



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 23, Bob Smakula](#)

Bob Smakula grew up in a musical family, playing in a family band and learning the craft of building and repairing instruments from his father. An award-winning old-time fiddle and banjo player, Bob is the proprietor of Smakula Fretted Instruments in Elkins, West Virginia, which serves customers all over the world.

Bob started building and repairing instruments at age 14, following in his father's footsteps. In the mid-1970s Bob and his father founded Goose Acres Folk Music Center in Cleveland, Ohio. The center was one of the few in the US specializing in repair of folk instruments. Luthiers—those who make and repair stringed instruments—are important to musicians who play traditional music. You can't exactly go to Target for instrument parts!

The first instrument Bob built was a lap dulcimer. A member of the zither family, the lap dulcimer has a thin, flat sound box with strings stretched across it. Family friends saw Bob's dulcimer and wanted one of their own, which Bob happily made and sold to them. He also learned to repair all kinds of instruments, which he's been doing for more than 40 years.

Bob is an accomplished musician, playing many of the instruments he repairs—fiddle, banjo, dulcimer, mandolin and guitar. He learned to play music by "being surrounded by music." His father and mother played stringed instruments, and his father's shop was full of recordings and musicians trying out instruments or playing together. Bob started out playing washtub bass—a low, thumpy-sounding bass instrument improvised from an upside-down metal washtub with a string attached to an upright stick.

Bob plays or mentions historically interesting songs on our episode:

- "[Fisher's Hornpipe](#)." A hornpipe is a type of dance tune in 4/4 time with a bouncy feel. "Fisher's Hornpipe" was well known in England and Scotland before it "immigrated" to the US. A fiddler is said to have played this hornpipe in 1796 on the banks of the Cuyahoga River on a trip to survey northeast Ohio before it was settled. Bob did his own research on the song and discovered that it was played during Cleveland's first July 4 celebration in 1801, when "Major Sam Jones played 'Fisher's Hornpipe' on his squeaky old fiddle." Bob plays the tune on his less squeaky fiddle made around 1890.
- "[Golden Slippers](#)." Bob plays this tune on the lap dulcimer. He demonstrates how easy it is to play this instrument—it can be done with one finger picking out a melody and letting the drone strings supply the harmony. "Golden Slippers" was originally an African American spiritual song. An African American composer named James Bland appropriated it to write a hit song for a minstrel show. The song became the unofficial theme song of the Philadelphia Mummers' Parade around 1901, when Bland moved to the city. It also became a much-loved bluegrass tune; tunes often survive while its original history is lost.
- "[Little Maggie](#)." This is a bluegrass standard, but it probably started life as an old-time Appalachian ballad (a "story" song). It's usually sung; the lyrics tell the story of a man who loves a woman who can't be true to him. Many musicians have covered this song, including the [Stanley Brothers](#) (bluegrass), [Bob Dylan](#) (folk-rock) and [Robert Plant](#) (well-known singer from the 1970s rock group Led Zeppelin). Bob plays this tune on a fretless banjo made around 1890 that he lovingly restored.
- "What Will I Do with the Baby-O." Bob jokes that his father sang this irreverent song to entertain the kids in the family, to their great amusement. Hear the great traditional singer [Jean Ritchie](#) sing this song (and listen for the laughs at the end). You can read the comical lyrics [HERE](#).

Vocabulary

Bass – Low notes, in terms of pitch. Also the name of a stringed instrument that plays the bass line in a group.

Drone – A sustained sound of a single pitch that continues throughout all or most of a musical piece. "Drone" also refers to the strings of the dulcimer that produce and sustain the sound.

Bluegrass music – A fast-tempo style meant to be performed on stage for an audience. It has a number of influences: old-time, 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.

Cover – To play a new version of an older—or another musician's—song. You can "cover" a song, or you can play "a cover"—the word is both a verb and a noun.

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.

Lyrics – The words of a song.

Melody and harmony – Melody is the tune, or the single most noticeable line, usually the one you end up singing along with. Harmony consists of notes played with the melody to create a fuller, more intricate sound.

Minstrelsy, or minstrel shows – 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 harmful stereotypes about African Americans but was popular entertainment during the 1800s.

Old-time music – A traditional music style of North America that comes from music and cultures of indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans, and settlers from the British Isles (Ireland, Scotland and England) as well as other European regions. Old-time music is sung or played live on acoustic instruments, often fiddle alone or with banjo, guitar and sometimes string bass. Many songs and tunes were imported by arriving immigrants, but many are American.

Spiritual – A type of song invented by enslaved African Americans who sang of their cultural heritage, the hardships of slavery, and biblical themes.

Time signature (or meter) – The division of music into patterns of repeated rhythm, or beats. A 2/4 meter indicates two beats repeated over and over in units called measures, or bars. The bottom number (4) means that the quarter note gets one beat. You can usually identify the meter by tapping along and noticing how often the strong beats occur. For example, "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" has two strong beats that repeat, so the meter is 2/4.

