

American Folk Songs and Dances

Gretchen Eckroat

Friendship Academy/Spring Hill Elementary

Overview

Rationale

Objectives

Strategies

Classroom Activities

Annotated Bibliography/Resources

Appendices-Standards

Overview

Can you remember the last time you sat around a campfire to sing songs or tell stories? Have you ever gone to a square dance or contra dance? Did your grandmother ever teach you a song she used to sing when she was growing up? These are a few of the questions I asked myself at the beginning of this class about folk tales. Being a music teacher I tend to think in terms of songs and dances. During my years in college I was very fortunate to be exposed to several types of folk traditions.

One tradition was folk tales. I was taking an introduction to folk tales class. The professor told us to attend the storytelling festival that was being held on campus. I ended up going with a group of friends. I couldn't believe the number of people who were there besides college students. People from all over the country and every age came to hear these storytellers. I was mesmerized. I loved it. I went to every evening performance I was able to attend. My friends also loved it. This became a tradition with us at school. It's hard to explain the feeling I had sitting there in the theater just listening to people tell stories. There was no need for flashing lights, no surround sound, and no moving pictures to help capture the audience. The storyteller sitting alone on stage was enough.

Folk tales, songs and dances fit very easily into a music education curriculum. The "Share the Music" series we are using now incorporates a lot of world folk songs and dances for the children to learn. I have noticed over the past few years how students are not as educated in American folk songs as they once were. American folk dances are almost non-existent in a student's life. I have decided to do a mini unit using American folk songs, dances and stories to help restore and preserve the traditions that we are slowly losing.

One of the first questions I asked myself when I first started this seminar was, “What is ‘folk’?” Originally, the term “folk” was applied only to the peasants and farmers of the Old World, who had never learned to read or write. As time went on the term evolved until it came to mean all proud and common people. Folk story, songs and dances are ways to remember our living history as a people. As with many other art forms folk songs and dances have made many changes over the years.

Folk singers were introduced to me as I was growing up. I was familiar with folk artists like Peter, Paul and Mary, Pete Seeger, The Smothers Brothers, and Woody Guthrie to name just a few. I loved the way the songs were always easy to pick up after a few listenings. The simple orchestration of the instruments was another thing that really drew my attention to these types of songs. I assumed that since these artists were called folk singers that all of their music was folk songs. This is not the case at all.

Rationale

According to Encyclopedia.com a folk song is “characterized as music of anonymous composition, transmitted orally. The theory that folk songs were originally group compositions has been modified in recent studies. These assume that the germ of a folk melody is produced by an individual and altered in transmission into a group-fashioned expression. National and ethnic individuality can be seen in folk music, even in the case of songs transplanted from one country to another.” In essence for a song to qualify as a “folk song” it needs to have these 3 criteria.

1. It is anonymous in composition - if you know who wrote it, it’s not a folk song.
2. It must be passed on orally- from one generation to another, one location to another.
3. The song can have many variations within the community, town, or city.

Folk music is the music of the people, not individuals, but all the people. “Traditionally, folk performers have been amateurs within rural communities rather than professionally trained musicians, and their music is closely associated with everyday activities such as ritual, work, and child rearing.” (Folk Music, Encarta Encyclopedia.) A folk song does not have a standardized form and is most commonly the music of the lower class and rural populations.

The musical structure of folk music is very simple, folk music is often made up of a single unaccompanied melody and if there is accompaniment it is very simple usually chords or a drone making it very easy for people to learn to play and sing.

This music often repeats in short stanzas made up of four lines, changing the words in the last line.

Common types of folk songs are repetition, call and response, and epic song – a song that tells a complex story usually focusing on an adventure of a hero, singing games, important occasions (calendric) these are often sung at important times of the year marking major events, work songs are usually call and response and have very steady beat or rhythmic accompaniment that makes it easier to do repetitive labor, religious songs and ballads. An American scholar named Francis Child collected and classified ballads. There are more than 300 Scottish and British ballads, which are a large part of the musical heritage of the Appalachian Mountain region.

American folk music uses several basic instruments such as the banjo, guitar, Appalachian dulcimer, auto harp, mandolin, fiddles, and harmonicas. These were all common instruments found in people's homes, easy to play, and very portable so they could be taken to gatherings. Even learning to play musical instruments was handed down from generation to generation since there was no formal music training in most schools.

