

Appalachian Traditional Music

A Short History

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The Magazine of Traditional Music Around the
World.

June 26, 2000

MOST Europeans consider the Appalachians to be mountains of the southeastern region of the United States, but in truth they encompass eighteen states, reaching from Maine to Georgia, and include, among others, the Berkshires of Connecticut, the Green Mountains of New Hampshire, the Catskills of New York, the Blue Ridge of Virginia, and the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. Southern Appalachia includes three hundred counties covering most of West Virginia and parts of Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Maryland, North and South Carolina, and Virginia, an area called today the Southern Highlands or Upland South, or, in Colonial times, the 'Back Country'. Although a large physiographic area, a body of behaviors and cultural identities based upon speech and dialect, building practices, folk music and dance, crafts, superstitions and religion, and concepts like feuding and moonshining link all 1500 miles of these mountains.

Today when ethnomusicologists discuss 'Appalachian music' they generally divide the term into two periods: the traditional music - including ballads and dance tunes, mostly brought over with anglo-celtic immigrants, and in evidence from the early eighteenth century through 1900 - and the 'old-time' music popular from around 1900 through 1930, a blend of that tradition with parlour and vaudeville music, African-American styles, and Minstrel Show tunes.

TO properly understand how traditional Appalachian music grew and dispersed it helps to have some understanding of how the Appalachians were formed. These mountains were shaped over 500 million years in three separate building periods called orogenies. During the first period, the Taconic, and the second, the Acadian, North America, Greenland, Ireland, and Scotland were all

one land mass called Laurentia. At this time the Caledonia Mountains rose up and wore down before the Atlantic Ocean started to split the continent. This is why the mountains of the Scottish Highlands and the Appalachians seem so similar; they were the same range!

During the third period, the Alleghenian, the Laurentian and West African continents smashed together, causing the Appalachians to curve like a half moon, mirroring the bulge in Africa. Two hundred million years of erosion turned the Appalachians from high, Alp-like peaks into rounded hills, but ridges of hard quartz sandstone survived, forming long valleys of softer shale. This produced a long range of accordion-like steep ridges, full of foliage entanglements like mountain laurel, and therefore difficult to transverse, alongside valleys and 'hollers' full of generally agriculturally useless soil. The Appalachians therefore tended to attract poorer people looking for cheaper or unwanted land.

There were other reasons that postponed settlement of this region than pure geography:

1. It was populated by native Americans justifiably hostile to white settlement.
2. There was heavy rivalry between the English and French over the fur trade there.
3. Political intrigues before unification of the states made land rights uncertain.
4. Any good farm land that did exist was annexed by land companies.

During the seventeenth century the largest and most influential group of American immigrants sharing an ethnic heritage were those from England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. They generally settled the Eastern Seaboard while the French worked their way up the Mississippi River. In the early 1700s immigration pushed westward but, barred by the continuous ridges of the Appalachians, people settled more on the Piedmont between the coast and the mountains.

The ridges were four thousand feet high and only crossable where rivers had cut transverse valleys. There were usually multiple ridges, and where an opening would cut through one, it was closed in others. Therefore, most settlement started north in Pennsylvania and drifted south down the long valleys, rather than west over the mountains.

In 1750 an opening called the Cumberland Gap was discovered, leading to the fertile bluegrass country of Kentucky, but the mountains in that area were still not successfully settled until 1835, when President Jackson relocated the local native population to Oklahoma under a spurious 'treaty'.

IN the 1763 Treaty of Paris the French gave up their American land rights to the English, causing the start of a larger expansion through and into the Appalachians from 1775 through 1850. The population explosion in Ireland (from four million in 1780 to seven million in 1821), coupled with a lifting of travel restrictions from that country, increased immigration to the US. Most of the Scots-Irish coming to Pennsylvania came as indentured servants. When their terms of service were over they found local land too expensive and so went south into the mountains. It is generally perceived that this 'lower' class of immigrant resulted in the 'poor white trash' or 'hillbillies' of *Deliverance* fame, although the truth is that to survive in the Southern Mountains you needed to be resourceful, healthy, and knowledgeable.

By 1790 any good land was taken or too expensive for most. Still, communities were settled rather late; at the time of the Civil War (1860s) most settlements did not average more than three generations back. All this tended to produce communities that were isolated geographically and unstable, at least compared with the higher degree of order, law, and precedent found on the Eastern Seaboard. Frontier life was rigorous and a struggle; people needed to rely upon each other, and anything social, including religion, was highly important, producing a generally deeply religious population. Musical traditions from home were important links to the past and were cherished and passed down to the next generation.

