

Definition Of Bluegrass And Old Tyme Music

BLUEGRASS MUSIC

Bluegrass music is considered a form of North American roots music with its own roots in the English, Irish and Scottish traditional music of immigrants from the British Isles (particularly the Scots-Irish immigrants of Appalachia), influenced by US rural African-Americans, jazz, and blues. Like jazz, bluegrass is played with each melody instrument switching off, playing the melody in turn while the others revert to backing; this is in contrast to old-tyme music, in which all instruments play the melody together or one instrument carries the lead throughout while the others provide accompaniment.

Instrumentation

Unlike mainstream country music, bluegrass relies mostly on acoustic stringed instruments: The fiddle, banjo, acoustic guitar, mandolin, and upright bass are sometimes joined by the resonator guitar (popularly known by the Dobro brand name). Debate rages among bluegrass musicians, fans, and scholars over what instrumentation constitutes a bluegrass band. One suggested definition is that a bluegrass band includes at least four musicians who play instruments including an upright bass, an acoustic guitar, and a banjo, though those instruments need not always be played. (Example: During gospel songs many banjo players switch to lead guitar, a tradition dating to Earl Scruggs.) Other common instruments include the fiddle, the mandolin, and the resonator guitar or dobro. Instrumental solos are improvised, and can frequently be technically demanding.

Vocals

Besides instrumentation, the distinguishing characteristics of bluegrass include vocal harmonies featuring two, three, or four parts, often featuring a dissonant or modal sound in the highest voice; an emphasis on traditional songs, often with sentimental or religious themes. This vocal style has been characterized as the "high lonesome sound."

OLD-TYME MUSIC

Old-tyme music is a form of North American folk music, with roots in the folk music of many countries, most notably: England, Scotland, Ireland, and Africa. This musical form developed along with various North American folk dances, such as square dance. The genre also encompasses ballads and other types of folk songs. It is played on acoustic instruments, generally centering on the fiddle. Old-tyme music represents perhaps the oldest form of North American traditional music other than Native American music, and thus the term "old-tyme" is an appropriate one.

Instrumentation

Old-tyme music is played using a wide variety of stringed instruments. The instrumentation of an old-tyme group is often determined solely by what instruments are available, as well as by tradition. The most common instruments are acoustic string instruments. Historically, the fiddle was nearly always the leading melodic instrument, and in many instances (if no other instruments were available) dances were accompanied only by a single fiddler, who often also acted as dance caller.

Instrumental old-tyme music is traditionally played for dances, and is considered to be dance music. As such, there is not much showiness, generally with no solos, but always carrying a strong beat. This contrasts with bluegrass music which was developed in the 1940s as a form of concert music. Bluegrass music, however, developed from old-tyme music, and shares many of the same songs and instruments, but is more oriented toward solo performance.

Learning old-tyme music

Players traditionally learn old-tyme music by ear; even those musicians who can read music generally learn and play old-tyme tunes by ear. Although it is one of the oldest and most prominent forms of traditional music in the United States and Canada, old-tyme music (with a few notable exceptions) is generally not taught in North American primary schools, secondary schools, or universities. Although square dancing is still occasionally taught in elementary schools (generally with recorded, rather than live music), old-tyme instruments and dances are not included in the educational system, and must be studied outside the school system.

Regional styles

There are numerous regional styles of old-tyme music, each with its own repertoire and playing style. Among the prominent styles in Canada are the Scottish-derived tradition of Nova Scotia (particularly Cape Breton Island), the French Canadian music of Quebec and Acadia, the old-tyme music of Ontario, and the prairie fiddling traditions of the central provinces. It is on the prairies (primarily in Manitoba and Saskatchewan) that the fiddle tradition of the Métis people is found.