

# Folklore and Folk Songs—Some Suggestions for Teachers

by Jeff Warner, *American Traditions*



*Musician and scholar Jeff Warner has been performing since he was 8 years old. He learned songs from his father and scholarship from his mother, the renowned music historians Frank and Anne Warner. Add to that the serendipity of growing up in NYC's Greenwich Village during the post-WWII folk revival movement and you have a passionate singer and musician who has been sharing his knowledge with audiences and in schools for the past 40 plus years.*

*He points out he is not a traditional singer (someone who has acquired the traditions through ethnicity or community ties) but a singer of traditional songs. He takes a historical approach to the music and has become known as a “folklorist/historian and community scholar.” In describing his work, he says he teaches American history and culture through traditional song, borrowing a phrase from historian David McCullough, who said, “my mission is to make history as interesting as it really was.” Below is an excerpt from Jeff’s “In-School Program: A Teachers Guide,” which he has kindly allowed us to share with our readers.*

**The following suggestions for teachers do not require prior knowledge of folk music or folklore.**

The best way to use folk music in the classroom is to sing: to teach the songs and use them to illustrate the curriculum, whether it be history, social studies, English (the ballads as early literature, oral literature as a concept), music (there is exciting and unusual ear training material here for both vocal and instrumental students) or art (knights, ships, period dress, trains—images abound in traditional song). While singing in the classroom can be intimidating for non-musicians, we encourage that it be tried. My teacher friends tell me that it is worth the initial pain.

Folksongs provide first-rate material for reading and teaching reading. While they often do provide new vocabulary words for students (and teachers), folksongs usually use only the simplest words, yet manage to describe events and tell stories that are fascinating to young people. This is especially true when the songs are first sung by the students.

My primary concern is to bring Anglo and African-American folksong into the classroom. However, students may gain a better understanding of traditional song if it is introduced as one of the many forms of folklore, which also include stories, expressions, games, rhymes, customs and other traditions.

An additional benefit of a class gathering its own customs and lore is that the students study themselves as a distinct culture or group in the same way they might study ancient Egypt or modern Australia. They begin then to understand that they themselves are as valuable—with the same wealth of ideas, history and integrity of culture—as are people long ago or far away.

Studying themselves, as individuals and as a group, will give students a new appreciation of each other through their cultural differences and similarities, and can make students increasingly proud of their own backgrounds.

## **1. Folksongs Are Old Enough That the Author Is Forgotten (or, at least, unimportant)**

- Make up a list of tales, songs, games or rhymes (or jokes?) that are commonly known to the class or a section of the class. Have them try to trace where each was learned. Determine how long the students have known them.
- Ghost stories or scary stories exist wherever there are children. Have students tell their stories and see if there are any common themes or motifs. Did the students make them up? Do they think the stories are old or new?
- It might be interesting to chart the rise and fall of any one or two currently popular songs. Most commercial songs have a surprisingly short life span. Popular music is highly ephemeral when

Photo by Ralph Morang

compared to traditional song. Not only because pop songs suffer from media overkill, but because they don't seem to provide the same depth of pleasure to kids over a long period of time as do songs learned from family and peers.

## 2. Songs and Stories Change Through Oral Transmission

- Compare jokes, songs or stories as they are related by several members of the class. Note how a single story can vary from teller to teller, yet remain basically the same. How did this variation occur?
- Have the class try the game of “telephone,” “operator” or “Chinese whispers.” Use small groups of five to seven people, make the story short (usually one sentence) and include in the sentence some unusual adjective or twist of events. Each person then whispers the story into the ear of the next. By the time it reaches the final person, the “story” might have significantly altered. This is an amusing and effective way to demonstrate how stories change as they are passed orally from person to person.

## 3. Folk Music Often Comes From Working People

- What are some of the differences in the ways that well-off people have lived in comparison to working people? It is particularly helpful to visit an historical museum where a clear demonstration of the differences in the two life styles is evident.
- Make two columns. In one, list observations about a cowboy's life as depicted on television or in films. In the other column, list the realities of his life.
- What are some of the reasons that a farmer's son in the mountains of Kentucky could be singing the same songs his grandfather sang, while a lawyer's daughter in Philadelphia was unaware that her grandmother, who once lived on a farm in—anywhere—ever sang old songs?

## 4. Folksongs Come From Groups That Are Isolated and/or Culturally Separate From Each Other

- Have the class think of groups to which they belong, such as teams, clubs, Scouts, school grades, classes.... What kinds of traditions or customs or songs are peculiar to each of these groups? Which traditions and stories have been

created by their present group? Which have been learned from previous generations of club members or from school mates?

- Ask students to consider their own families as one such distinct group and to look at their own family folklore:
  1. What kinds of traditions (holiday and non-holiday) do their families enjoy?
  2. Where do these traditions come from? Are they religious or ethnic in origin? Are any of the traditions unique to their families? If so, how did they get started?
  3. What songs are sung within the family? When were they sung: at holidays, on birthdays, at bedtime, on long car trips or on camping trips? Has anyone in the family made up songs that everyone in the family now sings?
  4. When did their families come to this country? Do they know anything about where their ancestors came from and why they emigrated?
  5. Have students talk to their parents and grandparents about their own childhood experiences. How would students in the class compare their lives to those of their parents when their parents were children? What games and songs were popular with these previous generations? Are any of these still popular with the students? Discuss the reasons why some traditions survive and other fade with time.
  6. If there are any family members who sing traditional songs, who are good storytellers or who practice traditional crafts or ways of food preparation, teachers should consider inviting them to class. Or, have students bring family artifacts to class for discussion: photo albums (old or new), sketches or paintings done by family members, old fashioned tools or clothes, recipes, or journals. There is no better way to illustrate folklore/oral history than to draw on community and family resources, thus demonstrating to students how traditions begin and live in their own lives. Family involvement in the classroom has the additional benefit of bridging the gap between school and home as separate spheres of learning.

**Web extra!** Jeff's full “In-School Program: A Teachers Guide,” is a web extra with the online version of this article, <http://www.cdss.org/programs/cdss-news-publications/cdss-news>.