TRADITIONAL Appalachian music is mostly based upon anglo-celtic folk ballads and instrumental dance tunes. The former were almost always sung unaccompanied, and usually by women, fulfilling roles as keepers of the families' cultural heritages and rising above dreary monotonous work through fantasies of escape and revenge. These ballads were from the British tradition of the single personal narrative, but the list was selective; most of the one hundred or so variations of the three hundred classic ballads found in American tradition are to do with sexual struggles from the female standpoint, as *Barbary Allen*, *Lord Thomas and Fair Ellender*, and *Pretty Polly*. One is less likely to find Scottish ballads of rape and dominance, or those with men as heroes. A large percentage, perhaps almost half, of the American variations tend to be about pregnant women murdered by their boyfriends.

The ornamentation and vocal improvisation found in many Celtic ballads seems to have led to that particular tonal, nasal quality preferred by many traditional Appalachian singers. But, even as content was changed to reflect American locations, contexts, and occupations, many nineteenth century versions of the Child Ballads still refer to Lords and Ladies, castles, and ghosts, and retain as their central theme love affairs and interpersonal relations. The churches of America were also very influential and usually more puritan in nature. Many fairly explicit lyrics were softened and cleaned up. British paganism was

frowned upon, and this censorship resulted in ballads where repentance and doom supplanted sinful behavior.

Broadside ballads, printed on cheap paper and sold on the street, were also popular up to the end of the nineteenth century. Penned by professional composers, they often became part of the folk tradition. Unlike the British theme of love affairs, the American broadsides tended to showcase male-dominated occupational experiences, such as logging, ranching, and mining, as well as sensational topics like disasters, murders, and tragedies.

Two other ballad types arose from the particular American experience, one from the African tradition, reflecting an actual event or action with real historical characters, and where the flow of text was highlighted by an emotional mood of grief or celebration, rather than a plot line. The second ballad type was from the popular music source of the parlour or sentimental ballad, mostly from the Victorian or Edwardian eras, presented in the Minstrel Show or Music Hall, and eventually passing into a folk tradition through sheer repetition.

ONE of the greatest influences on Appalachian music, as well as many popular American music styles, was that of the African-American. The slaves brought a distinct tradition of group singing of community songs of work and worship, usually lined out by one person with a call and response action from a group. A joyous celebration of life and free sexuality was coupled with improvisation as lyrics were constantly updated and changed to keep up the groups' interest. The percussion of the African music began to change the rhythms of Appalachian singing and dancing. The introduction of the banjo to the Southern Mountains after the Civil War in the 1860s further hastened this process. Originally from Arabia, and brought to western Africa by the spread of Islam, the banjo then ended up in America. Mostly denigrated as a 'slave instrument' until the popularity of the Minstrel Show, starting in the 1840s, the banjo syncopation or 'bom-diddle-diddy' produced a different clog-dance and song rhythm by the turn of the century.

Many of the African-American spirituals were discovered by mainstream America, particularly with the collection *Slave Songs from the Southern United States* published in 1867 and popularized by a small choir of black students from Fisk University in Nashville. With emancipation, black music began to move outside the South. By the 1920s a whole body of parlour songs known as 'race music' became popular. Many Appalachian songs sung today that allude to 'children' in the fields or 'mother' have been changed from 'pickaninnies' or 'Mammys'.

Religious music, including white Country gospel, was probably the most prevalent music heard in Appalachia. During the Colonial period the press was controlled by a clergy which had no interest in the spread of secular music,

therefore, not much of the latter survived in written form. There were three types of religious music: ballads, hymns, and revival spiritual songs. The latter directly arose out of the call and response of the African song tradition. These were popularized among the white inhabitants after the revival circuit started in Kentucky in 1800. Their simpler, repetitious text of verse and refrain was easier to sing and learn and produced an emotional fervor in the congregation. Shape-note and revivalist gospel still flourished in the southern mountains after being eliminated in northern churches by the new 'scientific' music led by Lowell Mason and Thomas Hastings.

There were other ethnic pockets in the southern mountains - mostly Czech, German, and Polish - but their music, as well as other cultural aspects, was generally assimilated in an effort to become more 'Americanized'. Still, many songs and tunes - for example, *Fischer's Hornpipe* - were of German ancestry and became anglicized over time.

The instrumental tradition of the Appalachians started as anglo-celtic dance tunes and eventually was reshaped by local needs, African rhythms, and changes in instrumentation. The fiddle was at first the main instrument, often alone, as a piano would have been too expensive to purchase. Originally the tonal and stylistic qualities of the fiddle mirrored those of the ballad. The 'reel' is generally thought to have developed in the Scottish highlands in the mid-eighteenth century. In the 1740s, Neil Gow, a Scottish fiddler, is credited with developing the powerful and rhythmic short bow sawstroke technique that eventually became the foundation of Appalachian mountain fiddling. More modern repertoires took shape in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with the waltz showing up at the beginning of the 1800s. Square dances slowly developed out of mostly a middle or upper class dance tradition, based upon the cotillion; black cakewalks were a burlesque of formal white dancing; and the *Virginia Reel* was a variation of an upper class dance called *Sir Roger de Coverly*.

