

America's Music in the 1920s

By Barrett A. Silverstein

From *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 43:2 (spring 2004).

Rock 'n' roll. Hip-hop. Rap. Heavy metal. These contemporary types of music may cause the older generation to be concerned about the popular music that youth listen to today. Did you know that the young people of the 1920s faced similar issues with *their* older generation? When the adults of the 1920s heard the blues and jazz being played, they expressed concern about the popular music that their youth were listening to, as well. Many of the cultural conservatives viewed the music as having a bad moral influence on youth.

We can define *music* as “vocal, instrumental, or mechanical sounds having rhythm, melody, or harmony.” Ultimately, music reflects personal tastes and situations. We listen to music when we are happy or sad. We play music for amusement and pleasure and when we want to forget the cares of the day. We can hear music in our places of worship, riding in the car, or in the shower.

Historically, the United States has been one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse nations in the world. Nearly every cultural and ethnic group has brought its own music to America. History and geography have also played their parts in the music of America. Think about work songs, cowboy songs, Depression songs, war songs, union songs, train songs, and protest songs.

The first Europeans to arrive in the New World brought with them the memories and songs of their native lands. These songs were, in turn, mixed and blended with the sounds of the American Indians whom the colonists encountered. Each group of settlers brought its own unique ethnic form of music. Puritans and Pilgrims sang hymns and psalms without instruments at meetings and church. English and Scots-Irish gentry remembered ballads of the British Isles, and enslaved people brought here in slave ships carried with them the chants and rhythms of Africa.

The interweaving of European and African musical styles is perhaps the most significant factor in the history of American music. In the South, particularly, the music of black and white working people mixed, remixed, and blended. Enslaved peoples and their descendants added a fluid and expressive vocal style and a highly developed sense of rhythm to European songs and instruments. As a result, a new African American music was created.

American music is a mixture of these many factors. Foreign songs were planted like seeds in the fertile soil of the New World and grew into varied styles of American music. Each year there are thousands of folks festivals and gatherings throughout North Carolina and the nation. America's folk music may have its roots in faraway places, but as the

nation's people live, work, and struggle, their music is reborn every day.

Only one original folk music exists in America—the music of the American Indian. It is as varied as the hundreds of different tribes and languages. This music was old long before the first explorers crossed the ocean.

The earliest documentation of European music in the New World says, “The *Pinta* leads the procession, and her crew is singing the *Te Deum* [a religious chant]. The crews of the *Santa Maria* and the *Nina* join in the solemn chant, and many of the rough sailors brush tears from their eyes.” Christopher Columbus wrote these words in his journal on October 12, 1492, as his three ships landed in America.

Cornwallis's surrender at Yorktown in 1781 was accompanied by music. Colonial fife-and-drummers tooted “Yankee Doodle,” and the British played an appropriate folk tune, “The World Turned Upside Down.”

In the South, the fiddle tradition flourished. It was influenced by the rhythmic music of enslaved people. It laid the basis for later styles such as bluegrass and country-and-western music.

From Scotland and Ireland, successive waves of migrations have kept alive traditions in many communities throughout North Carolina and the United States, where protest songs and ballads can still be heard.

Music for dancing was an essential ingredient in communal activities such as corn husking, quilting bees, tobacco curing, apple stringing, log rolling, and wood chopping.

Music served other important functions. The traditional ballads were the storybooks, radios, and news flashes of isolated rural life. New songs told stories of local events, famous happenings, and legendary heroes and outlaws. Songs detailed the ups and downs of farming and rural life. There were sentimental songs, love songs, and many songs about the railroad. The railroad in the nineteenth century helped break down the isolation of rural communities and to many people held out hope of adventure and freedom.

In the early 1900s, some southern rural communities grew to be less isolated as they became industrialized, and major social and technological developments changed the way of life for many people. The radio came to many isolated rural areas in the 1920s. It brought popular commercial music from northern cities. It also made possible a venue for country musicians to broadcast throughout the South, on programs such as the *National Barn Dance*.

