

JEFF WARNER ❖ AMERICAN TRADITIONS

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IN-SCHOOL PROGRAM A TEACHERS' GUIDE

Objectives of Program:

- To have fun singing together
- To familiarize children with a variety of traditional folk instruments, including: banjo, guitar, concertina, bones, spoons and Jew's harp.
- To introduce little known folk songs and tunes, with particular attention given to the rural styles in which this music was played.
- To teach American history and culture through the songs and stories of rural people.

Assemblies:

An assembly for a primary school might include some of the following:

- New England dance tunes on concertina as children enter.
- A fast-paced song from the repertoire of one of the many string bands that played and recorded in the American south during the early 20th century.
- A description and history of the Jew's harp, one of the world's oldest instruments; a song with a Jew's harp accompaniment.
- A folk tale from the Southern Appalachians or the South Carolina Sea Islands.
- A work song used aboard the sailing ships of the 19th century. The audience sings the chorus, while a "crew" of students actually hauls on a line to simulate the raising of a sail.
- A demonstration and explanation of how spoons are played.
- A game song learned at camp, Scout meetings or in a schoolyard.
- The singing of a ballad, representing an ancient form of unwritten literature, followed by a 20th century version of the same song.
- A demonstration of clogging, a traditional step dance.
- Playing of a hand-made wooden banjo, crafted in the North Carolina mountains.
- Demonstration of a hand-made wooden dancing toy from the early 19th century.
- A Southern mountain banjo tune as children leave the assembly.

Workshops:

In primary schools, workshops are geared to grade levels. In all cases, workshops invite questions and dialogue. Follow-up work will be done each time on material presented in the assembly. Categories below are flexible according to circumstances and requests of the school.

- Singing games, animal songs, songs that teach rhythms or that invite participation and involvement.
- Biographical songs of heroes and, more importantly, songs of ordinary working people: lumbermen, milkmaids and cowboys.
- Songs of colonial days, the Westward movement or the Civil War.
- Songs of social issues and hard times, immigrant songs.

Teaching History Through Folk Song:

The story of life in America has best been told through the honest expressions of its working people. A feeling for that life is best gained by listening to their songs and stories, which are both art and oral history. Folksongs can tell us why people emigrated to America—or why they moved west in covered wagons—and what few vital possessions they took with them. They describe designs of sailing ships and tell of the men who worked them. They reveal the hazards of coal mining—and they remind us of the times when rattlesnakes were an ever-present danger, and when there was often too little to eat. As such, folksongs give us a first hand view—the good and the bad—of what it was like to be an early American.

A Need For An Awareness Of The Past:

In the last hundred years, Americans have seen a remarkable acceleration in the rate of social change. Previously, whole generations could come and go and live essentially as had prior generations. Those who lived through the American Revolution had a great deal in common with those who survived the Civil War. Even forty years after Abraham Lincoln, things had not changed dramatically for the vast majority of people: the farming families, the lumbermen, and all the other working people who labored to mold the feared wilderness into something hospitable.

With the advent of railroads and steam ships, however, the Industrial Revolution began to be felt across the land. The airplane was invented in 1903, and only twenty-four years later, Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic. Henry Ford began to produce inexpensive automobiles, and this new mobility, combined with the social instability caused by a Great Depression and two Great Wars, created an America on the move, well on its way to becoming an urban-suburban society. Now, in the middle of the Space and Nuclear Age, we have what people have never had to deal with before on a global level: a wholly unpredictable future.

It is important then, that we be acutely aware of the past, for we are becoming rootless, our tastes determined by industry, and our eyes glued to the television. It is easy for the solid substance of the past to be lost in the ephemeral present of rock music stars and designer jeans. If we lose our history, we will have lost the sense of community that gives a feeling of belonging to a people or a nation; the sense of continuity that tells us that we are one more generation in a chain; the sense of heritage that tells us from where we have come and how we might best proceed.

Some Characteristics of Folksongs:

One definition of a folk song is a song sung by anyone for their own enjoyment in a non-commercial act. I agree with that. Additionally, however, the following should be considered:

1. **Folksongs are usually old songs**, old enough, or at least well traveled enough from person to person by word of mouth, so that people do not remember who wrote them. It was often the oldest songs that expressed sentiments, values or problems universal enough for each succeeding generation, in turn, to learn and cherish them.

2. **Folksongs are learned by oral transmission** and therefore change through time. In traditional societies of long ago, songs were learned by individuals from individuals. As Mike Seeger says, “Before recording, if you heard music, it was being played by someone right next to you.” There was no radio, no sheet music to provide standard, nation-wide versions of popular songs to mass audiences. Songs were carried on, in a sense, from master to apprentice.

Because of the vagaries of memory, ability and personality, words and music had a tendency to change subtly from singer to singer. Despite every effort—perhaps—on the part of the singers to learn and sing the songs as they heard them, the music was never static, never frozen, but always taking on the characteristics of the community where it was performed, always in a state of becoming.

3. **Folk music comes from people who are somehow apart from others geographically or sociologically.** The Scotch-Irish families of the Southern Appalachians who settled in the mountains in the 1700s, and who have maintained the music of the British Isles for two centuries, are an obvious example. But folksongs and other forms of folklore (e.g., stories, games, jokes, ways of cooking, colorful sayings) are also found among school children, in the military, on baseball teams, among automobile workers, among Polish immigrants and in any group which sees itself as distinct from the rest of the population. While Americans might fully accept the ice water drenching of a football coach after a victory, it is a folk custom that might seem odd to an Indonesian weaver.

