



## 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 9, James McDowell](#)

**James McDowell** is a bluegrass musician from the Blue Ridge Mountains of Henderson County, North Carolina. He began guitar lessons at age 13 and banjo lessons at age 14, following in the footsteps of his grandfather, a professional bluegrass and gospel musician. James has a passion for the inventive banjo style of Don Reno, "my all-time favorite banjo player."

Bluegrass as a style of music emerged in the late 1930s with the radio, which provided a way for people across the country to listen. Its influences include old-time music, country, blues, jazz and gospel. Bluegrass is played by a band of acoustic stringed instruments, usually fiddle, banjo, mandolin, guitar, bass, and sometimes steel or dobro guitar. Bluegrass is meant to be enjoyed live at festivals and concerts or listened to on recordings. Informal "jam" sessions at homes and gatherings are a good opportunity to listen or learn to play. Classic bluegrass music features:

- A fast, driving rhythm that's almost ahead of the beat, creating a lot of energy and forward momentum.
- "Breaks" with players taking turns taking the lead, showcasing their virtuosity with improvisation and fast runs, string picking and finger work. A bluegrass "breakdown" is a tune that features a series of breaks, rotating through the different instruments.
- High, tight vocal harmonies that often create a "lonesome" sound.

Over time in different areas of the country, bluegrass picked up regional flavors and other styles; for example, influences from pop, rock and jazz have created a progressive form of bluegrass often called "newgrass." Depending on the style and situation, bands may use amplified instruments.

The banjo is a stringed instrument with a drumhead and a long neck. Bluegrass banjos have a resonator back and 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. White musicians and instrument makers adopted the African American banjo starting around 1820. It became part of regional musical styles such as old-time music, eventually making its way into bluegrass.

James has participated in both guitar and banjo competitions; he placed second in the RenoFest banjo competition and sixth in the guitar competition. He is a member of the band Carolina Blue, based in Brevard, North Carolina, that plays "vintage" bluegrass in the style of Bill Monroe (known as the "father of bluegrass"). In addition to performing bluegrass and gospel favorites, the band writes its own songs. Carolina Blue has four other musicians besides James; the band's instrumentation is fiddle, guitar, double bass, mandolin and banjo.

## Vocabulary

**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.

**Gospel** – A genre of music that arose in the 1800s with religious revivals. Gospel developed differently in white and Black communities. White gospel is rooted in European traditions—hymns, spirituals and popular styles. White gospel music is usually in a major key, in verses with a chorus, and in four-part harmony (like a hymn) with the melody on top. Black gospel's influences were white hymns, Black spirituals and songs of enslavement; syncopation became a feature of Black gospel, which developed alongside ragtime, blues and jazz.

**Dobro and steel guitar** – Both instruments are "steel guitars" because they're both played with a "steel"—a small metal slide used to push down on the strings and produce different notes. A lap steel guitar is played with the guitar on the lap; it may be amplified. A resonator, or resophonic, guitar (often called the "dobro," after a brand name) is held flat on the lap or hung from a neck strap. The dobro is fitted with one or more metal cones to receive and amplify the sound from the strings. Both guitars have distinctive sounds. (See Resources below.)

**Genre** – A particular style of music. For example, jazz, country, classical, hip hop and traditional are all different genres of music. There are often subgenres under main genres. For example, Baroque is a subgenre of classical music.

**Instrumentation** – The group of instruments used to play a particular piece or style of music.

**Old-time music** – A traditional music style of North America that comes from the 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.

**Rhythm** – The time element of music and dance. Different elements of rhythm are the beat (the repeated emphasis you hear; what you can tap your foot to), patterns of sound, duration of sound, tempo (speed) and meter (or time signature).

## Activities and Questions for Students

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

Countries: Scotland, Ireland and West African countries where the banjo originated: 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.

States: Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, Kentucky, West Virginia, Virginia (southeastern states with mountainous regions).

