



Southern Music



Bill C. Malone

The South has played a central and defining role in American musical history, as an inspiration for songwriters, as a source of styles, and as the birthplace of many of the nation's greatest musicians. It is impossible to think of American music in this century without such Southern-derived forms as ragtime, jazz, blues, country, gospel, rhythm and blues, Cajun, zydeco, and rock 'n' roll. These vibrant styles have been taken to heart by people around the world and have even been reintroduced to this country in altered forms through the performances of such foreign-based musicians as the Beatles and Rolling Stones.

Romantic images of the South have fired the imaginations of songwriters since at

"Bill Monroe, often called the father of Bluegrass music, established the classic Bluegrass sound — high, pure tenor voice, powerful mandolin solos against the banjo background. Bluegrass remains the most distinctive of all the sub-styles within country music, having changed relatively little in the last half-century."

— David Vinopal, *All Music Guide*

Photo by Bruce Roberts,
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least the 1830s, when black-face minstrels began exploiting Southern musical forms and cultural symbols. The region has spawned a veritable school of songwriters, from Stephen Foster, Will Hays, and Dan Emmett in the nineteenth century to Johnny Mercer, Hoagy Carmichael, Allen Toussaint, Tom T. Hall, Dolly Parton, and Hank Williams, Jr., in our own time. Visions of lonesome pines, lazy rivers, and smoky mountains have long enraptured America's lyricists and delighted audiences with images of a land where time moves slowly, life is simple, and people hold clear values and love to make music.

Southerners themselves have greatly enriched American music, as performers, songwriters, record producers and promoters, and folklorists. While some Southern-born musicians who have won international distinction, like Mary Martin and Kate Smith, Van Cliburn

and Leontyne Price, express little or no regional identity, the folk South, in contrast, has greatly broadened the nation's musical styles.

Southern-born musical styles also have conquered the world, making immense fortunes for a few musicians and more entrepreneurs, but we should not forget that they were born in poverty. They were nurtured in the folk communities of the South, largely apart from the gaze of outsiders, in homes, churches, singing schools and conventions, juke joints, honky tonks, brothels, fiddle contests, and other scenes of social interchange. The region's working people drew deeply from their marvelous music to preserve their sanity, assert their identity, build community ties, worship God, and win emotional release and liberation in a society that seemed too often to value only their labor.

The deep waters of Southern folk music flowed principally from the confluence of two mighty cultural streams, the British and the West African. This mighty river was enriched by the periodic infusion of German, Spanish, French, Caribbean, and other melodic and stylistic elements. The African admixture has contributed much to the distinctiveness and appeal of Southern music: syncopation, antiphony (call and response), improvisation, and blue notes. But other ethnic groups have also added to the musical mix. Scotch-Irish balladry and fiddle music, German accordion rhythms and hymn tunes, the infectious Cajun dance style, and the soulful cry of Mexican *conjunto* singers have all shaped the Southern sound.

Southern working people's music also borrowed much from both high art and popular culture. Some rural dances, for example, had middle- or upper-class origins. The square dance came from the cotillion; the African-American cakewalk was a burlesque of formal European-American dancing; the Virginia Reel was a variation of the upper-class dance called

At the home of Terry Wootten on Sand Mountain, in Alabama, the Wootten family sings from the Sacred Harp Songbook, first published in Georgia in 1844. The invention in 1802 of shape

notes, a format in which the pitch of each note is represented with one of four shapes, facilitated music reading. The notation proved so popular in the South and Midwest that practically every singing-school book used the four shapes devised by William Little and William Smith.

Photo by Anne Kimzey,
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Traditional Culture



the Sir Roger de Coverley. Many fiddle tunes hallowed in rural folk tradition, such as "Under the Double Eagle," "Listen to the Mockingbird," and "Red Wing," came from marches or pop tunes written by popular composers. Chautauqua tents, medicine shows, tent-rep shows, vaudeville, and the popular music industry all introduced styles and songs that became part of Southern folk traditions.

Southern music entered the nation's consciousness late in the nineteenth century. Until that time national audiences had heard only caricatures of Southern music in the performances of the black-face minstrels — Northern, White song-and-dance men who roamed the country sporting corked faces and grotesque "darky" dialects. In 1865, however, a small group of African-American entertainers, the Georgia Minstrels, inaugurated a brand of minstrelsy that, while still suffering from stereotypes of the genre, enabled Black performers to slowly develop a form of entertainment more truly representative of their culture and music. At least as late as World War I, minstrel troupes featuring African-American performers such as Billy Kersands, Ma Rainey, and Bessie Smith spread Black Southern music to a wide audience.

