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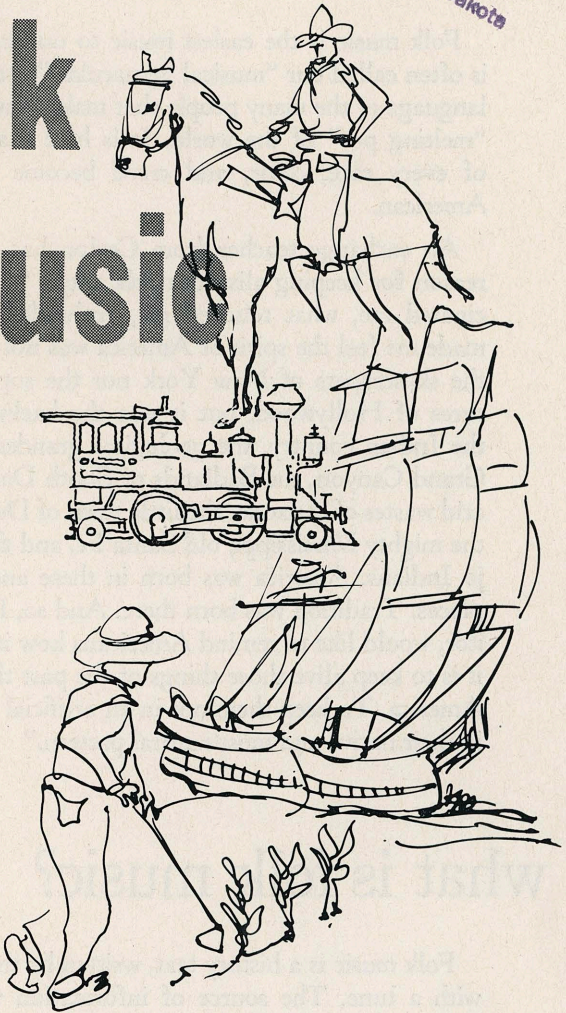


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our folk music



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Our Folk Music

By Shirley Adams, Extension Music Specialist

Folk music is the easiest music to understand. It is often called our "musical vernacular," for it is the language of the many people that make America the "melting pot" of the world. It is here that people of every race, color, and creed become one—an American.

An exchange teacher from Ceylon has given us reason for keeping alive our folk ways. "What fascinated me, what touched me, enthralled me and made me feel the spirit of America was not so much the skyscrapers of New York nor the super structures of Hollywood, but it was the backwoods of the Indian country, the geological grandeur of the Grand Canyon, the Badlands of South Dakota, the arid wastes of Arizona, the little town of Deadwood, the mighty Mississippi, old Santa Fe, and the Navajo Indians. America was born in these and similar places. Tradition was born there. And so, I as a visitor, would like to remind Americans how important it is to keep alive those things of the past that made America. To keep them not in an artificial way, but in their native and most natural pattern."

what is folk music?

Folk music is a history text, written by the people, with a tune. The source of information was their daily living.

Our forefathers left their native lands in search of a better place to live. The new world was a challenge: the customs, songs, and dances of the old world were company. Folkways and music of many

lands and tongues came to America. The various threads of culture were woven into our cultural pattern, yet they did not lose their own identity. A west coast city has approximately twenty-five national groups that still celebrate their native holidays in song, dance, and religious custom. Much of our folk music has a foreign background. It is what we have done and do with this folk music that is of interest to us. To this heritage we have added distinctive patterns of our own in such colorful regions as the South, mountain areas, New England, Midwest, and Far West.

Folk music can be defined as a musical expression of people's emotions and needs. From the stress of sorrow, the strain of work and failure, the joy of living, the reverence of devotion, the love of life and play came folk music.

history of folk music

How often during the day do you whistle or break into song? Subconsciously, you are expressing an emotion or relieving tension. In this same manner folk music was born. People sang as they worked and played, but it was necessary to compose their own words and tune, or to sing a song someone had taught them.

News travelled by word of mouth in the days prior to modern communications. In England, the wandering minstrels gathered information and news to carry from village to village. The minstrels arrival in the village was an exciting affair. He carried news from the royal family, word from relatives, and stories of love, heroism, and tragedy. Minstrels often sang these stories to the accompaniment of a simple folk instrument as the lute or lyre, composing the music as he performed. In this same manner of word of mouth communication, folk music spread from family to family, village to village, and generation

to generation. Later these songs crossed the ocean to America, and within America. This is the reason there are several recorded versions of the same song.

characteristics of folk music

The words of a folk song are expressive. The author and origin are seldom known. Folk songs were intended to be sung without accompaniment, or with the aid of a simple instrument. Most of our folk singers use guitars, or stringed instruments as the ukelele, mandolin, or banjo.

When you sing a folk song, you are free to interpret them as you please. The words and rhythm can be made to fit as comfortably as your bedroom slippers.

types of folk songs

We often have the mistaken idea that all folk music is "hill-billy." There are as many types of folk music as there are needs and emotions to express. It is as difficult to place each folk song in a specific category as it would be to trace the origin.

Love and courting songs, "Black Is the Color of My True Love's Hair," "Careless Love," and "On Top of Old Smokey" often began as a true account of a boy-girl relationship. Patriotism or love of country (Yankee Doodle) can be placed in this group.

Folk hymns and faith songs expressed religious devotion, as they still do. "We Gather Together," originated from the Netherlands, and is still one of our best loved Thanksgiving hymns. "Wayfaring Stranger" and "I Wonder as I Wander" are exam-

ples of folk hymns. The Negroes have also contributed many well-loved spirituals to our folk music.

work songs

Man discovered long ago that rhythm and unity of action made work easier. Music helped the farmer till the soil, the sailor haul the ropes, the railroader drive the rails, and the cowboy herd his cattle. The words and music to these particular folk songs grew out of the work itself. We can sense the mood and type of work by the rhythm. The principle of music while you work still exists. Some factories use music as a basis to help speed up production with less nervous strain. Supermarkets, stores, and restaurants use music to make your shopping or dining more pleasant.

The settlers had to provide their own entertainment, for there were no movies, television, radio, or social organizations for them. Folk and square dances provided many enjoyable hours. "Skip to Mah Lou," and "Cindy" are samples of the folk dance music we still use. Sea chanteys and sea songs ("Shenadoah" and "Blow the Man Down") were born as the sailors hauled the ropes, heaved the anchor, and passed many lonely days at sea.

The men who drove the rails, opening up new frontiers and expanding our country, had their work songs, the most popular being "I've Been Workin' On De Railroad."

As the cowboys roamed the prairies, rounded up the cattle, and drove them to meet the railroad, a song literature of the trail was born. "Home On The Range," "Old Chisholm Trail" and "Night Herding Song" are still among our favorite collections.

There has been a recent interest in recording and preserving our folk music with the hope that it will not be lost. We have become a nation of spectators, rather than participators. In this fact lies the danger of losing our folk music heritage.

future folk music

What of the folk music of tomorrow? In this day of automation, extensive travel, rush and confusion, what will be the folk music of tomorrow? What heritage will we leave our children's children?

The song of tomorrow will not be the song of the wide open spaces—it will be the song of the city. The scream of jets, the factory whistle, the wail of sirens, the sing song of the newsboy, the noise of traffic, the chime of the church . . . this will be the song of tomorrow.

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