

Hillbilly Zen – contemplating old-time country music.

Support notes for a workshop given by Fred Pribac and Terri Lukacko
Solfest – December 2006 – Hobart, Tasmania

What is old-time country music?

Old-time music is a traditional American folk music that, in its purest form, is based on the fiddle and banjo duet combination.

The music tends to be earthy and community based. It is played for dances, performance and jamming. The backbone of old-time music is its use for communal sessions or jams and or dancing.

The oldest tunes were originally brought to America by English, Irish, Scottish and Scandinavian settlers.



In many regions (particularly the deep south) there was also a strong influence from the Griot bards and shamanic storytellers that were brought to America with the 17th century slave trade. In the 18th through 20th century the combination of evolving European melody and African rhythm and harmony (syncopations and blues notes) led to a compelling style of rural music which also spun off bluegrass, country and blues. With the advent of mass media in the 1920's (radio and records) rural stringband music achieved a high public profile for a short time and was marketed as "hillbilly" music. The term "hillbilly" has stuck and through sustained media misuse taken on a pejorative meaning. Here, the term is used fondly to express a quirky rural affinity and an earthy approach.

Old-time music is played by a small, and increasingly international, community of devoted fans, a brace of non-commercial stringbands and a handful of charismatic individual artists. Very few people make a living from it.

Other names for this music include hillbilly, oldtimey, mountain music or Appalachian music. It remains associated with grass roots values. It can be broken down into gospel songs, secular songs and ballads, dance tunes and listening tunes.

Bluegrass is "not" old-time music although the two can be hard to distinguish for casual listeners. Bluegrass is a style of commercial music developed in the 1940's, by Bill Monroe (and others), from old-time music beginnings, a blues influence and jazz performance ideas. It was enabled by the new microphone technologies of the day that allowed musicians to effectively take virtuoso solo breaks for audiences in large or noisy venues. It is also characterised by strident and often stunning harmony singing and has been cheekily described as middle aged men singing hurting songs.

How is it done?

Old-time music is most commonly played in various combinations of fiddle, banjo, fretless banjo, guitar, double-bass, mandolin, autoharp, mouth organ or dulcimer, however any instrument can be incorporated if used with sensitivity. It sounds best intimate and un-amplified.

Old-time music can be thought of as "hot" school or "cool" school. Hot school plays at faster tempos and with greater rhythmic excitement. It has strong energy and drive and groove is everything! Cool school is more for people who want to play intricate melody and subtle harmony. It can suit quiet gatherings, solo players or technically superior players.

The violin music is important because we play it.
Arthur Frank – Alaskan native fiddler

On the other hand, the banjo has a positive musical charm in the country. Here we can see that it fits the surroundings. Its half barbaric twang is in harmony with the unmechanical melodies of the birds.
Philadelphia music and drama, 1891

The music is best learned by ear. In a jam session tunes may be repeated "dozens" of times without halt. This affords a good opportunity to pick up and exchange new tunes and develop a session groove. Technical prowess is welcomed (but not essential) however showing off with fancy licks or melodic complexity is seldom considered helpful. The session "groove" is everything. Sessions tend to be led by the elders, or by the most skilled musicians, but usually everybody gets a chance to start a tune at some point.

A player may play on his instrument with this or that fingering, in this or that manner, he may even help along with his nose on the fingerboard; what matters in the end is the music produced.
Michael Praetorius – 1620

Rhythm players keep to the simplest bare minimum chords needed – sometimes fewer! Harmonic cleverness and substitutions can improve concert performance but may reduce the groovability of a session. Bass accompaniment follows an unwavering 1-5 pattern.

The basic accompaniment rhythm is "boom chuck, boom chuck" (pick-strum). Fancy percussion or syncopated strumming on guitars or mandolins takes the music away from a traditional sound and can negate the groove.

Respect for tradition is a kind of filter. People who are willing to bow down to tradition have a certain amount of respect for something greater than themselves.
John Herrmann



Is old-time country music spiritual?

Not particularly ... with the exception of old-time gospel.

However, many players adopt a reverent approach to the music and people have often noted the mantra like effect of old-time jamming.