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

1. James' parents insisted that he try playing guitar, which at first he didn't want to do. But eventually he became a professional musician. Have you ever had to try something you didn't especially want to? If so, what happened? If not, is there something out of your "comfort zone" that you'd be willing to try learning or doing?
2. Listen to James' first tune, "[Turkey in the Straw](#)." Make up a one-paragraph story to go with the song. Let the music and the title of the song spark your imagination!
3. 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. Listen to James' first tune, "[Turkey in the Straw](#)." Now try to sing it. How much can you sing from memory? If you have time, listen again to just a little bit of it. Now see how much you can sing from memory.
4. Does anyone you know play an instrument? When did they start? How much and how often do they practice?
5. The Appalachian Mountain system stretches all the way from Alabama and Georgia into Canada. Do some [Internet research](#) and name as many ranges as you can in the Appalachian system. James has given you one—the Blue Ridge Mountains.
6. If someone were interviewing you about bluegrass music, how would YOU describe this musical tradition? Where did it come from and what does it sound like?
7. James mentions musicians who have influenced him, including his grandfather and certain banjo players (who were influenced by musicians before them). Pretend you're being interviewed about your "personal influencers," people who've had a positive impact on your musical life, or your life in general. Who would you mention? What effect would you say they've had on your life or your music making?

8. Listen to "Orange Blossom Special" [played by Carolina Blue](#) (James' band) and a version played by a [dobro \(guitar\)](#). Think about the overall sound. What adjectives would you give to each performance? Do you prefer the version with the band, or the dobro version?
9. The main subgenres of bluegrass are traditional (which James plays) and progressive bluegrass, which uses traditional bluegrass as a springboard to incorporate other styles and musical characteristics. Listen to the first part of these performances of bluegrass played at various points over several decades—the first performance is the only one considered purely traditional. What similarities do you hear between them? How about differences? Which style resonates the best with you?
  - 1965 – "[Bluegrass Breakdown](#)," traditional bluegrass played by Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys (the first well-known bluegrass band).
  - 1979 – "[Rider](#)," played by The Seldom Scene.
  - 1979 – "[Lonesome and a Long Way from Home](#)," played by the New Grass Revival.
  - 2011 – "[Sinister Minister](#)," from Béla Fleck & The Flecktones.
10. James suggests first listening to traditional bluegrass to appreciate the later styles. Why might he say that? And do you agree with him? There are no wrong answers, just your opinion!
11. Listen to this performance of "[Grown Cold](#)" from James' band Carolina Blue. Now listen to a performance of "[Uncle Pen](#)" from Bill Monroe's band. The pieces are different, but what similarities do you hear between Carolina Blue and the band of Bill Monroe, the father of bluegrass?
12. Listen to [Don Reno](#), a banjo player who influenced James' playing, and listen to [James playing a Reno tune](#) on our episode. Can you name a musical characteristic or two (or three) that defines the Reno style?
13. Listen to Earl Scruggs (banjo) and Lester Flatt (guitar) play "[Foggy Mountain Breakdown](#)." Now listen to a [Millie Meunier](#), a high school musician from Indiana play the same tune—she plays all five instruments in the video. What liberties does she take with the "classic" version of Scruggs and Flatt? What do you like or what don't you like about her version? Do you think it falls within the parameters of classic bluegrass?
14. [Snuffy Jenkins](#) was a musical influence on [Earl Scruggs](#) and [Don Reno](#). Listen to all three—what similarities do you hear? Differences? Don't think too much! Try to name just one similarity or difference.
15. Watch this video of two well-known banjo players who play in different, but closely related, styles: one in bluegrass style, one in old-time style. What differences do you notice between old-time and bluegrass banjos, both the instrument and they ways they are played? From the styles and the musicians' commentary, can you guess which style came first, historically speaking?

## Additional Resources

### James McDowell

Website for [Carolina Blue](#), James McDowell's band.

[James' bio](#) on Carolina Blue's website.

### Banjo and Guitar

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

[A lesson from Snuffy Jenkins](#) on three ways to play the banjo— two-finger, clawhammer, and three-finger styles. Snuffy Jenkins influenced Earl Scruggs and Don Reno, both of whom played with Bill Monroe.

[Bluegrass Banjo Don Reno Style](#) – YouTube lesson on Don's style from his son.

[A lesson with Doc Watson](#) – A lesson from the legendary guitar player in the flatpicking style.

[An explanation and demonstration](#) of the dobro guitar.

[A demonstration of a 1936 lap steel guitar](#).

### Bluegrass and Old-Time

"[What's the REAL Difference between Old-Time and Bluegrass?](#)" – This video gives historical background about these purely American styles of music, which are closely related.

## 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!

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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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