



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 15, Vivian Leva & Riley Calcagno](#)

Vivian Leva and Riley Calcagno grew up playing traditional music on different coasts of the US. After meeting in 2016, they formed a duo that blends old-time, bluegrass and original songwriting. They are also members of the four-person string band The Onlies, which plays old-time music; the band won first place at the Clifftop Appalachian Stringband Festival in 2017. As a duo and with their band, Viv and Riley tour the US, Canada and the UK; they have also collaborated with musicians like Elvis Costello and Tatiana Hargreaves.

Both Viv and Riley are in their early twenties, and both grew up in families that played old-time Appalachian music. Viv is from Lexington, VA, near the Appalachian Mountains; Riley is from Seattle, WA. They spent time with their families at music festivals, surrounded by traditional music from an early age.

Viv's early music making involved singing and making up songs by age 7. When she started playing guitar, she began taking songwriting seriously. She released an album with original songs at the age of 19. Riley started playing violin at the age of 4, learning classical violin and fiddle at the same time. He also plays banjo, guitar and mandolin. Riley became a scholar of old-time music in college, [writing about traditional music](#) as an intern for the [American Folklife Center](#) at the Library of Congress.

Viv and Riley showcase several tunes on this episode:

- "[Newport Breakdown](#)," a traditional old-time fiddle tune. Riley cites 1920s musician [Manco Sneed's version](#) of the tune. But according to some sources, Sneed learned it

from a musician named Blind Wiley Laws. Other early musicians also played the tune, which was known by various names and probably evolved from an even older tune brought by immigrants from the British Isles.

- "[You Don't See Me](#)." Viv wrote this song for her and Riley's new album, *Vivian Leva & Riley Calcagno*. The melody and [the lyrics](#) are in the tradition of a heartbreakin country music ballad. This song is rooted in traditional music, but Viv and Riley add their unique, modern perspective.
- "[Troubles](#)," with The Onlies. The band's performance of this old-time tune is based on a version of the song performed by traditional autoharp player Kilby Snow—his version of the song can be heard [HERE](#).
- "[Cold Mountains](#)," Viv and Riley's version of a song that traditional musician [Texas Gladden was recorded singing](#) in the late 1950s. She was known for singing ballads a cappella (without accompaniment). Viv and Riley arranged the song (adding instruments and harmony) and added a chorus.

The "tradition" part of traditional music is evident in every old-time tune that Viv and Riley play. For example, the tune "Boogerman" (performed [HERE](#) by The Onlies) is an old tune that Riley researched for the [American Folklife Center](#). He discovered several traditional artists in the 1920s and '40s who played this tune and who learned from each other in "a rich community of players, with tune swapping, competition, and shared performances." Artists gave the tunes their own flair, "illustrat[ing] the old-time process: the blending of different sources, regions, and understandings of the music." You can listen to different versions of Boogerman performed by artists Riley mentions: [Manco Sneed](#) and [Bill Hensley](#).

Tradition was also an important part of Viv and Riley's musical education; they learned from their parents, their parents' friends, and musicians they encountered along the way. Viv's grandfather, [Loyal Jones](#), is a scholar on Appalachian culture who taught at [Berea College](#) in Kentucky; he passed his knowledge and interest to Viv's mother and through her, down to Viv.

Vocabulary

Autoharp – A stringed instrument of the zither family. Bars with felt pads underneath are used to stop (mute) certain strings, creating chords. Melodies can also be plucked.

Bluegrass music – A fast-tempo style that arose in the late 1930s with the radio, which provided a way for people all over the US to listen. Influences include old-time music, country, blues, gospel and jazz. Bluegrass is played by a band of stringed instruments, usually fiddle, banjo, mandolin, guitar, steel or dobro guitar, and bass. Singing in high harmonies is part of bluegrass, and each player usually showcases their virtuosic instrumental skills.

Country music – A genre of American music with roots in blues, old-time and other traditional music including Southern and Western musical styles like Cajun, cowboy and Mexican music. Tunes are often ballads (story songs) and dance tunes. Instruments include various combinations of acoustic and electrified stringed instruments, as well as keyboards, percussion and brass instruments.

Fiddle and violin – Two names for the same instrument, a portable four-string instrument made of wood with pegs for tuning the strings. The main difference between fiddle and violin is the style of music played on the instrument—it's a fiddle if you play traditional or folk-based music; it's a violin if you play classical music on it.

Genre – A particular style of music. For example, jazz, country, classical, hip hop and traditional are all different genres of music.

Old-time music – A traditional music style of North America, particularly the mountainous regions of the southeast US, that comes from music and cultures of settlers from the British Isles (Ireland, Scotland and England), as well as France, Germany and Africa. Old-time music is sung or played live on acoustic instruments, often fiddle alone or with banjo, guitar and sometimes string bass.

Activities and Questions for Students

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

Countries: The United Kingdom (Ireland, Scotland, England), France and Germany and countries in western Africa.

State: Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Washington state.

Region: The Appalachian Mountains.

