

# COUNTRY MUSIC: STYLES AND TRADITIONS



**Jimmie Rodgers**

**Thursday, April 6, 2006**  
**11 a.m.-12 p.m. ET**  
**Grades 7-12**

When viewing *Country Music: Styles and Traditions* and participating in this guide's suggested activities, the following National Standards for Music will be addressed: 6, 9.

## Program Notes

### What Is Country Music?

When asked to describe an artist who typifies country music, people will likely offer different answers—maybe Shania Twain, Hank Williams, Emmylou Harris, or Willie Nelson, or perhaps a bluegrass artist like Alison Krauss or a country rock band like the Eagles. It is not one but all these—and many others—who together represent country music. This uniquely American genre—known for its emphasis on stringed instruments, simple melodies and harmonies, straightforward lyrics, and folksy style—has been changing and growing ever since it first emerged as a commercial art form in the 1920s.

### A Style and Tradition Is Born

**Old-Time Country**—Country music traces its roots to immigrants from England, Scotland, and Ireland who settled in the rural American South. Skilled in playing fiddles, those immigrants fused traditional folk songs, hymns, and fiddle tunes with the folk music of African-Americans and with nineteenth-century commercial music. Out of this mix, “hillbilly” (later, country) music was born. And with the advent of radio and recording, so were country's first stars: solo singer Jimmie Rodgers, considered the father of country music, and the Carter Family, revered as country music's First Family. Together, they popularized the guitar and a repertoire including blues, gospel, and love songs.

**Cowboy**—In the 1930s, times were changing and so was country music. Smooth-singing cowboy movie stars like Gene Autry gave country music a western sound and image that appealed to many Americans yearning for simpler times and an escape from hardship.

**Western Swing**—Meanwhile, musicians such as Bob Wills, playing in dancehalls in Oklahoma and Texas, created another type of country music, western swing, by blending traditional fiddle tunes with big-band jazz, blues, and Mexican folk music. The popular dance sound spread as people moved to find work or serve in the military during World War II.

**Honky-Tonk**—During the late 1930s into the early 1950s, country music continued to diversify, reflecting new sensibilities. Out of rowdy bars and clubs known as “honky-tonks” came a namesake style. Popularized by artists including Hank Williams, honky-tonk was boisterous and blunt, telling of cheating spouses and hard living.

**Bluegrass**—During the decade following World War II, a substyle eventually known as “bluegrass” emerged, named after Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys, the band in which this style first took shape. Bluegrass bands typically included fiddle, banjo, guitar, and mandolin, but updated older string-band sounds with faster tempos, tighter vocal harmonies, and dazzling instrumental solos.

### New Sounds in the 1950s

**Rockabilly and Country Rock**—Blending the backbeat of rhythm & blues with country tunes, full-throated vocals and freewheeling performance styles, artists such as Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash created rockabilly and paved the way for a new genre—rock & roll. In the 1960s and '70s, rock artists incorporated country elements to create country rock.

**The Nashville Sound**—From the mid-1950s into the early 1970s, Patsy Cline and other country artists—under the guidance of Nashville record producers—scaled back the hard-edged sounds of fiddles and steel guitars in favor of smooth vocals and pop elements such as background vocals and string sections.

## Looking Back and Ahead

**Outlaw Country**—In the 1960s and '70s, the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War plunged America into turmoil. Unrest also played out on the country music scene, as some artists—most famously Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings—launched an effort to return country music to simpler instrumentation and songwriting.

**New Traditionalists and Pop-Country**—From the 1970s into the present, artists continue to rediscover and redevelop their roots, focusing on virtuoso playing (for example, Ricky Skaggs) and evocative songwriting (such as Lyle Lovett). At the same time, many performers continue to blend pop and country to create new sounds.

**Words to Live By**—Regardless of how the sound has branched out over the years, the roots of country's legacy remain the lyrics that tell honest stories—often with a beginning, middle, and end. With feisty attitude (“You Ain’t Woman Enough to Take My Man” or “Take This Job and Shove It”), down-home humor (“May the Bird of Paradise Fly up Your Nose” or “I’m My Own Grandpaw”), wordplay (“Old Flames Can’t Hold a Candle to You” or “If The Phone Don’t Ring, It’s Me”), straightforward sincerity (“I Can’t Stop Loving You” or “Making Memories of Us”), or joy, heartbreak, frustration, and other emotions, country songwriters speak to a wide audience, not only in rural America but also in cities and small towns.

The accessible and distinctively American voices and messages of country music continue to resonate with listeners everywhere. By the 1990s, country music—in all its varied forms—became America’s top radio format.



*Johnny Cash*

## Instructional Activities

### Write

Write a title to a country song and a short description (or, if you like, a few lines of lyrics) that would tell a story. To help you get started, brainstorm some song titles you know, or research some online. Exchange your title and song idea with others, and evaluate and explain whether you think the ideas would make good country songs.

## Internet Resources

For more information, visit:  
[countrymusichalloffame.com/explore](http://countrymusichalloffame.com/explore)  
[honkytonks.org](http://honkytonks.org)  
[cbmr.org/styles/country.htm](http://cbmr.org/styles/country.htm)

### Listen and Analyze

Listen to at least three different types of country music (some audio clips are at [www.countrymusichalloffame.com/explore/interact\\_audio1b.html](http://www.countrymusichalloffame.com/explore/interact_audio1b.html)). Listen for the use of traditional country instruments, such as banjo, fiddle, guitar, mandolin, steel guitar, piano, and harmonica. Notice that drums, long considered too loud and harsh, were minimal in early country music. Compare and contrast the songs for arrangement, tone, and lyrics.



*The Carter Family*