4. **Folksongs often come from working people—usually poor working people.** This is an oversimplification, admittedly. Nevertheless, it is true that the middle class and the wealthy have had greater access to current fashions, and that social status was, to some extent, based upon the awareness and appreciation of the new and novel. Working people, until recently, were without access to the fashionable, and tended to cherish the old ways, while not cherishing their poverty.

While there is much to be gained from studying the older songs, it must be reiterated that folk music and folk culture are still very much with us. Folklore is being created everyday as people adopt and change cultural elements to make them their own.

The Instruments

1. Five-String Banjo:

While the banjo has the reputation of being a truly representative American instrument, which it is, it also has the reputation of being an instrument native to America, which it is not. The banjo came to this country from western Africa with the slaves in the 17th and 18th centuries. Its primary characteristics, a resonating animal skin drum head and a shorter fifth or drone string, can still be found on instruments in Africa and India. It is interesting to note that the banjo has evolved from being an instrument played exclusively by black slaves in the colonial days, to being an instrument played almost exclusively by white musicians in the 21st century.

Banjos were not produced commercially until the 1850s, and those banjos were available to urban players only. Most rural banjos were hand-made and had smooth, unfretted fingerboards, as do violins. The old playing styles, therefore, included a great deal of sliding from note to note in imitation of African American vocal styles.

2. Concertina:

Commonly known—along with other accordion-like instruments—as the “squeeze box,” the concertina was developed between 1829 and 1844, by an English scientist, Dr. Charles Wheatstone, who was also responsible, to a large extent, for the creation of an effective telegraph system. It is a “free-reed” instrument, as are the accordion and the harmonica, the free reed coming to Europe originally from the Orient.

The concertina did not really become a folk instrument until the 1860s, when mass production made them available. Thereafter, however, millions of them were made and sold until they fell into relative decline in the 1930s. Like the accordion, the concertina employs a large number of metal reeds. Unlike the accordion, there is no piano-like keyboard, but, instead, a complicated system of buttons (keys). The concertina was light and small, and its portability made it popular with traveling folk and sailors. Although today the concertina is strongly identified with sea songs, in fact its use was wide spread in Europe. Even the Salvation Army adopted the concertina at the turn of the century and used it in their street-corner inspirational bands.

The concertina is a relatively new, mechanical, and sophisticated instrument which, like the piano, was made possible by the scientific and technological advances of the Industrial Revolution.

4. Guitar:

Today, the guitar is known as the preeminent folk instrument. Remarkably however, the guitar is a latecomer to traditional folk music, at least in the English language. Imported to the American colonies from England in the 18th century, it was used by the wealthier classes for formal parlor music (Benjamin Franklin was known to have played guitar). In the 19th century, the guitar was used in the minstrel shows but was not nearly as popular as was the banjo.

Introduced to Florida, New Orleans and the southwest as well by Spanish colonists, the guitar was adopted by African American musicians in the Deep South in the late nineteenth century and subsequently adopted by white musicians. Widely distributed recordings of early blues and country music stars such as Robert Johnson, Jimmy Rogers and the Carter Family helped introduce the guitar to the nation at large. Early 20th century Sears and Montgomery Ward mail order catalogues made the guitar widely available.

5. Jew's harp

The Jew's harp—known also as the “jaws harp,” and by many other names, even in English—is a plucked idiophone (percussion instrument). It is held against the teeth, using the head as a gourd for amplification, the mouth to provide pitch and the fingers and breath to provide rhythm. The oldest Jew's harp on record is from 14th century China, though the instrument is probably far older than that. It is found in most parts of the world as a traditional instrument.

It is not known how the name came to be. It was sold in Europe by Jewish peddlers in the middle ages, but the name seems to pre-date that. There is academic speculation that the name may have come from the mishearing of a Dutch name for the instrument, *jeudgetrump* (child's trumpet), or a French name, *jeu d'harp* (play harp). But no one knows. In Italian, it is called *scaccipensieri* (chase away all thought).

6. Rhythm Instruments: Spoons, Bones and the Dancing Man Puppet:

Folk music has always been the music that people actually make themselves, rather than only listen to passively. Standard melodic instruments were not always available to rural people, so they were inclined to use anything at hand. In such a way did the common house spoon, wooden or metal, become a musical instrument. Playing bones is, perhaps, even an older art. Indeed, drawings of female figures playing bones adorn Egyptian vases dating from 3000 BC. Often two sets are played—a set in each hand—the sound produced by clacking the pieces, one against the other, in complicated rhythms. Though my set is made from a cow femur bone, “bones” are often made out of wood.

The dancing or clogging man puppet is sometimes called a “limberjack” or a “jig doll” (UK). It is now thought of in America as an Appalachian Mountain toy, but did not begin there. It is first reported in America, ca.1820, but versions of it are known throughout England and abroad. It could have been first created wherever solo step dancing is a tradition.

The Ballad

Ballads were important to early Americans because they were the literature of people who could not read or write. Ballads are songs that tell stories and, as such, were vehicles for the transmission of cultural and historical information. Many of the oldest ballads tell stories of kings, knights and high-born ladies; or ancient legends closely related to early epics like *Beowulf*, that comprise the beginnings of written English literature. New ballads (18th, 19th and 20th century) tell tales of train wrecks, battles, lost love, presidential assassinations—or practically any event of human interest.

But new or old, the ballads that have survived in oral transmission have done so because they dealt with universal truths. Ballads document how people felt about their lives: their work, their losses, their longings—and the things they found amusing. As a result, they mirror the culture of a developing people.

FOLKLORE AND FOLKSONG SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

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 a 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 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.