By 1900, Southern music had had a powerful impact on high and popular culture. The Fisk Jubilee Singers from Nashville, Tennes-

see, made devotees of "serious music" aware of Negro Spirituals after 1871, when they made performing tours in the North and in Europe. And in the 1890s, a large number of itinerant piano players, led principally by Scott Joplin from Texarkana, Texas, revolutionized the world of American popular music with ragtime. During the years surrounding World War I, composer and veteran brass-band musician W. C. Handy, based in Memphis, popularized a style of sophisticated, urban blues music, including his own compositions such as "St. Louis Blues" and "Memphis Blues." The most dramatic entrance of Southern-derived music on the national scene, however, came after 1917, when a few bands from New Orleans, including the Original Dixieland Jazz Band and Joe "King" Oliver's Creole Jazz Band, brought their hot, improvised numbers to receptive fans on the West Coast and in Chicago and New York. First described as "jazz" in Chicago, this music rapidly won over young musicians and fans with its dance beat and spirited improvisations. Jazz stars quickly arose, including instrumentalists Sidney Bechet and Louis Armstrong and vocalist Bessie Smith, whose city blues developed in a close relationship with jazz.



Gospel singers on W. C. Handy Square in Memphis. Gospel music is rooted in spirituals, blues, shape-note songs, ragtime, and the urban church revival. It emerged in the early twentieth century as traveling performers "visited" church communities, popularizing compositions by Charles Tindley and Thomas Dorsey. Gospel compositions are formally notated, but they are transformed during performances, when participation and improvisation on the part of the audience become an important part of the offering.

Photo © Roland L. Freeman

Although collections of Appalachian ballads and cowboy songs had been published in 1917 and 1920, the music of rural White folk of the South between the eastern mountains and the western plains remained unknown and unvalued nationally. The discovery and popularization of this music came with the media revolution of the 1920s. White rural entertainers began performing on newly established Southern radio stations, and in 1923 a fiddler named John Carson, who had earlier performed on WSB in Atlanta, made the first "hillbilly" recording in the same city. As the decade continued, other Southern grassroots forms such as Cajun, cowboy, gospel (African- and European-American), and country blues also began to appear on commercial recordings.

Southern musical forms changed as they grew to national popularity during the 1930s and 1940s. They thrived during the Great Depression and provided hard-pressed Americans with escape, fantasy, and hope in danceable rhythms and down-to-earth lyrics. New and vital forms emerged, including the singing cowboy genre of Gene Autry, the western swing dance music of Bob Wills, the honky-tonk music of Ernest Tubb, the gospel soul of Mahalia Jackson, the shuffle beat of Louis

Jordan, and the urban and electrified blues of Muddy Waters. Southern music was already making crucial stylistic departures and reaching out to larger audiences by the end of the 1930s through powerful radio broadcasts, Hollywood movies, personal appearance tours, and increasingly sophisticated recording techniques.

The massive population movements and the prosperity caused by World War II and new forms of consciousness among youth, women, and African Americans combined to intensify the nationalization of Southern music. Many small record labels featuring grassroots music styles of the South appeared after the war, in and outside the region. Major record labels found commercial success with Southern-born musicians like Hank Williams, Eddy Arnold, Louis Jordan, Nat "King" Cole, Sister Rosetta Tharp, and Elvis Presley. Postwar recording tended increasingly to be done in such Southern cities as Dallas, Houston, New Orleans, Memphis, Macon, Muscle Shoals, and Nashville.

Powered by prosperity and an emerging youth market, a skyrocketing entertainment industry distributed great quantities of commercial music. Old forms evolved and acquired new labels that seemed to better reflect America's newly emerging realities. "Hillbilly" gave way to "country," "rural blues" became



"rhythm and blues," and the gospel style of the old shape-note publishing houses became a polished and dynamic urban gospel. American youth were increasingly receptive to musical alternatives of which their parents had been unaware, or to which they were opposed.

Elvis Presley was a major beneficiary of these transformations. His dynamic and sensual style combined elements from virtually every form of popular music available in the postwar years. He and other rockabilly musicians such as Buddy Holly, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, and the Everly Brothers unleashed the most important musical revolution that America had experienced since the blossoming of jazz earlier in the century. Together with rhythm and blues performers such as Fats Domino, Little Richard, and Chuck Berry, they carried the musical sounds of the Southern working class deep into American popular culture.

Country music has become America's favorite. Its styles and themes seem to appeal to much of the nation's adult White population. This trend may reflect a "southernization of the North," but it also suggests the musics and the cultures that created them are becoming part of the national mainstream. But country musicians are still overwhelmingly from the South, and their lyrics often self-consciously reflect Southern preoccupations and longings.

