

Folk and Folk-Rock Music

Folk music grows out of an oral tradition. Composers do not plan and notate every nuance of the music. Rather, the rhythms, lyrics, and melodies of folk music often changes from performer to performer and, often, from performance to performance. Sometimes the changes were made as a result of faulty memory, but often, the changes were made so that old songs would speak to new circumstances.

Because it is folk music, the nature of the music would vary from one region to another. This is because the musical traditions the different settlers brought with them varied from other parts of the country. The folk-rock music that developed in this country was most closely related to the music of England. Much of the folk music was cultivated in the Appalachian Mountains.

Most folk music was primarily vocal with instruments being used to accompany the singers. Instruments such as the fiddle and the recorder supplied fills and riffs in much the same way as was done in hillbilly music (which really is a type of folk music). Folk singers avoided the use of electric instruments and drums---even after these were common with other forms of rock music.

Folk singers frequently spoke (sang) about various social problems. Pete Seeger, one of the early successful folk singers, formed the group, The Almanacs in 1941. The Almanacs sang about civil rights, labor unions, and the need to end war. Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, a member of The Almanacs, both went on to have successful solo careers.

In 1948, Pete Seeger formed The Weavers. This group performed well-known folk tunes such as *On Top of Old Smokey*, *Kisses Sweeter Than Wine*, and *Goodnight Irene*.

Listen to The Weavers---Goodnight Irene

In addition to these favorites, The Weavers also sang political songs. Their left-winged political connections resulted in their being investigated by the House Un-American Activities Committee in the early 50's. The temporarily broke up in 1953 and regrouped two years later, continuing to perform for another 10 years. Among the pieces recorded by The Weavers is *Kum Bah Yah*.

Woody Guthrie (1912-1963) spent many years traveling around the country singing of his social concerns on street corners. During WWII he served in the Merchant Marines and sang songs supporting the war cause. He painted *This Machine Kills Fascists* during this time. By the early 50's, he was hospitalized with a degenerative disease of the nervous system. Among his best-known compositions was *This Land is Your Land*.

Listen to Woody Guthrie---This Land is Your Land

Folk music became a preferred style among socially-conscious college students during much of the 60's.

Bob Dylan

Robert Allen Zimmerman was a follower of Woody Guthrie and grew up in Minnesota. In high school, he sang with a rock group, but dropped rock for folk. In college he sang in coffee houses and began to use the pseudonym, Bob Dylan, which he eventually changed his name to.

One of the traditional songs recorded by Dylan was *House of the Rising Sun*. Dylan sang the traditional lyrics without changing them, from the woman's point of view. It was common for folk singers to sing the original lyrics, regardless of the gender roles being sung about.

Listen to Bob Dylan---House of the Rising Sun

Later, The Animals recorded the song and did change the lyrics as well as adding electric bass, keyboard, guitar, and drums, giving the piece a much more rock-oriented sound.

Dylan became more outspoken in his second album, *The Free-Wheelin' Bob Dylan*. In it, he recorded *Blowin' in the Wind*, *Masters of War*, and *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall*. These songs all contained strong anti-war statements.

Listen to Bob Dylan---Blowin' in the Wind and Masters of War

Joan Baez aided Dylan's career by recording some of his songs and adding him to her 1963 tour. He was becoming very popular among folk fans and was invited to perform on the Ed Sullivan Show. He refused the performance because he wasn't allowed to sing *Talkin' John Birch Paranoid Blues*. To Dylan, making political statements was more important than fame.

1965 marked a shift in Dylan's style. He had observed that there was a potentially large audience for rock-style performances of folk hits. His first hit single during this time was *Subterranean Homesick Blues*.

Listen to Bob Dylan---Subterranean Homesick Blues

This recording, in addition to The Byrds recording of Dylan's *Mr. Tambourine Man* was the beginning of the new genre of rock---folk-rock.

Listen to Bob Dylan---Mr. Tambourine Man

Dylan continued to make strong political statements and was heavily involved in Live Aid and Farm Aid concerts. He was awarded the Founders Award by ASCAP in 1986 and was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1988.

Folk-Rock Music

Dylan's folk hit, *Mr. Tambourine Man* became folk rock when recorded by The Byrds. Members of The Byrds had been members of folk groups before joining The Byrds. Their leader singer/guitarist, Roger McGuinn bought a 12-string electric guitar in order to imitate the sound of the Beatles and Searchers. The result was more than an imitation. The Byrds became an effective response to the British Invasion.