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

1. Did any of your ancestors play an instrument? Did they play in a musical tradition?
2. Riley says, "One of the best ways to practice is just listening." Do you play an instrument? When did you start? How much and how often do you practice? How much do you listen to music when you're not practicing? If you don't play, answer these questions about someone you know who does.
3. What do you think of Riley's advice to practice by listening? If you've studied music, what has most helped you to learn? Listening? Playing with others? Being shown? Practicing? If you don't play music, but play a sport or have studied or taught yourself something else, what has most helped you to learn?
4. If someone were interviewing you, how would YOU describe a musical tradition like old-time music? How much do you think the tradition can be changed until it becomes something else? Your opinion, please!
5. [Here are the lyrics](#) to the song "You Don't See Me." [Listen to Viv and Riley play](#) the song on our episode. Now make up new lyrics for the song. Use your imagination and poetic powers! If you'd rather, make up new lyrics to "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star."
6. Riley learned to play both classical violin and fiddle at the same time. Because of this, he says he "didn't have to unlearn anything." Can you think of anything musical—or if you don't play music, anything in another skill-based realm—that would benefit from learning two different styles, instruments or skills within the same discipline (like music) at the same time? How would it benefit you? There are no wrong answers!

7. You are a reporter for your school's newspaper. Write and illustrate a review of these artists, what they 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!
8. What do you notice about Riley's playing technique in "[Newport Breakdown](#)" (especially his bow hold)? What about Viv's guitar technique? What do you admire about it? Do you wonder what they're doing, technically speaking?
9. A lot of old-time tunes are... well, old. They are taught and passed down to other musicians. The Onlies (with Viv and Riley) play their version of the song "[Troubles](#)," which they've based on [an older version of the tune](#) by Kilby Snow. What are the differences between the two versions? Which do you like better? Why?
10. Playing a new version of an old-time tune is similar to doing a "cover" of another musician's song. For example, the song "[What a Wonderful World](#)" was made famous by Louis Armstrong in 1967. It was actually written by two other musicians and has since been performed by dozens of other musicians, including [Izzie Naylor](#), [New Republic](#) and [reggae artist Ziggy Marley](#). Do you like to hear covers of familiar songs? What do you think a cover does for a song? What are the pluses and minuses?
11. On the tune "[You Don't See Me](#)," Riley uses a number of techniques to accompany the song. Describe techniques you hear and see—there are no wrong answers!—and how they contribute to the mood of the song. ([Here's a link to the lyrics](#).) What do you think the violin interlude around the middle of the song contributes musically?
12. Viv studied sociology and anthropology in college. How do you think this might serve her music making?
13. Analyze the structure of the first tune Viv and Riley play, "[Newport Breakdown](#)." Each section has 16 bars in 4/4 time. Use letters like A, B, C and D to designate different sections. How many *different* sections are there? Don't be thrown by variations! Map out the structure with letters, for example: AABBCC AABBDD. (This is *not* the structure, just an example.) What do you come up with?

Additional Resources

Vivian Leva & Riley Calcagno

[Viv and Riley's website](#) – Their [About page](#) includes information on their two albums, and the [Media page](#) has three videos of them performing together. "Will You" and "Time Is Everything" are original songs that they co-wrote; "Lost Gal" is an old-time tune.

[Viv and Riley's Facebook page](#).

[Website for The Onlies](#), the four-member string band with Viv and Riley and two of their friends. The [Video page](#) has several performances, including a full-length concert film.

Music

"[Time Is Everything](#)," a song from the album of the same name recorded in 2018. Viv and Riley co-wrote this song; [the lyrics](#) reflect the album's theme of the passing of time.

"[Bottom of the Glass](#)" is a tune in the country music genre; Vivian wrote it by herself and performs it with Riley.

[Vivian Leva & Riley Calcagno](#), their latest album on Bandcamp. Songs range from country music songs, ballads and evocative songs written during the pandemic.

[The Onlies](#), the latest album from Viv and Riley's band The Onlies, with interpretations of old-time fiddle tunes and ballads. You can listen to all the songs on this Bandcamp site.

Festivals & Lessons

Viv and Riley have attended many festivals growing up and as adult performers; they mention these in particular:

Clifftop – The Appalachian String Band Music Festival, Clifftop, WV – Cancelled for 2021; [this documentary](#) from West Virginia public television offers a look at the festival and its music making that influenced Viv.

[Weiser River Music Fest](#) – Weiser, ID. Home to the [National Oldtime Fiddlers Contest](#) and music that influenced Riley.

[Fiddle Tunes](#) – Online in 2021. "A week-long, total-immersion workshop . . . presenting an expansive array of fiddle styles from specific regions of the world. Workshops, classes, band labs, tutorials, dances, concerts, singing, open jams, hat parties – all contribute to participants' experience."

Both Viv and Riley have taught at festivals around the US such as Big Sur Fiddle Camp (CA), Swannanoa Gathering (NC) and Fairbanks Summer Arts Festival (AK). Riley teaches fiddle, banjo, guitar and mandolin online at [Virtu.Academy](#); students interested in learning old-time guitar from Viv can [email her](#).

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