourth staff.

1. Now come all ye and take heed
Concernin' the death of Ella Speed.
(repeat)
2. Now Ella Speed was havin' her lovin' fun.
Let me tell you what ol' Bill Martin done.
(repeat)
3. Bill Martin he was tall and slender.
Better known by bein' a bartender.
(repeat)
4. Now the deed ol' Bill Martin done,
He shot Ella with a Colt forty-one.
(repeat)
6. When them women heard Ella Speed was dead,
Well, they went on home and they re-ragged in red.
(repeat)
7. Now come all ye and take heed
Concernin' the death of Ella Speed.
(repeat)

Lead Belly's lyrics:

1. Bill Martin he was long an' slender,
Better known by bein' a bartender.
Bill Martin he was long an' slender,
Better known by bein' a bartender.
2. Bill Martin he was a man whut had a very small hand
He worked ev'y night at de coffee stand.
Bill Martin he was a man whut had a very small hand
He worked ev'y night at de coffee stand.
3. He walked out for to borrow a gun'
Something Bill Martin had never done.
Ella Speed was downtown havin' her lovin' fun,
Long came Bill Martin wid his Colt 41.
4. De fust ball it entered in po' Ella's side,
De nex' ball entered in her breas',
De third ball it entered in her head;
Dat's de ball dat put po' Ella to bed.
5. All de young gals eome a-runnin'an'cryin',
All de young gals come a-runnin'an'a-cryin',
"It ain' but de one thing worry de po' gal's min'-
She lef' her two lil boys behin'."
6. De deed dat Bill Martin done'
Jedge sentence: "You gonna be hung."
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Jedge sentence: "You gonna be hung."
7. They taken Bill Martin to de freight depot,
An' de train come rollin' by,
He wave his han' at de woman dat he love
An' he hung down his head an' he cry.
8. All you young girls better take heed'
Don' you do like po' Ella Speed;
Some day you will go for to have a lil fun
An'a man will do you like Bill Martin done.

"Ella Speed", also known as "Bill Martin and Ella Speed", "Poor Little Ella" and "Alice B." is a blues ballad recounting a true story.

Ella Speed, a prostitute referred to as an "octoroon" by her "landlady" had a relationship with Louis "Bull" Martin who was white. Ella was the 28-year-old wife of Willie Speed and a mother of two children, one a boy of four. Louis, a 28-year-old bachelor, was a short, stocky tough who worked as a bartender at New Orleans' Dryades Street Market. On the morning of September 3rd, 1894 at about 9:30 a.m., Louis shot Ella once with a Harrington and Richardson 38 caliber pistol in Ella's upstairs room in the house kept by Miss Pauline Jones at 137 Customhouse Street, in the French Quarter of New Orleans. At trial, he testified that the shooting had been an accident. Louis was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to 20 years of hard labor in the state penitentiary but by 1901 he was back at his old bartender's job.

Somehow, in the song "Bull" Martin became Bill Martin and his short, stocky physique gets described as "tall and slender". The murder weapon is changed from the less well known Harrington and Richardson 38 to the more well known Colt 41.

The first printing of "Ella Speed" was under the title "Bill Martin & Ella Speed" in John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax's **American Ballads And Folk Songs** (1934). Versions had appeared before, notably "Poor Little Ella," in Dorothy Scarborough's **The 'Blues' As Folk Song** (1923) and as "Alice B." in Carl Sandburg's **American Songbag** (1927).

In 1933 John and Alan Lomax collected a version from Lead Belly at the Angola Penitentiary in Louisiana. Lead Belly later recorded the song in 1944. It was also recorded by Lightnin' Hopkins (1959) and later by Ian & Silvia on **Four Strong Winds** (1963).