Southerners export musical treasures to the world and absorb much in return. Their styles may no longer be as regionally distinctive as many would like, but how could it be otherwise when the folk cultures that produced these traditions are undergoing a similar transformation? Happily, many of the older traditions — such as old-time fiddling and string band music, clog dancing, and Sacred Harp singing — are preserved and revitalized by

increasing numbers of young people. New Orleans has seen a revitalization of the brass band as young musicians rediscover it, and scores of Cajun youth have taken up the accordion and the Louisiana French music of their ancestors.

Many performers preserve the older traditions of Southern rural music: singers like Austin-based Don Walser, who yodels and sings in the old-time honky-tonk style; Ralph Stanley, the banjo player and tenor singer from McClure, Virginia, who preserves the haunting, pinch-throat style of Appalachian singing; and Doc Watson, the North Carolina wizard of the flat-top guitar. And, thank God, Bill Monroe, the Kentucky musician whose sky-high tenor singing and powerful mandolin style defined the art of bluegrass music performance, still lives and entertains.

Festival of American Folklife 1996

Music & the U.S. Civil Rights Movement

Jacquelin C. Peters

Song and eloquent oratory are integral to African-American religious expression, and they were pervasive, spiritually sustaining elements of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. In emotionally tense or physically threatening situations, the standard of nonviolence and a serene attitude were maintained through song, prayer, and words of encouragement. Massive church rallies, picketing demonstrations, and even jail houses echoed with the sounds of resolve, declaring, "Just like a tree standing by the water / We shall not be moved."

Sacred African-American music provided the basis for many freedom songs. One such spiritual, "I Will Be All Right," has evolved to become the universal anthem of protest, "We Shall Overcome."

*We shall overcome
We shall overcome
We shall overcome someday.
Deep in my heart, I do believe
We shall overcome someday.*

Techniques such as call and response, "worrying the line" (using melismatic vocal embellishments), or "lining out" (the song leader's singing or reciting the next line of verse before the end of the previous one) are other retentions from traditional African-American song.

Grounded in the tradition of Black congregational song, choral quartets and ensembles transmitted the Movement's musical message to audiences far from the locale of the struggle. The Montgomery Gospel Trio, the American Baptist Theological Seminary Quartet (also known as the Nashville Quartet), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) Singers, and the SNCC Freedom Singers gave performances that encouraged the world to sit up and take notice.

Suggested Listening

Been in the Storm So Long.

Smithsonian Folkways SF 40031.

Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement through its Songs.

Smithsonian Folkways SF 40032.

Voices of the Civil Rights Movement:

Black American Freedom Songs, 1960–1965. Smithsonian Collection of Recordings R023.

Wade in the Water, Vols. 1–4.

Smithsonian Folkways SF 40072/75.

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Young, more commercial musicians prove it is still possible to create new, exciting, and popular sounds by building on time-tested musical genres: Tish Hinojosa, with her affecting blend of Tex-Mex and country styles; the Nashville Bluegrass Band, with its superb mixture of dynamic musicianship, original and traditional songs, and a cappella gospel harmonies; Zachary Richard, with his fusion of rock and traditional zydeco stylings; and Aaron Neville, with his sweet, soulful mélange of country and New Orleans rhythm and blues.

Whatever directions its talented musicians may take in the years to come, the South will not soon lose its genius or its romantic aura. It will always sing and be sung about.

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A former Guggenheim Fellow for the study of country music and the Southern working class, Dr. Malone is the author of an award-winning book entitled *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers: Southern Culture and the Roots of Country Music*, and numerous educational journal publications and encyclopedia articles on the varied forms of Southern music.

The 1958 cast of the Louisiana Hayride. Begun in 1948 in the Municipal Auditorium in Shreveport, the Louisiana Hayride was the launching-pad of country music in the 1940s and 1950s. The show, dubbed the "Cradle of the Stars," presented area favorites and trend-setting explorers on the edge of what was then called "hillbilly" music. Fans came from neighboring states and all over Louisiana to the live, Saturday night broadcasts over local station KWKH. The sometimes-rowdy audience could make or break an act. It was on the Hayride that a truck driver from Mississippi, Elvis Presley, gyrated himself to stardom with more moves than the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville would tolerate. When KWKH joined the CBS radio network and the Armed Forces Radio System, the Hayride audience grew to encompass an entire new world of listeners intrigued and excited by the Hayride's transformation of "hillbilly" into "country" music.

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