Mr. Tambourine Man was The Byrds' first recording.

Listen to the Byrds---Mr. Tambourine Man

The Byrds followed *Mr. Tambourine Man* with a cover of another Dylan song and then with a song by Pete Seeger, *Turn, Turn, Turn*, based on a passage from the biblical book, *Ecclesiastes*.

Listen to The Byrds---Turn, Turn, Turn

The Byrds moved further from folk-rock in 1966 with their recording of *Eight Miles High*. This was a move toward *psychedelic rock* (discussed in chapter 11).

Most folk-rock music groups were so labeled because they used the folk-inspired music of Bob Dylan and included sounds of acoustic instruments, tambourines, and occasional country styles. But, others came to be regarded as folk-rock because of their rustic dress and their *do your own thing* attitude. One example of a group that got the name of folk-rock from their image was Sonny and Cher.

Listen to Sonny and Cher---I Got You Babe

They included a tambourine, but also included an oboe to get the feeling of continuous motion.

Most folk-rock groups were actually made up of folk musicians. One folk and *jug* band group from New York was the *Mugwumps* (referred to people who tended to be uncommitted and who sat on the political fence). This group split and actually formed two other folk groups. One, The Lovin' Spoonful, took their name from a song by a blues singer. Their music tended to be light-hearted, like *Do You Believe in Magic?*

Listen to The Lovin' Spoonful---Do You Believe in Magic

The Lovin' Spoonful was considered a folk-rock group during the mid-60's. But, it owed its style as much to country and blues as it did to folk.

The second group resulting from the split of the Mugwumps was *The Mamas and the Papas*.

Listen to The Mamas and the Papas---California Dreamin' (1966)

Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel sang together in high school, separated, then came back together in 1966 to record *Wednesday Morning, 3 AM*. This was recorded using only acoustic instruments to accompany their singing. After its release and without Simon or Garfunkel knowing it, Tom Wilson (producer) remixed a track from that album, including electric guitars, bass, and drums and released it. That single rapidly became a hit and showed Simon and Garfunkel the success that might be possible by combining the sounds of folk and rock.

Listen to Simon and Garfunkel---The Sounds of Silence

The duo stopped working together in the mid-70's and developed solo careers.

Much music of folk-rock groups such as the Mamas and the Papas was light. But, Paul Simon's introspective songs introduced an additional depth to folk music. He, like Bob Dylan followed the folk tradition of using music to raise social consciousness of social and political issues. Others followed their lead.

Listen to Janis Ian---Society's Child (1967)

Ian was 15 when she recorded this piece, which she wrote. It makes a strong statement about racism.

Some of the marches and gatherings of protestors during the 60's turned violent, whether the cause was racism or the war in Viet Nam. After a demonstration turned violent in LA, *The Buffalo Springfield's* writer/singer, Stephen Stills wrote what became the anthem of the protest movement.

Listen to Buffalo Springfield---Stop, Hey What's That Sound, (1967)

Stephen Stills joined David Crosby and Graham Nash to produce many hits. This song became the first of their hits.

Listen to Crosby, Stills, and Nash---Marrakesh Express

Neil Young joined the group in 1969 and performed with them at Woodstock. The group performed many different kinds of songs, but they were not untouched by issues. *Ohio* was Neil Young's lament over the death of four students during a demonstration at Kent State University.

Listen to Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young---Ohio (1970)

Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young began to work on solo careers in the early 70's, but they continued to regroup, in pairs or trios to record or perform together.

Folk Rock in Britain

In the same year that Bob Dylan and The Byrds began combining folk and rock, folk musicians in the British Isles began doing the same thing. One early group in Britain to do this was *The Incredible String Band* from Glasgow, Scotland. They began by playing in small clubs, but were soon hired to perform in Royal Albert Hall in London with Tom Paxton and Judy Collins. While they were strongly influenced by rock, their strong interest in non-Western cultures caused them to add instruments such as the oud, sitar, chahanai, and other instruments to their folk-rock sound.

Listen to The Incredible String Band---Chinese White

Fairport Convention debuted their first album in 1968 with covers of American rock and folk-rock music. The album wasn't very successful and the group changed their direction to focus on traditional music from the British Isles. In 1968, they changed lead singers and Sandy Denny joined them. After this, Fairport Convention became leaders in British folk-rock.

Listen to the Fairport Convention