



Traditional Music and the People Who Make It

Resource Guide for Educators and Students Grades 4–12

What is traditional music? It's music that's passed on from one person to another, music that arises from one or more cultures, from their history and geography. It's music that can tell a story or evoke emotions ranging from celebratory joy to quiet reflection. Traditional music is usually played live in community settings such as dances, people's houses and small halls.

In each 30-minute episode of Carry On™, musical explorer and TikTok sensation Hal Walker interviews a musician who plays traditional music. Episodes air live, allowing students to pose questions. Programs are then archived so you can listen to them any time from your classroom or home. Visit Carry On's [YouTube channel](#) for live shows and archived episodes.

Episode 4, Hubby Jenkins

Hubby Jenkins is a musician from Brooklyn, New York, who sings and plays multiple instruments—banjo, guitar, slide guitar and bones on our episode, as well as mandolin, violin and bass. He follows the thread of Black history woven through America's traditional music forms, including blues, old-time, country, ragtime and jazz. He performs around the world as a soloist and with ensembles, and he's been nominated for GRAMMY and Americana music awards.

Hubby grew up listening to and playing music, starting with the alto saxophone in elementary school. In high school, he began playing bass and discovered classic rock and roll via the British invasion—musicians who "invaded" the US in the early 1960s with music based in the blues, a style that actually originated with African American musicians.

This led Hubby further back into the roots of blues and traditional American music. He became fascinated with the banjo, a stringed instrument that enslaved African Americans made to mimic instruments back home. Around 1820, white musicians discovered and appropriated the banjo, which began to be sold commercially. In 1830, a white musician from New York invented a character he called "Jim Crow," blackening his face ("blackface") to perform exaggerated songs and a dance he claimed to have learned from an enslaved African American. Minstrelsy perpetuated dangerous stereotypes about African Americans, but it was a popular entertainment, and overt forms of minstrelsy persisted until the 1970s. Along the way, the banjo was also appropriated for traditions like old-time and country music.

In this episode, Hubby performs songs in several styles, which were originally performed for personal entertainment, in homes and at community events, in clubs and in the fields during labor, as well as for religious purposes and ceremony.

1. [A medley of two tunes.](#)
 - "Buck Creek Girls," a fast tune believed to be from the Kentucky hill country. (For comparison, here are two other versions—a recent version from [Nora Brown](#) (scroll down for audio player) and a much older version from ["Banjo" Bill Cornett](#) recorded in 1961.)
 - "Walkin' Boss," a song that comes out of the practice of convict leasing. After the 13th Amendment freed the slaves, Southern states passed "Black Codes," laws applying only to Black people that sent them to prison for small infractions like loitering. Black prisoners were then leased out to work for plantations and corporations, for no pay in terrible conditions.
2. "[On the Frisco Line](#)" is a blues song. Blues originated in the South; its roots are in African American musical traditions such as work songs sung in the fields, "[field hollers](#)," spirituals and ballads. Subjects were often related to suffering and, as Hubby points out, grief at having to leave family members and homes behind during enslavement, after being sent to prison and during the Great Migration of the early 20th century as African Americans left the South to escape limitations and find safety. The blues are usually in a slow, steady 4/4 time with "blue" (flatted) notes. They usually consist of three chords in regular 8- or 12-bar patterns.
3. [A video](#) of Hubby with Carolina Chocolate Drops performing at the Newport Folk Festival. Hubby and a band mate have fun showing off their skill with the bones.
4. Hubby's last song is in the tradition of a "[ring shout](#)," a counterclockwise dance to call-and-response singing. Ring shouts are probably the oldest known African American tradition. Derived from African practices of affirming unity with the Spirit and ancestors, ring shouts have survived to this day in the coastal communities of Georgia and South Carolina. Songs are accompanied by percussion in the form of hand clapping, foot tapping or pounding a stick on the floor. Subjects are sometimes religious (in the tradition of Christianity), sometimes social (about the hardships of the enslaved), sometimes ceremonial (for funerals).

Vocabulary

Banjo – [A stringed instrument](#) with a drumhead and a long neck. Modern American banjos usually have five strings; the top-most string is a drone string that plays just one note. Enslaved Africans made early banjos out of anything they could find to mimic instruments from home. For the drum, they used cigar boxes or gourds (a pear-shaped vegetable that was hollowed out and dried). They used goat skin to cover the drum and cat gut or broom wires to make strings.

Bones – A percussion instrument of two sticks or bones that the musician strikes together. This instrument has been around as long as humans have. [Versions of this instrument](#) were used in ancient cultures around the world, including India, Egypt and Australia.

Call and response – A type of singing in which the main singer "calls" with different statements and the chorus "responds" with a single, set phrase.

Clawhammer – A style of banjo playing, with the thumb out to strike the top-most drone string and the other fingers curled in a "claw" to brush the other strings. Clawhammer is sometimes called "frailing" or "knocking" to produce melody and rhythm at the same time.

Medley – A mix of tunes or songs into one musical piece.

Slide – A hard object, such as a glass ring or a short metal tube, that fits on a finger of the hand that plays the strings of a guitar.

Syncopation – An emphasis on the "up" beat of the music. In 4/4 time, this accents what are usually weaker beats—the 2 and the 4 beats—which are sometimes called the "off-beat" or "backbeat." Syncopation gives the music bounce and energy.

Activities and Questions for Students

Before you watch the episode—Locate the following places on [Google Maps](#) or a large map.

