Appalachian Folk Music

Background and History

The Appalachian Mountains extend 1,500 miles from Maine to Georgia. They pass through 18 states and encompass the Green Mountains of New Hampshire and Vermont, the Berkshires of Connecticut, New York's Catskills, the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, and the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. The region known as the Southern Highlands, or Upland South, covers most of West Virginia and parts of Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Maryland, the Carolinas, and Virginia. In colonial times, this area was known as the "Back Country." Appalachian people share a common cultural heritage that is expressed through their speech and dialect, their building methods and crafts, their religions and superstitions, and, most of all, their music.

Appalachian folk music developed its characteristic sounds over several centuries of immigration, movement, and settlement. During the seventeenth century, the earliest settlers in the area were Anglo-Celtic: English, Scottish, Irish, and Welsh. They settled the eastern seaboard, and as they pushed westward, their way was barred by the continuous ridges of the Appalachians. The good farmland of the Piedmont, between the mountains and the ocean, was quickly claimed by powerful landowners, so the settlers were forced to make their living from the thinner soil of the mountains.

It wasn't until 1750 that the Cumberland Gap was discovered, which led to the fertile bluegrass country of Kentucky. These mountain regions of Kentucky, however, were not settled until 1835, when President Andrew Jackson made a cruel treaty with the Native American population and the area was opened up for farming. Many of these mountain farming communities were very isolated, and they remained remote from the world and from each other. They retained their old ways and developed gradually in their own time, uninfluenced by change in other areas.

In 1763, the French gave up their American land rights to the British, and this led to greater expansion into and throughout the Appalachians. After the Revolutionary War of 1775-1783, travel restrictions were lifted for the Irish. Thousands of Irish people arrived in Pennsylvania as indentured servants, and when their terms of service were completed, they sought their living on the land. Finding good farming land prohibitively expensive, many of them moved south into the mountains. This wave of immigration was intensified during the Irish Potato Famine of the late 1840s, when many rural Irish left their homeland for America. Most settled in cities like New York, Boston, and Chicago, but others moved into the Appalachians to work the land.

Mountain life was hard. People relied heavily upon each other, and communities were close-knit and religious. They came together to worship, and to dance and sing. Musical traditions from the homeland were important links to the past and were cherished and passed down through the generations.

History Through Folk Music

The Anglo Celtic origins of Appalachian music are apparent in the songs and dance tunes of the region. Ballads like "Barbara Allen," "Fair Ellender," and "Lord Thomas" were usually sung, without instrumental accompaniment, by women, both socially and in the home. Folk traditions were often kept alive within families by children hearing songs from their mothers and, in time, singing those same songs to their own children. Over the generations, the old songs changed to reflect American locations and occupations, eventually becoming true American folk songs.
There are hundreds of different versions of "Barbara Allen." Before the song came to America, the "hard-hearted" maid lived in Scarlet town, London town, or Dublin town, as well as Newbury, Reading, and Carlisle. Within a few generations, she could be found in towns in Virginia, North Carolina, and all over the Southern Highlands. The same is true of "Pretty Polly," the ballad of a girl murdered by her faithless boyfriend. In the English broadside ballad called "The Gosport Tragedy," the girl comes back as a ghost and wreaks a terrible revenge. In most Appalachian versions, though, she remains silent in her grave with only the wild wind for comfort.

The influence of religion on the music of the Appalachians is enormous. Many ballads were censored for superstitious and explicit content: repentance, doom, and a place in heaven replaced revenge, superstition, and the supernatural. Hymns were the only form of music that was actually written down, and the old ballads were often adapted for religious purposes. Folk singers in turn drew on the rich musical heritage of the church. The vocal ornamentation used in such ballads is typically Irish, but the high nasal twang favored by Appalachian singers is a specifically American development. The distinctive arpeggio flourishes that can be heard in modern-day country music owe much to African American gospel singing.