Activities and Questions for Students

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

Countries: England, Scotland, and a few of the countries where Bob's customers live:
Sweden, Argentina, New Zealand, and Australia.

US: West Virginia (where Bob lives) and Ohio (find Cleveland and the Cuyahoga River).

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

1. When you're learning to play music by ear, you listen to learn—just like when you're a baby learning to talk, you listen to people talking. What song is "in your ear" that you can sing from memory?
2. Make your own dulcimer with rubber bands and paper cups, using [these instructions](#) from Camp Galileo. Follow the instructor's suggestions on adjusting the tone of your "strings." What do you learn?
3. Watch and listen to Bob play "[Golden Slippers](#)" on his lap dulcimer. Our host Hal calls Bob's left hand a "spider." How would you describe the lap dulcimer—how it sounds or how it's played—to someone who's never seen or heard one? You can talk in general or musical terms.

4. How long do you think it would take you to figure out a song like "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" on the lap dulcimer? How long do you think it would take to figure out "[Golden Slippers](#)"?
5. Bob started repairing instruments as a teenager and it became his business. If you were starting a business repairing anything of your choice, what would it be? Who would your customers be?
6. Bob was the one who gave his father's store the name Goose Acres. If you needed a funny name for your business, what would you call it?
7. If you want to learn traditional music, Bob suggests starting with your family. Did any of your ancestors play an instrument or sing? If they played in a musical tradition, what was it?
8. Bob's banjo is strung with natural gut strings made from sheep intestines. It produces a particular sound. [Listen to Bob](#) play on those strings. Now listen to a banjo strung with [steel strings](#). What differences do you hear? How would you characterize the tone that the different strings produce?
9. You are a reporter for your school's newspaper. Write (and illustrate, if you want) a review of Bob, 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!
10. Bob invents a [fun ending](#) for the song "Golden Slippers." Invent a unique ending for "Take Me Out to the Ball Game." You can sing it or play it on an instrument.
11. Which instrument that Bob played "spoke" to you the most? Why? Which would you learn to play if you had the chance?
12. Bob names the banjo and the lap dulcimer as truly American instruments. Enslaved Africans made banjos to resemble instruments they remembered from Africa, and immigrants perfected the lap dulcimer from instruments they brought with them, or memories of instruments from home. This all happened in the early days of the US, mostly before 1800. Think about that time period—why do YOU think was it a good time for invention and experimentation and musical instruments? There are no wrong answers!
13. Traditional fiddlers often have a different approach to instrument maintenance than violinists do. If you play violin, or a member of the violin family, what do you notice about Bob's approach to instrument maintenance?
14. Bob seems a little apologetic when he describes [the lyrics of the comical song](#) "What Will I Do with the Baby-O." How do you think we should feel about songs of the past that have words we might not use today? Do you think we should excuse the past? Or how should we deal with it? Use the example of this particular song.
15. Listen to Bob play "[Little Maggie](#)." Now listen to the three covers of this song by the [Stanley Brothers](#) (bluegrass), [Bob Dylan](#) (folk-rock) and [Robert Plant](#) (well-known singer from the 1970s rock group Led Zeppelin). Which of the four versions do you like the best, and why? What are the advantages of covering an old song like "Little Maggie"? Why do you think its charm appeals to musicians of today just like it did to musicians of 100 years ago? You can find one version of the lyrics [HERE](#).

Additional Resources

Bob Smakula

Website for [Smakula Fretted Instruments](#), Bob's repair business.

[Short video interview with Bob](#) about his instrument repair work.

[Longer website interview with Bob](#), written by a banjo fan.

[Full-length news broadcast](#) about Goose Acres, the music store that belonged to Bob's father.

Famous musicians who got their start at Goose Acres:

[Marc Olitsky](#), who plays old-time banjo, talks about the store and playing a fretless banjo.

Dirk Powell, who has worked with Joan Baez, a famous folk singer who got her start in the early 1960s. [This is a video of Dirk](#) performing with Rhiannon Giddens, a recipient of the [MacArthur Genius Grant](#).

Lap Dulcimer

Bob mentions that he plays the dulcimer in a simple style; here is a [video of Bing Futch](#), a dulcimer virtuoso.

[TEDx Talk with Jerry Rockwell](#) – The Mountain Dulcimer: A Musical Possibility Box. The mountain dulcimer is another name for lap dulcimer. Jerry demonstrates a variety of playing styles and techniques on this dulcimer, which he built himself. He gets some unusual sound effects from the instrument; at the beginning the dulcimer is amplified and "souped up" to create an other-worldly sound.

Tell us what you think!

We want to make Carry On™ even more useful and enjoyable for students and educators across the country. [Send us your feedback!](#) Tell us what you liked and what we could do better. And please... tell other educators and schools about the show. Help us all carry on!

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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