These observations are often light heartedly alluded to in terms of; making pilgrimages to old-time festivals, or sitting at the feet of a fiddle guru. For example in the 1980's the late, and great, Tommy Jarrell appeared at the Clifftop Fiddlers Convention (the "Mecca" of old-time music) in a once-off band called "Swami Tommy and the Round Peak Zen Boys".

A component of this reverential feeling may also be a visceral response to the primitive modes and harmonies of the music. The tunes often have a "spooky" or otherworldly character.

In addition, in the occasional absence of even-tempered instruments, the fiddle and fretless banjo players can deliberately use perfect (or even micro-tonal) intervals to harmonise the melody, which can have a strong effect on the listener's perceptions.

The fifth interval is particularly important in old-time music. Lao Tzu referred to the fifth as the source of universal harmony between the forces of Yin and Yang. In India, the fifth is believed to create a sound through which Shiva calls Shakti to the dance of life. Apollo, the Greek Sun God of Music and Healing plucked the fifth on his sacred lyre to call dolphin messengers to Delphi.

Is old-time jamming a group meditation?

In 1995 I posted a similar question on the internet group rec.music.country.old-time. Here are some of the responses I received.

Very simple: Old-time music = mantra music.
Steve Feldman

Hey why else do we play tunes? Or dance or paint or go to church or ... we're all just looking for that good old alpha state.
Dan Gellert

Try Uncle Bunt's "Candy Girl".
Rich Hartness

*At a house party a few years ago, playing tunes late at night, about fifteen of us were rolling along playing God-knows-what, but whatever it was, somewhere along about the millionth time through the tune something came over us all and we began to play with such *sympathy* that our individual instruments melded into one huge roaring voice that felt like God himself yawping along with us. This lasted for only a few minutes, but we all knew it had happened, and no one wanted to talk about it afterward for fear of spoiling the feeling. It was a truly ecstatic sensation, and one I have never had again.*
Art Zerbey

A year or so ago on the bluegrass mailing list, one of the bluegrassers was comparing their custom of playing a tune until all the verses had been sung with the old-time custom of playing the same tune ad infinitum. He remarked that the object of old-time music was to bore people. I explained that the object of an old-time jam session is enlightenment (satori, if you will) – boredom is only a means to that end.
Charlie Bowen

Some concluding quotes ...

From John Herrmann, an old-time banjo player and long time Zen practitioner – as reported by Brad Leftwich in *The Old-Time Herald* – Vol 9 – 2004/05

Repetition of the tune in the groove leads people to an absorption, a place of clarity which most old-time musicians like. I think human beings all the way back to the prehistoric cultures of Lascaux and Altamira learned how to find that place, and music is one of the ways they've done it.

In old-time music you have pointed concentration, often at first narrowly focussed on what you're doing. And then your concentration broadens and you take in the fiddle, banjo, everything. You hit the groove. The music starts to play itself.

The fundamental project is developing wisdom and compassion in your life and trying to keep them in focus whatever you're doing. Old-time music is simple enough to offer a lot of people the opportunity to do that, to play with wisdom and compassion. Technical athleticism, the hope for recognition, and the other things people do for a variety of motivations are beside the point.

... and finally ...

One way of enhancing awareness, found in Zen, is the process of listening to every sound. This is the koan kikanushi – "Who is the master that is hearing?" Using this koan one listens to every single sound, all the time asking who is it that hears. In this way it is said the bodhisattva Kannon found enlightenment.

William Johnston

Fred Pribac

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Terri Lukacko is happy to answer old-time questions and exchange tunes
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Further Reading

That Half-Barbaric Twang: the banjo in American popular culture

Karen Linn

African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia: a study of folk traditions

Cecilia Conway

Hillbilly: a cultural history of an American icon

Anthony Harkins

The Crooked Stovepipe

Craig Miller

Old-Time Kentucky Fiddle Tunes

Jeff Todd Hilton

Zen Buddhism: selected writings of D.T. Suzuki

William Barrett

Silent Music: the Science of Meditation

William Johnston

Hobart Old-Time Country Music and links to more

The Hobart Old Time String Band is a community based orchestra that meets regularly. www.HOTstringband.org

Hobart Zen

Mountains and Rivers Zen Group
2nd Floor, 71 Liverpool St, Hobart