

## Masters of Bluegrass – Lecture #1

Sources for series:

*Country Music, U.S.A.*, Bill Malone, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1968.

*Bluegrass: A History*, Neil V. Rosenberg, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1965.

American folk music owes much to the musics of the peoples who journeyed to the New World from the British Isles, Europe and Africa. From Britain and Europe came ballads and other song traditions, instrumental dance music and sacred music traditions. Africans brought approaches that developed into unique American styles including ragtime, spirituals, the blues and jazz. Singing and playing stringed musical instruments, Southern rural folk developed and kept alive a rich body of traditional music.

Much of this music was passed from one to another through a process called *the oral tradition*. Using no written music or words and by memory alone, individuals learned the lyrics and melodies of thousands of songs and tunes an in turn, taught them to generations of musicians and singers. This, of course, has been the method through which songs, poems and stories have survived for many centuries.

These new Americans brought their music and songs to their new homes. Many settled in the isolated hills of the Southern Appalachian Mountains that stretch through the states of Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, Maryland, West Virginia and North Carolina. In this relative isolation, the music brought here from the old country survived relatively unchanged for hundreds of years. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, musicologists collected songs in these regions that existed in England as far back as the 1600s. *Oxford Girl*, also found as *Wexford Girl*, is a murder ballad recounting a violent murder and the perpetrators' eventual hanging. Americans changed the place names to local ones resulting in the well known Knoxville Girl still sung in bluegrass music circles. Popular melodies, such as the fiddle tune *Soldier's Joy* appear in tune books from the late 1700s

To modern ears, the violence and brutality of murder ballads may at first seem shocking. We question why people found these stories attractive enough to memorize and pass to successive generations. We need look no further than reality television and the grocery store check out line for the answer. We are indeed the same people today. Tabloids and sensational media tell, in excruciating detail, the ins and outs of celebrity crime. Our appetite for such stories is seemingly insatiable. In the mid 1990s, I wrote this murder ballad about the then-current case involving O.J. Simpson. In addition to crime, other songs of this type commemorated great disasters.

Other well known reality based songs in the American folk tradition include *Tom Dooley* (about an 1866 murder and hanging,) *Amelia Earhart* (about the 1937 disappearance of the famous aviatrix,) *Rueben James* (written by folk composer Woody Guthrie about the sinking of the first U.S. ship in WWII,) *The Wreck of the Old 97* (about the 1903 locomotive crash recorded by Vernon Dalhart in 1934,) and *The Titanic* or *It Was Sad When the Great Ship Went Down* (about the 1912 ship sinking.)

There are also tunes about which little is known including *Down in the Willow Garden* or *Rose Conelly* (recorded by the Everly Brothers in the 1950s) and *Banks of the Ohio*. Contemporary songs written in this style include *Long Black Veil* (1959) and *El Paso*.