Another important innovation was the phonograph. When the phonograph became popular in the South, country people could buy records only of northern entertainers. However, in 1923 Fiddlin' John Carson, an old-time fiddler, political campaigner, and moonshine maker, became one of the first of the southern musicians recorded when he played the song “The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane.” The unprecedented success of

this record in rural areas launched the “hillbilly” recording industry.

Much of the “country music” recorded in the 1920s and 1930s drew its sound and lyrics from the folk music of the South. Commercial recordings made country music available to everyone.

The Carter Family of Tennessee sang historic ballads in a traditional fashion and became enormously popular in the 1920s. The Carters also sang religious tunes, original songs, and popular and sentimental ballads. Their harmony singing, and Maybelle Carter’s lead guitar work, had a great influence on future stars of country music.

Uncle Dave Macon, who traveled through North Carolina and the South, was a very colorful performer, singing everything from traditional folk songs to community satire to medicine show novelty songs. He became the first big star of the Grand Ole Opry, the first national country music show.

Charlie Poole and his North Carolina Ramblers were among the many popular string bands of the 1920s. The band featured fiddle, guitar, and banjo, and combined traditional dance tunes with the latest offerings from the New York song industry.

The most popular country music star of the 1920s was the “singing brakeman,” Jimmie Rodgers. Originally from Mississippi, Jimmie Rodgers spent many years in Texas, and his association with the West led to the increasing popularity of western and cowboy music. Authentic cowboy music was, like the music of the Southeast, rugged and traditional and often sung unaccompanied. Rodgers was one of a long line of country musicians influenced by southern black music. His combination of blues with a high-pitched yodel earned him the name Blue Yodeler.

Nationwide, the early years of country music recording reflected the effects of the Great Depression. Many people were driven off their farms and became migrants looking for work. They often ended up in the bread lines of the cities. Country musicians used commercial success as a way to escape poverty. However, as they tried to keep up with the new fads, traditional music was neglected. Though traditional music did continue, the Depression’s disruption of rural life contributed to the decline of such music in the South.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, a new type of African American music had begun to be heard throughout the South. Whether slow and mournful, harsh and driving, or light and naughty, these solo songs became known collectively as the blues. The early years of the twentieth century saw a continuous migration of southern blacks from rural areas to cities and from the South to the North. By the 1920s, a number of large urban African American populations existed throughout the country. As a result, Memphis, St. Louis, Atlanta, Indianapolis, Detroit, and Chicago became blues centers.

Blues songs had their own particular patterns. The words were personal, vivid, and highly symbolic. The blues singer’s favorite instrument was the guitar. Bluesmen used it to aid their singing by filling the pauses with the kind of expression that later became the

hallmark of jazz.

In the 1920s, talent scouts from northern record companies turned their attention to the South. They recorded black and white musicians, paid next to nothing, and made fortunes selling music to southern audiences. The varied and colorful strains combined to create a multitude of folk and popular music. They contributed to the development of jazz, one of America's most unique and highly developed arts, and influenced the work of American classical composers. Jazz was born about the turn of the twentieth century in New Orleans, which was a crossroads of musical culture. Jazz had its basis in the religious shouts and hollers, dances, work songs, and blues of African American people.

The music heard in North Carolina in the 1920s was heard mostly in homes or in places of worship. However, with the arrival of the radio, and the recording of country and folk music, musical experiences and tastes changed during the decade. Today, with compact discs, television, MTV, and the many modern electronic devices, music has become more diverse and different than anyone could have imagined in the 1920s. Can you imagine how music will sound when your grandchildren are urging you to listen to a popular song of their day?

Barrett A. Silverstein, a retiree of IBM Corporation, volunteers for both the North Carolina Museum of History and the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences. He is also a volunteer instructor for classes in popular music and radio at North Carolina State University's Encore Center.