Africa: West Central Africa, home of Africans brought to the US as slaves, and home of their instrument that later became the banjo. Modern-day countries are Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Republic of the Congo and Democratic Republic of the Congo.

US States: [View this map](#) of the Great Migration to identify the states involved.

City: Brooklyn, NY (where Hubby grew up).

After you watch the episode—Complete assigned activities and questions from this list, which progresses from simpler to more complex.

1. How would you describe the music you heard on this episode to someone who hasn't heard it? What adjectives would you use? (Think about how this music makes you feel—happy, sad, peaceful, energetic? You can feel more than one thing!)
2. What instruments does Hubby play on this episode? Describe them to a visitor from another planet—what would you say about them?
3. Which instrument did you like the most? Which would you want to learn if you had the chance?
4. Can you hum part of a tune you heard? How much of the tune can you hum?
5. [In the video of Hubby with his band](#) Carolina Chocolate Drops, he and a band mate play the bones. They play off each other, almost like a rhythmic duel. Make your own set of bones—you can use things you find around the house, or your hands against a wooden table, or pencils against a hard surface. Now find someone to play a duel with. See if you can imitate and "riff" off each other in a friendly competition of rhythm.
6. What culture produced this tradition? If it was more than one, what were they, and how did the cultures mix?

7. What do you think the music expresses about the experience of the people in the traditions Hubby shared?
8. What do you think the music did for the people who performed it originally? Why do you think people played or sang it? You can choose just one of the songs to talk about.
9. Hubby's first set of tunes is a medley that includes the tune "Buck Creek Girls." [Here's the version](#) he played for us, and [here's a version](#) he played with the band Carolina Chocolate Drops. Which version do you prefer, and why?
10. You are a reporter for your school's newspaper. Write and illustrate a review of this artist, what he talked about, and the music you heard. Describe the music, your favorite things about it, and what more you wish you could see or know about. Be sure to give your article a descriptive title!
11. Hubby says, "So much of our history is in the music." He is a music historian as well as a musician—through the history of the music he plays, he's learned things about Black experiences that he never learned in school. Why do you think a culture's music reveals so much about history? There is no wrong answer! And is there something about your heritage or culture that you'd like to know more about?
12. Hubby plays slide guitar in our episode. What does the slide do to the sound? What adjectives would you use to describe that sound? What emotions does it evoke? If you have a stringed instrument, improvise a slide and try playing with it (without damaging your instrument!). If you don't have a stringed instrument, try "sliding" with your voice.
13. In the medley he plays, Hubby performs two tunes. What are the musical characteristics that change when the medley shifts to the second song? How does Hubby connect the two songs, musically speaking? Think of musical elements like key, tempo and phrasing.
14. On our episode, Hubby plays "[On the Frisco Line](#)," a song from Mississippi Fred McDowell, a blues musician active from the 1920s through the late 1960s. He influenced many rock and roll musicians and taught some to play slide guitar. Listen to [McDowell's version of the song](#) and compare it with Hubby's. How does Hubby honor McDowell's version? How is Hubby's version different? Think about the differences that catch your attention in musical elements like tempo, melody, phrasing and improvisation.
15. This song is partly about a train. If you didn't know that, what musical elements would give you clues about the subject?
16. Hubby mentions African American writer James Baldwin. Do a little Internet research. What themes did he write about? What are his best-known works?
17. Do a little Internet research on the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, on "Black Codes" and on Jim Crow laws. How long do you think African Americans continued to suffer limitations after the Civil War? There are no wrong answers!

Additional Resources

Hubby Jenkins

[Hubby Jenkins](#) – Website and bio, with a sample of some of his recordings.

[Hubby Jenkins' Facebook page](#) – Every week on Facebook Live, Hubby reads a Choose Your Own Adventure book followed by a musical performance.

[The Fourth Day](#) – Excerpts from Hubby's newest album/EP on Bandcamp.

The African American Journey

[Slavery in America](#) (website) – The origins and history of enslavement of Africans in the United States.

[Convict Leasing](#) (website) – A description of the practice from the Equal Justice Initiative.

[The Great Migration](#) (website) – The reasons that African Americans left the South and settled in cities of the North, Midwest and West; their journey spanned several decades.

Musical Traditions

"[The Banjo's Roots, Reconsidered](#)" – This article from National Public Radio discusses the African origins of the banjo and the similarities between the clawhammer playing style in the US with the style used with the African *akonting*, an instrument like the modern-day American banjo with a drone string.

Clawhammer style of banjo playing (websites) – Here is [a basic lesson](#) in clawhammer style. And this is a [sampling of several lessons](#) in clawhammer playing.

[History of Minstrelsy](#) (website) – An online exhibit from the University of South Florida with a history of minstrel entertainment in the US from its beginnings into the 20th century.

[Gullah-Geechee Ring Shout from Georgia](#) (video) – This Library of Congress video showcases the McIntosh County Shouters, "a ten-member Gullah-Geechee group that began performing professionally in 1980."

"[What Is the Blues?](#)" – This article from the Public Broadcasting System describes the origins of blues music and its rise to a dominant American art form.

"[Shades of Blues](#)" – This article concentrates on the musical characteristics of the blues.

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With the help of generous donors, [Carry On](#)™ is produced by the nonprofit [Northeast Ohio Musical Heritage Association](#) (NEOMHA). The show is programmed by [Laura Lewis](#), artistic director of NEOMHA's [Lake Erie Folk Fest](#). Carry On's resource guides are the work of writer and musician [Rita Lewis](#).

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