“Some folk songs often develop from one parent tune. Samuel Bayard has claimed that some 40 or 50 families dominate the Anglo-American folk music, and that 7 of these families account for the vast majority of songs.” (Folk Music, Encarta Encyclopedia)

Some of the changes that occur are that tunes may be shortened, lines changed, and the melody may undergo changes. One example of a family tune is “On Top of Old Smoky”. It started out as an Anglo-American song called “Pretty Mohea” or “Little Mohea”.

Little Mohea

As I went out walking for pleasure one day
In sweet recreation to wear time away
As I sat amusing myself on the grass
Oh, who could I spy but a fair Indian lass.

Another variant is known as "Coconut Grove"

On Top of Old Smoky

On top of old Smoky, all covered with snow.
I lost my true lover from courting too slow,

Though courting's a pleasure and parting is grief
A false-hearted lover is worse than a thief.

American folk songs have always interested me. How did our folk heritage take place? Where did we get most of our songs? Our dominant tradition came from the British Isles and from Africa. We also used chants from the Native Americans, songs from the trappers and traders, and also the Pilgrims and Puritans who brought hymns. From Africa came rhythms and harmonic patterns.

Native Americans had a form of folk music before European settlers came to this land. They had developed a very complex form of chant. They used chants to help remember parts of their tribal history by combining repeating words with musical notes. Native Americans also used drums to help keep the rhythmical patterns. They developed many complex rhythmic patterns that have not been surpassed even today. "They used these chants in ceremonies, which were passed from one generation to the next generation by medicine men." (Attaway, 25) When the white settlers came to America the two worlds were very different. Native American music incorporated many voices of nature. "There was the ripple of the happy waters in children's lullabies; the cry of the eagle and the sound of hunting wolf in his war songs; the sigh of the wind and the rustle of leaves in his laments and death dirges; the wistful call of water birds in his love songs; and in his appeal to the Great Spirit, there was always majesty." (Attaway, 27) There is an underlying element of Native American music in New World folk singing.

When the Vikings came to the new world they brought professional musicians with them to sing the Viking war songs called skalds, but the simple oarsmen, among whom were farmers and herdsmen brought over the folk songs from home. (Attaway, 32) After the Vikings returned home Christopher Columbus brought over the next influence of music.

Many Spaniards came to the New World looking for gold. They were also the first Europeans to colonize the New World. These soldiers who fought brutally during the day would sing lovely Spanish airs at night. The Spanish did not see love as being happy but as a great suffering. "One New World song based on Spanish Folk traditions is "Cielito Lindo" it is considered to be Spanish-American. " (Attaway, 34)

Cielito Lindo

*By the Sierra Morena I wait, Cielito Lindo,
As twilight dies,
Searching the dark for the starlight,
Cielito Lindo,*

Of your bright eyes.

*Ay, Ay, Ay, Ay!
Whispering of you,
My heart will sing the joy you bring;
Cielito Lindo,
I love you.*

When the French came they learned to live in the forest and trap with the Native Americans. They also brought folk songs with them. Since the French trappers used canoes to paddle up and down the rivers some of the songs they used at home on their farms to do work transferred nicely to the paddling of a canoe. Women on the farm sang “Allouette” while they were plucking the fowl. This song transferred nicely to the beat of the canoe paddling.

Soon the British settled in Virginia and they brought with them songs centuries old. The most popular type of folk song they brought with them is the ballad. “Barbara Allen” was one of the most popular and it is still sung today in Appalachia. Soon after a stream of immigrants were coming to America all bringing with them songs from their homeland. All of these songs were passed from person to person, soon becoming the basis for the American folksongs.

The African contribution to American folk music is a great one. This was a group of people who were forced into a new land to work as slaves. While the slaves were in the cotton and tobacco fields under the whip of the overseer they dreamed of one thing: freedom. “In every song, in all his humor and folk tales, he expresses his rebellion against the white master, the white society and the little white flower that ruled everything.” (Attaway, 158) Slave songs had their own language with two parts. One for the master or overseer and the other expressing the slaves’ own feelings. These songs contained sarcasm, resentment through humor, flight for freedom, spirituals, and of celebration after the Emancipation Proclamation freed the slaves. Here is an example of this type of song.

Jump Down, Spin Around

*Jump down, Spin Around
You got to jump down, spin around
Pick a bale of cotton
You got to jump down, spin around
Pick a bale a day.*

*There was a skeeter
Lit on my head,*

*Blinked his eye,
An, I killed him dead.*

This is the way the song was sung when people were around. There was no way that one man could possibly pick one bale of cotton in a day, but it is filled with sarcasm. And when no one was paying any attention the song was changed to this.

