

Folk Music

The term *folk music* usually applies to music that has been created at some point in a nation's or a region's development, often expressing in words and music aspects of the culture of that nation or region. Generally, folk music is not something that is created simply because there seems to be some commercial purpose for it. Rather, it is created out of necessity—out of a need that is felt by the people.

In many cultures, we can see folk music in the people's everyday chores and activities. For instance, in African tribal cultures, music is very much an important part of every aspect of their lives. Whether it be working in the fields or in the village, washing clothes, cooking a meal, or celebrating a marriage or another special occasion, music plays an important role and is used in all of these situations. Likewise, American folk music incorporates a part of the life experience of the people who create it. Immigrants who came to America from other countries brought with them a heritage of folk songs. Many of the folk songs in America are derivatives of these different styles. In particular, the type of folk music that is generally called *bluegrass* or *hillbilly* has a number of elements that are similar to elements in the music of the British Isles. For instance, the fiddle (the violin) and the mandolin were used widely in the British Isles and were carried across the ocean to America and incorporated in the culture that grew up in America.

Another important aspect of folk music is that it is usually anonymous. Very often the names of the composers are not known; in fact, it has often been a group effort when pieces become standard in the folk music literature.

American folk music has had a wide variety of influences. As has already been mentioned, the influences of the British Isles played an important role in the development of the folk heritage of America. Also, the African slaves brought a number of elements of their culture into our heritage, and many of the immigrants from other parts of the world have in at least some small way influenced the folk music of America. Folk music itself is at the root of popular music.

Early types of American folk music include the following: songs vendors sang in the streets to help sell their wares; shantyman or lumberjack songs that were sung after the evening meal and had to do with the men's lives and experiences; sailor songs or chanteys sung by the sailors to help them do their work; songs of pioneer settlers in the Eastern Mountains and those who migrated west; and the African slaves' tunes in the south. All of these types of folk music have had some influence on today's American popular music, including its rhythm, lyrics, instrumentation, and notation.



Bluegrass is a style of music developed by Bill Monroe in the 1930s that combines musical elements from the British Isles with those of the people in the Appalachian Mountains of the United States.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Questions for Consideration

1. Music that expresses aspects of a nation's or region's culture is called what?

2. Why is folk music created?

3. Name some ways in which music is used in African tribal cultures?

4. Who brought to America a heritage of folk songs?

5. Bluegrass music has elements of folk music from where?

6. What instruments are commonly used in British and American folk music?

7. Why would it be hard to tell who the composer of a folk song was?

8. Name some early types of American folk music that may have influenced the rhythms of today's popular music.

9. Name some early types of American folk music that may have influenced the lyrics of today's popular music.