Irish immigration also added its own flavor. The sound of the pipes and their drones added a double-stop approach where two strings are usually played together. Popular music - such as ragtime - at the turn of the century started the rocking of the bow, another distinctive Appalachian feature. Players began to use tunings different from the standard classical - sometimes one for each tune - to heighten the 'high lonesome' sound. Many tunes acquired words, so the caller could take over and give the fiddler a break by singing the calls. Dances changed: American squares and promenades featured a change of partners more often than their British counterparts, as it was often a couple's only chance to meet in such isolated communities. It also kept down the fights although, by the 1930s, liquor and fighting had ended most southern mountain dances.

TUNES changed a lot, first with the introduction of the banjo after 1860, and then with the popularity of the guitar, starting in 1910. Early tunes tended

to be more rhythmic as the fiddler was often playing alone. With the luxury of percussive rhythm from other instruments, tunes became more elaborate and melodic. Having a chordal structure also evened out irregularities as the guitar produced the even backup of a measured beat. The guitar also greatly redefined singing traditions in the same way. It evened out rhythms and gave singers a 'floorboard' to mount their songs. Bands that used exclusively to play tunes gradually added songs, mostly from popular and commercial sources.

All through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries this music was truly 'folk'. Singing was used for personal and group enjoyment and continuation of historical narrative. Instrumentation was used for dances and contests; food and drink and enjoyment were considered enough recompense. Contact was limited regionally as travel was difficult. But late nineteenth century industrialization produced mobility, and the advent of recorded sound in the 1920s brought popular music to the mountains. Mail order and mass production made instruments more accessible. Radio stations started barn dances with live performances of local talent, and styles began to cross over.

Music now known as 'old-time' became prominent in the Appalachians. Henry Ford began to sponsor national contests for old-time music through his auto dealerships; a new interest in fiddling arose, especially as a decline in local dances started, probably owing to the radio's popularity. The 1920s was a decade of string band popularity. A string band was usually one or more fiddlers, a banjo, bass, and guitar, with possibly a piano. In 1922 the first recording of a rural performer, Eck Robertson, was made. Many followed. To the absolute amazement of the urban record companies, recordings made by groups from the mountains sold in huge numbers and an 'industry' was born. Bands were able to quit their day-jobs and make a living from music, although their audiences preferred versions of popular songs played in an old-time manner over the old traditional songs heard at the kitchen table. The length of recording time also shortened songs to a few verses. In the earliest days of commercial recording each band had its own regional sound; later there was a great deal of experimentation with crossovers. Charlie Poole's popularity was based upon parlour pieces, race songs, and vaudeville material, with the guitar and finger-picked banjo following each other in carefully orchestrated progressions. Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers were more spontaneous, with multiple fiddlers, and more of the 'rough and ready' sound heard in earlier string bands. Singing was usually a single male voice; duet harmonies became more prevalent during the 1930s. Ma Maybelle of the Carter Family introduced a guitar style where lead melodies were picked out by the thumb.

The term 'old-time music' began to show up in the early twentieth century. In 1908 a newspaper, the *Iredell North Carolina Landmark* used the term to describe fiddling and dancing at Union Grove. Okeh and Vocalion Record catalogs listed Old-Time Tunes as a category, and the Sears Catalog of 1928 used Old-Time in its advertising.

The Great Depression of the 1930s put an end to the commercial viability of old-time music. The 1930s and '40s brought in an individual star system with people like Hank Williams, and the advent of Brother Groups like the Delmores, Stanleys, and the Louvins, and the introduction of swing, horns, electricity, and bluegrass. The old traditional music of the mountains gave way to the beginnings of modern commercial country-western music.

BUT the traditional old-time Appalachian music never really died off; it just reverted back to being a participatory 'folk' music. Fiddlers' Conventions, house parties, and back-porch jams kept the music alive. Few old-time musicians can, or want to make a living playing a style now considered archaic by the general public. Many old songs, originally written for commercial reasons, are now considered traditional, their composers gradually forgotten. A visit to the Southern Appalachians, particularly Virginia, West Virginia, and North Carolina, will still find singers and musicians holding forth on banjo and fiddle, still playing *Soldier's Joy* and *Arkansas Traveler* with love and gusto.