Won't jump down, spin around

Pick a bale of cotton,

Won't jump down, spin around

Pick a bale a day.

They used humor songs to express their resentment wishing bad luck on the old master. The Blue-Tail Fly is a fine example of that. When the Underground Railroad was established slaves invented map songs. These songs were sung to inform slaves how to travel north to freedom. One of the most popular map songs was Follow The Drinking Gourd. The spirituals were used for encouraging the slaves that through patience and understanding God would help you. This was also a way for the slaves to express themselves. After the slaves were free they did not have an easy life. In some ways it was a lot harder than before especially in the south. During this time the African Americans started looking back on the way life used to be and used those feeling to introduce a new type of music called the Blues. They used parts of spirituals, call and response patterns and shouts to make up what we know as the blues of today.

When I ask people about American folk dancing many people think of square dancing.

In *The Complete Book of Square Dancing* Betty Casey writes,

“ The square dance is uniquely American. . . . The format, many of the folk dances movements, and terminology incorporated into the square dance were brought by early emigrants from other countries to the United States. Borrowed bits from foreign dances such as French quadrilles, Irish jigs, English reels, and Spanish fandangos have blended with American folkways and customs into the square dance. . . .”

There is also contra dancing, Appalachian dancing, singing game, social dances, and clogging to name just a few.

Folk dancing is based on the same criteria as folk songs. (Folk Dancing, Encarta Encyclopedia)

1. Folk dances need to be easy to learn. They are passed on from generation to generation.

2. Everyone, young and old, should be able to participate in the dances.
3. There is live music to dance to not prerecorded music.

The one form of dance that I see thriving is the singing game tradition. I can look out on the playground today and see many children chanting while they jump rope, hand clapping games, and group games using song and movement. Many of these games I can remember playing when I was small. The words have changed slightly and the motions might have been placed in a different order but the tradition is still alive on the playground. As we grow older we tend to forget these games until we find ourselves in a position where we can hear them again. Then they all come flooding back.

Contra Dancing is a form that developed here in America that was based on the English Country-Dance style. It is usually performed in a long ways set with each person facing his or her partner across the set. Then these sets are broken into groups of 4. Contra dances are performed today pretty much the way they were back when they were developed. In some places in New England the contra dancing tradition is still very much alive. Saturday night dances are held in the town hall where these dances have been danced for over a hundred years. Everyone comes to dance. They have been able to keep this tradition alive. Most cities have contra groups that meet once a week but are not well publicized. Many people in those cities have never heard of contra dancing because they have never been introduced to it. Folk dancing helps to build community relationships. It creates an environment for anyone to join in no matter what previous experience you have. "Early in the 20th century, as America urbanized, square dancing nearly died out." states Richard MacKinnon. "Folk dancing also received a major boost in the 1920's when the New York City public schools, were the first school district to make folk dancing a required activity."

Square dancing is probably the most recognized form of American folk dancing. You can walk into a room and know whether or not they are dancing a square dance. Square dancing has a definite form. A square is made up of 4 couples standing in a box shape. There is a caller who tells the dancers what direction to move and what move is next.

Most gym teachers teach a unit on square dancing. However students are so busy trying to learn the vocabulary and sequence they never have a chance to really enjoy the dance.

People used to learn dancing by observation and trial and error in a friendly setting. There was usually a live band and a caller who was aware of what was going on. Today we tend to lean on recorded music with a set pace that students find very difficult to pick up.

In the last 60 years we have been losing this tradition of learning folk tales, songs and dances. With radio, television, computers, and all sorts of other media technology we have lost the tradition of gathering with family or community members to share stories, songs or even the occasional dance. We tend to communicate through e-mail rather than face to face. I am hoping to educate my students in these traditions so they realize the enjoyment of sharing them with each other and hopefully pass them on to their children.

Objectives

I want to provide an opportunity for my students to explore learning folk songs, stories, and dances in a traditional way. (So we can help preserve this tradition.) Unfortunately folk dances and songs are again being lost to our students. Teachers are becoming so overwhelmed with testing and other standards we are leaving out some of our most important traditions. Also a lot of school districts have to cut out general music and gym where a lot of these traditions were taught.