**Instrumentation**

The instrumentation of Appalachian folk music also reflects its origins. The lead instrument in mountain dance music, as in the reels and country dances of Ireland and Scotland, is the fiddle. The pipes, particularly the smaller, more adaptable Irish pipes, also made the journey west, along with a small, slender, three-stringed instrument which is plucked like a guitar, and eventually came to be known as the Appalachian dulcimer. The development of the instrument was most likely influenced by the German scheitholt, the Norwegian langeleik, the Swedish hummel, and the French épinette des Vosges. These instruments, like the music that was played on them, gradually adapted to their new environment. The dulcimer—also known as the "hog fiddle" or "music box"—was a louder, more robust instrument than its European ancestor. The tuning of the fiddle was also often changed to create the "high lonesome sound" that is associated with Appalachian fiddle music.

**Cultural Influences**

As German, Polish, and Czech immigrants arrived in the mountains in the nineteenth century, the waltz entered the mountain dance repertory, and the concertina and mandolin joined the other instruments. "Fischer's Hornpipe" joined the growing repertory of Appalachian dance tunes. Square dances slowly developed out of a mingling of Celtic reels and the cotillion, which was French-English in origin. The "Virginia Reel" is a variation of an English formal dance called "Sir Roger de Coverly." In mountain squares and promenades, there is more changing of partners than in their British counterparts. This may be because, in such isolated communities, dancing was the only chance that couples had to meet, other than at church.

African American music and vocal styles also influenced the development of Appalachian music. The "call-and-response" form of African American group singing made its mark on Appalachian singing styles, both religious and secular. Revivalist church meetings, for example, which began in Kentucky in the early 1800s, used verse-and-refrain to produce emotional fervor in their congregations. "Minstrel
"Shows" became popular from the 1840s onward and led to the popularization of the banjo. After the Civil War in the 1860s, the banjo became an essential part of the instrumental sound of the Southern Highlands. The influence of ragtime music at the turn of the twentieth century led fiddlers to start "rocking the bow"-a technique in which the bow's contact with the string is curved, or rocking, rather than long and consistent-which quickly became another distinctive feature of the music. The guitar entered the instrumental lineup in the early twentieth century. An infinitely adaptable and easily portable instrument, the guitar quickly took up a central role in Appalachian music, and also played a crucial part in the development of twentieth-century country music styles.

1800s to Today

In the late nineteenth century, industrialization led to greater social mobility, and the mountain communities of the Appalachians became less isolated. The advent of radio and the phonograph brought popular music to the region, and styles began to cross-fertilize. String bands became nationally popular, and barn dances moved out of the barn and into the studios of radio shows like Grand Ole Opry. The string band music, often called "old time," developed into Bluegrass music, and stars like Bill Munroe of Kentucky achieved international fame. Nowadays, country music, that uniquely American melding of traditional and popular, rural and urban forms, is an international industry.

Authentic Appalachian folk music has survived the rush of "civilization." As the twentieth century hurtled on, people recognized Appalachian folk music as a national treasure and worked to preserve its characteristic sound. Musicologists like Cecil Sharp (1859-1924), John Lomax (1867-1948), and his son Alan (1915-2002), recorded the music where it was made, both on record and in songbooks, and wrote about its history and heritage. Over four generations, beginning with Alvin Pleasant Carter (1891-1960), his wife Sara (1898-1979), and his sister-in-law Maybelle (1909-1978), the Carter Family have been a living embodiment of the continuing power of Appalachian music. Singers like Aunt Molly Jackson (1880-1960), Florence Reece (1900-1978), Sara Ogan Gunning (1910-1983), Jean Ritchie (b. 1922), and Hazel Dickens (b. 1935), preserved and developed the Appalachian ballad tradition through the twentieth century. Instrumentalists like banjoists Clarence Ashley (1895-1967), Moran Lee "Dock" Boggs (1898-1971), and Roscoe Holcomb (1911-1981), guitarists George Shuffler (b. 1925) and Arthel "Doc" Watson (b. 1923), banjoist and autoharpist Laura Boosinger (b. 1957), and fiddlers like Tommy Jarrell (1890-1985), John Hartford (1937-2001), Ralph Blizard (b. 1918), Brad Leftwich (b. 1953), and "Fiddlin'" Jake Krack (b. 1985), are proof of the living continuity of the Appalachian musical heritage.