

Old-Time Music Brought Down from the Mountains

BY CHERIE YURCO

The region of Appalachia has managed to hold onto its unique culture and old-time music despite the many changes the region and country have seen. That's not to say its traditional old-time music hasn't evolved and adapted with generations of immigrants and their influences.

For the most part, the tradition of playing old-time music is passed down from generation to generation at jam sessions. Today these sessions that play tunes like "Come All You Fair and Tender Maidens," "Silver Dagger," "Clementine," and "Old Dan Tucker" can include banjo, guitar, mandolin, harmonica, mountain dulcimer, and other instruments, and newcomers are usually welcomed.

Richard Sutton, a fiction writer living in Huttington, New York, has been participating in old-time jams for many years. "I've always found the other players to be welcoming, friendly, and minimally ego-driven," he says. "I've never seen a player turned away, even if they show up with something unusual, like an accordion or electric guitar."

It's fascinating to look at how this music developed from English, Irish, and Scottish settlers who began to arrive in the Appalachian region in the 17th century bringing their dances, reels, and instruments. They imported tunes like "Barbara Allen" and "Fair Ellender," which were changed to reflect life in the New World. Ornamentation and vocal improvisation led to a unique tonal, or nasal, quality common to Appalachian singers.

Fiddles were their most common instrument, but they also brought pipes and a small three-string plucked zither, which evolved to become the more boisterous mountain dulcimer. Sometimes there were autoharps and harmonicas. The manner of fiddle playing evolved with the music. Players adopted a "high lonesome" sound characteristic of old-time music, and then the influence of ragtime around the turn of the 20th century led fiddlers to start "rocking the bow."

The banjo, today a staple of old-time music, was introduced to



the region by African-American slaves in the mid-1800s, who also brought the tradition of call-and-response singing. Banjo remained a "slave instrument" until the growth in popularity of minstrel shows in the 1840s. By 1910 when the guitar was added, the music had become more percussive, elaborate, and melodic.

Finally, in the 1920s, greater mobility, radio, and music recording allowed old-time music to spread down the mountains and across the country with recordings from artists like Eck Robertson, Fiddlin' John Carson, Henry Whitter, the Carter Family, Frank Proffitt, and Dock Boggs. Programs like the Grand Ole Opry featured old-time music in the 1930s.

In the 1950s and 1960s ethnomusicologists realized the value of preserving this music and they recorded many musicians—Jean Ritchie, Roscoe Holcomb, Ola Belle Reed, Lilly May Ledford, and Doc Watson. Groups like Mike Seeger's New Lost City Ramblers brought the music out of the mountains to a wider audience. Many of these old-time recordings have been preserved by the Smithsonian Institution's Folkways Recordings (www.folkways.si.edu).

To experience this very special American music in person visit one of the numerous old-time festivals and music camps held around the country. Visit www.makingmusicmag.com/old-timemusic for a list.

"Old-time music is easy to play and remember, with lyrics everyone already knows, or can learn fast," says Sutton, 60. "The act of jamming in one of these sessions improves your confidence, builds your player chops, and makes you a more agreeable human being! I've been playing more than 50 years now, and never turn away from a jam, if I can attend."