

What is Folk Music?

In its simplest sense, folk music is music that is made by common folk, and is about common things. Folk music is called folk for two reasons: because of who makes it, and because of what it expresses.

Who makes folk music? Ordinary people, not professionals. Although skill is needed to make folk music (at least the ability to carry a tune and memorize lyrics¹), it requires no special equipment, expertise, or wealth. (Compare this to classical, pop, or rock music.) Because it's the music that people can and do make for themselves, there are songs to suit and express all the situations in which ordinary folk find themselves.

The second reason for the designation "*folk*" is what folk music expresses: its content. Folk music is about universal human things: suffering, faithfulness, loss, betrayal, love, wanderlust, greed, violence, yearning, courage. Folk songs do not deal with only the workaday life; there are songs for every situation. There are ballads, narratives rife with drama, that tell stories of love, longing, murder, war;² there are lyrical songs and lullabies, simple expressions of love or loss;³ there are nonsense or patter songs, nursery rhymes, children's games, counting songs;⁴ there are songs of faith (often originally hymns or gospel tunes);⁵ there are drinking songs;⁶ there are celebratory songs⁷.

These ordinary situations don't just provide the content of the songs, however; they also shape the form of the music itself. The rhythms of folk music, more than just the words, tend to reflect universal, workaday human activities (in sometimes subtle ways). The rhythms of walking, kneading, rocking, beating, cutting, and rowing are all commonly found in old traditional music. Doc Watson recalls singing *Banks of the Ohio* to the rhythmic beat of

¹ Or play an instrument. We're dealing particularly with folk singing here, but most of this applies to instrumental music, as well.

² Such as *Barbara Allen*, *Banks of the Ohio*, or *The Minstrel Boy*.

³ Such as *Sally Gardens*, *Lavender's Blue*, *Rockabye Baby*, or *Greensleeves*

⁴ Such as *Over in the Meadow*, *Old King Cole*, *Cat went Fiddle-i-fee*, *The Twelve Days of Christmas*, or *The Rattlin Bog*.

⁵ Such as *Amazing Grace*, *Down to the River to Pray*, or *May the Circle be Unbroken*.

⁶ Such as *Whisky in the Jar* or *Little Brown Jug*.

⁷ Such as *Happy Birthday* or *For He's a Jolly Good Fellow*.

his mother's butter churn. And haven't we all as children marched around to *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*? Or rocked a baby to *Hush Little Baby* or *Away in a Manger*?

Sometimes the rhythms are suited to a particular type of labor. For example, both sea-chanties and lumberjack songs can be sung while doing heavy physical labor. They have simple, memorable refrains, and because lumberjacks and sailors do much heavy lifting and pulling, their songs frequently have a call-and-response format, which allows the singers a chance to catch their breath and pull together.⁸ Other examples of the influence of labor on music are the trotting rhythms of cowboys music and the heavy driving beat of railroad tunes.⁹

So folk music is sung by ordinary humans about the most powerful and ordinary human things.¹⁰ It's done while doing dishes, putting children to bed, doing hard physical labor, driving in the car, waiting for the bread to come out of the oven, celebrating a special occasion, walking down the road, sitting by the fire.

Whatever the content, folk songs are usually notable for their lack of sentiment. Although they are often dealing in sentiment, folk songs offer no easy answer to the most visceral difficulties of life. Take these lyrics, for example: *I killed the girl I loved, you see/ Because she would not marry me*. No dealing in bathos, here; just bald statement of fact. Or this experience of a young girl in love: *All my friends fell out with me/ Because I kept your company./ But let them say whatever they will/ I love my love with a free good will*.¹¹

⁸ The song leader will lead the verses: "When I was a little lad, and so my mother told me", with everyone joining in the refrain: "Way haul away, we'll haul away, Joe".

⁹ E.g. *I've been working on the Railroad, Streets of Laredo, Rolling Home Across the Sea, Hanging Johnny, or John Henry*.

¹⁰ It should be noted that a folk song can, for this reason, be political in origin, but it will only become a true folksong if at root it addresses something universally human. (e.g. *The Battle Hymn of the Republic, A Man's a Man for a' that, The Minstrel Boy, The Southern Girl's Reply, This Land is my Land*)

¹¹ The one exception to folk music's lack of sentimentality is gospel music. As a genre, it trades in sentiment. I believe this is a result partly of sentiment-based Protestant revival theology and partly of the fact that it picks up where liturgical music leaves off; in other words, it is not so much dealing with God as it is dealing with the human *experience* of the life of faith in God.

But if an unsentimental portrayal of raw human experience was all folk music offered, it wouldn't offer anything hard metal or rock couldn't offer more powerfully. Folk music characteristically portrays this human experience in a distant, detached way. Moreover, because this music has passed through the filter of tradition, it is no longer a raw experience--it's pre-digested, as it were. When singing "I killed the girl I loved, you see/Because she would not marry me", one is not being invited to feel the feelings of murderous rage; but one is being asked to accept the common humanity between oneself and a fellow human being.¹²

Thus, folk music gains its name from the nature of its content--both its subject matter and its rhythms--and from the people making it. The final defining trait of folk music that it is shared, held in common by a community. I like to say that folk music is *alive*, because it's music that is participated in, rather than consumed. It thrives primarily in small communities, because there must be much shared experience, a common idiom, and a chance to make music together frequently. Folk music is highly adaptive and full of variety, so it usually has a distinct local flavor. This last mark of folk music, its communal nature, begins to manifest not only what folk music is, but also its value.

¹² It's a little like the difference between reading a good war novel such as *The Red Badge of Courage* and playing a violent video game. They're both a form of vicarious experience, but one is mediated, rational participation and one is simulated participation. One is an experience that snatches you out of yourself, carries you away; the other invites you to retain your human agency by the exercise of your intellect.