So, during the next year I want to bring back some of those traditions in my general music class room by teaching my students at least two folk songs a month with out using song sheets, the radio, or CDs. I am planning to do this with all of my students. I am also going to try to use folk instruments when I am teaching these songs such as a guitar, audio harp, or dulcimer to name a few. By the end of each semester I would like to have a whole school sing where the whole school will meet in the auditorium or cafeteria and sing these songs together as a community. I am hoping to promote a sense of community within the school with teachers and students. I am also going to teach my students a least one folk dance a month. The same dance will be taught to every grade level so we will have a base to start from. I am planning to make this an annual event and hopefully older students will be teaching younger students. By the end of the year the students will know many songs and dances that might go with them. I would like to bring in a live folk band come in and we will have a Community Folk Day. I will also try to hold an introductory lesson for community members, and teachers so they can come and enjoy the event with us. Students will have learned the same dances and songs and we would have teachers, students, parents and other community members come and enjoy the afternoon. Folk songs and dances are simple enough that everyone should be able to participate no matter their age. I want this to become a community tradition.

Strategies

I am planning to use very basic strategies. I am planning to set aside 10 to 15 minutes per class time to review songs and teach new songs. I would like to teach the songs by rote. This is the most common way these types of songs are passed on to the following generations. I will also try to use folk instruments while

teaching the songs such as guitar, Appalachian dulcimer, and audio harp. After students learn the songs for the month I might review them by using Orff arrangements I have created. This will give the older students an opportunity to read notes, and rhythm patterns. I would like to stay as close to the oral tradition as possible when teaching my students these songs.

Classroom Activities

I would like for this to become an on-going tradition in my school. I needed to come up with something that I could build on each year. For the first year I am going to concentrate on teaching two to three new folk songs a month to every class in the building. I am also planning to teach one dance or singing games to each class a month. This will be the base for upcoming years.

Here is my outline for the first year.

September

Songs

She'll be Comin' Round the Mountain

Frog Went A Courtin'

America

Dance or Singing Game

Circle Round the Zero (K, 1, 2)

Chimes of Dunkirk (3, 4, 5)

October

Songs

Skin and Bones

Little Liza Jane

Yankee Doodle

Dance or Singing Games

Game for Little Liza Jane (All grades)

Paw Paw Patch (K, 1, 2)

November

Songs

Bingo

God Bless America

Dance or Singing Game
Jump Jim Joe (Primary)
Alabama Girl (Secondary)

December

Songs
Review all songs learned so far this year. Have an all school sing and dance.
This will be held the last day before Christmas break in the morning.

January

Songs
Bile Them Cabbage Down
Old Joe Clark

Dances and Singing Games
Down in the Valley (All Grades)
Hambone (Primary)

February

Songs
Shady Grove
Lift Every Voice and Sing

Dances and Singing Games
Little Johnny Brown (Primary)
Four White Horses (Secondary)

March

Songs
Take Me Out to the Ball Game
National Anthem
I know an Old Woman Who Swallowed a Fly

Dances and Singing Games
Virginia Reel (Secondary)
Chimes of Dunkirk (Primary)

April

Songs

Chicken on a Fence Post

Yonder She Comes

This Little Light of Mine

Dances and Singing Games

Ti YA YA (Secondary)

The Tree Song (Primary)

Razzama Tazzama (ALL Grades)

May

Songs

Review All songs from the Year

Dances and Singing Games

The Sweets of May (Secondary)

Alabama Girl (Primary)

June

**All school sing in the morning. Sing all songs learned throughout the year.
All school dance in the afternoon. Invite parents, community members.**

I am planning to hold mine in early June probably on a Friday. I will hold it outside in the playground. Students will choose their own partners.

After the first year I am going to concentrate on a group of songs for each grade level.

5th grade will be songs from the southern Untied States

4th grade will be cowboy songs

3rd grade will be patriotic songs

2nd will be grade will be ballads and story songs

1st and Kindergarten will be singing games and poems.

Dances will be built on prior knowledge throughout their elementary years.

Kindergarten and 1st will concentrate on singing games and learning basic directions.

2nd grade will learn basic long ways set and simple circle dances

3rd grade will lead into more complicated long ways sets and circles

4th grade will start contra dances

5th grade will be square dances.

Annotated Bibliography/Resources

- Casey, Betty, *The Complete Book of Square Dancing (and Round Dancing)*. Doubleday, 1976.
- Cooney Michael. "If You Know Who Wrote It, It's Not A Folk Song". 2/12/2004 <<http://www.michaelcooney.com/MC1P013.html>>.
- Encyclopedia.com
- MacKinnon, Richard. "Square Dancing: The Historical Geography of an American Folk Custom." 2/12/2004 <[http:// www. Heritagedance.com/History/am_folk.html](http://www.Heritagedance.com/History/am_folk.html)>.
- Mills, Isabelle. "The Heart of the Folk Song". Canadian Journal for Traditional Music. 1974. 2/12/2004 <[http:// cjtm.icaap.org/content/2/v2art5.html](http://cjtm.icaap.org/content/2/v2art5.html)>
- Tolman, Beth and Page, Ralph. "The Country Dance Book: The Best of the Square and Contra Dance and all about them." 1976. The Stephen Greene Press.
- Greene, Hank. "Square and Folk Dancing: A Complete Guide for Students, Teachers, and Callers." 1984. Harper & Row, Publishers
- Harris, Julia, Pittman, Anne, Waller, Marlys. "Dance A While 7th edition: Handbook for Folk, Square, Contra, & Social Dance. 1988. Macmillan College Publishing Company.
- Lornell, Kip. "Introducing American Folk Music." 1993. WCB Brown & Benchmark publishing.
- Seeger, Ruth. "The Music of American Folk Song: and Selected Other Writings on American Folk Music. 2001. University of Rochester Press.
- Attaway, William. "Hear America Singing." 1967. The Lion Press, Inc.
- Filene, Benjamin. "Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music." 2000. The University of North Carolina Press.
- New England Dance Masters, "Chimes of Dunkirk". 1991. New England Dancing Masters Productions.

New England Dance Masters, “ Jump Jim Joe”1991. New England
Dancing Master Productions.

New England Dance Masters, “ Down in the Valley” 2000. New England
Dancing Masters Productions.

New England Dance Masters, “ Listen to the Mockingbird”. 1997. New England
Dancing Masters Productions.

Appendix Content Standards

Appendix A

Arts and Humanities Standards

1. All students describe the meanings they find in various works from the visual and performing arts and literature on the basis of aesthetic understanding of the art form.
2. All students evaluate and respond critically to works from the visual and performing arts and literature of various individuals and cultures, showing that they understand important features of the works.
3. All students relate various works from the visual and performing arts and literature to the historical and cultural context within which they were created.
4. All students produce, perform or exhibit their works in the visual arts, music, dance or theater, and describe the meanings their work has for them.

Appendix B

Tips for Teaching Folk Dances.

I teach my students folk dances every year. Here are some tips that I find to be very useful.

1. I do not have boy-girl partners with older students (Grades 3 and above) I usually let them pick or I assign partners. Once in a while I will have a 5th grade that is willing to go the traditional route with boy-girl partners.
2. When trying to get students to make a clean circle I tell students to look at the person's head in front of them and not to walk beside them. After some practice this usually works.
3. I have very limited space in my room so I teach the dance section by section to the whole class. Then divide the class into 2 groups. One sits and watches while the other dances and then we switch. If you have an odd number someone will dance twice.
4. When we are folk dancing I have 2 water pitchers in the room and small Dixie cups for water. When a group is sitting they may get a drink.
5. After a class learns a dance sometimes I will combine them with another class of any grade level. If I want to review some simple dances with 4th or 5th grade I generally have them come help teach the dance to a 2nd or 1st grade. The students love this. The upper grades get to review and the lower grades learn.
6. Have them perform for their classroom teacher or anyone else I can round up.
7. HAVE FUN!!! Take pictures and make a bulletin board out of them. Students love to see themselves dancing.
8. If you have a really ambitious group look up your local contra dance society and find out when their dances are and take a group of students.

Appendix C

Dance Glossary

Allemande: One hand turn once around and back to place.

Circle Left, Circle Right: Dancers join hands in a ring and move either right or left.

Corner: The person next to you who is not your partner in a circle or square dance.

Do-Si-Do: Two dancers face each other and walk forward passing right shoulders, and then go round each other back to place.

Forward and Back: Step forward three steps and stop, step back three steps and stop.

Grand Right and Left: In a circle or square dance: partners face each other, take right hands and walk forward passing right shoulders. Take left hands with the person you meet and pass left shoulders. Right to next, left to next, and so on. Take two steps forward each change of hands.

Neighbor: In a contra dance, the person in your circle of four who is next to you on your side of the set.

Promenade: Partners side by side, walking forward together and holding each other's hands: right in right, left in left. Probably the best promenade hold for children is the "skaters" position with both hands held in front. Younger children can simply hold inside hands.

Sashay: Galloping or skipping sideways, usually with a partner, two hands held.

Turn: Dancers join specified hands and move around each other once and back to place. Right hand turn and two-hand turn are clockwise, a left hand turn is counterclockwise.