Lesson Objective(s):

» The student will discuss and explain the origin and identify four characteristics of country music as well as recognize the instruments used at that time.

Country music was one of the first styles of truly American music, with roots in English folk music, church music and the work songs of African American slaves. It started in the poor and isolated mountain regions of Appalachia and the Southeastern part of the United States reaching west to Texas. Each region had its nuances but it was altogether rural and tied to the past no matter where you went.

Old-time music

One of the earliest styles of country music was old-time music. It included instruments like the mandolin, autoharp, fiddle and acoustic or folk guitar. The country music of today hardly resembles the original old-time music, though there are elements that have remained like the instruments used, subject matter and themes and the basic style.

A new style of uniquely American music developed in the 1900s. It came out of the traditional music heard and performed in the Appalachian Mountains and surrounding hill country of the Eastern United States. Old-time music, as it was first called, saw little change in its words, music and playing style. Like a lot of regional music, it was passed on from one generation to another by the oral tradition of repetition and memorization. As city people moved out to the country, they brought with them their music and instruments like the banjo. When country folk moved into the cities seeking better opportunities they were exposed to new subject matter and a different sound. Soon they integrated these new sounds and experiences into their music.

Records and country music

Recorded for the first time in the early 1920s, old-time music became known outside the Southeast. Ralph Peer, an A&R agent for Okeh Records (which will eventually become Victor Records) was looking for new talent and a new market. In 1923, he recorded a champion fiddle player from Georgia by the name of John Carson. “Little Log Cabin in the Lane” by Fiddlin’ John Carson became a regional hit and Peer knew that a market for “hillbilly” music had been created. Peer spent the new decade finding and
recording this music and he introduced several of the greatest talents of country music’s early commercial period. Another group to become famous during this time was The Carter Family. The Carter Family included A.P. Carter who collected traditional folk songs and also wrote new folk songs, he sang harmony with his sister-in-law Maybelle, and his wife Sarah. Sarah also played the autoharp. Several of the Carter Family songs became hit records like “Can The Circle Be Unbroken (By and By)” and “Wildwood Flowers”; the Carter Family became the first country music stars.

Another of country music’s first stars was Jimmie Rodgers, considered the “Father of Country Music”. His music was recorded at the same recording sessions as the Carters. As a member of the railroad working gangs, Rodgers was exposed to the African American work chants and blues music and, along with the old-time music and folk songs he heard, he combined all these styles into his own music. He also used a vocal technique called yodeling and his first hit record in 1927, “Blue Yodel”, sold almost half a million copies.

**Hillbilly and country-western music**

The term “hillbilly” was first published in a New York newspaper and used to describe uneducated and impoverished white people from Alabama. When trying to decide a name for this type of music the record company decided to use “hillbilly”. Hillbilly music included fiddlers, harmonica players, and singers. The song lyrics were about both the good and bad aspects of everyday life, love, loss, family and death written with simple lyrics and in strophic form.

Before television, though phonographs were available not everyone could afford one, but radio was much more accessible. Radio was the way for families to sit together and listen and be entertained. This gave rise to the hugely successful radio “barn dance” programs and live country-music variety shows, of which Nashville’s now famous “Grand Ole Opry” was a large part. It was radio that helped sustain the country music industry during the Great Depression in the 1930s. As radio signals strengthened, it brought country music and the “Grand Ole Opry” to listeners and fans across the United States. They performed not only old-time music and hillbilly music, but also western music. It became the most successful radio show at the time and can still be heard today. It is the “Grand Ole Opry” that brought country music to Nashville, Tennessee and made it the country music capitol of America.

The western music style often included a horse-like clippity-clop rhythm and the lyrics were about lovesick cowboys and gun-fighting outlaws. Western music became popular in the 1930s and 40s when singing cowboys started to appear in Hollywood cowboy movies called “Westerns”. Singing cowboys like Gene Autry and Roy Rogers became the new country-music stars and Nashville executives decided that the cowboy image was better than the hillbilly image; because of this, “Country and Western music” was born and all the singers and musicians started dressing in cowboy clothes.

**The “sound” of country music**

With country music originating in the Appalachian Mountains and Southeast America, a Southern accent is what is expected of country music. Another aspect is the use of regional colloquialisms. The use of “a-goin”, “ya’ll”, “lyin”, and “yonder” as well as the dropping of the
final g of the –ing suffix is part of country music. In the early years of old-time music and country music, the lyrics were written in the vernacular, however, as time went on and country music reached a larger percentage of the American population, songs using standard English became the norm.

The vocal quality of a country singer characteristically was high, nasal, and tight or strained. It also included the tendency of scooping from one note to another, rather than hitting each not exactly on pitch, particularly at the end of a phrase. The melodic structure of a song was relatively narrow in range, which added to the simple “down-home” feeling.

The lyrical style of country music shows its roots in the ballad tradition of English folk music. As in folk music, the themes of these songs deal with love, death, religion, traveling, patriotism and current events. Realism and emotional responses are important factors in country music and anything that has to do with life in general can find its way into the lyrics of country music.

**Instruments used in country music**

Stringed instruments are the most common instrument in country music and include the fiddle, banjo, upright bass, autoharp, dulcimer, guitar, mandolin, Hawaiian slide or steel guitar and the dobro. Some instruments like the autoharp and dulcimer would eventually fall out of favor while others like the guitar would end up taking center stage. Other instruments like the piano, drums, saxophones and trumpet weren’t used in country music until after the 1930s when they became popular in other genres. Guitars eventually go from acoustic to electric in the 1960s where the electric piano is also added.

**Typical country song lyrics**

“Your Cheatin’ Heart” by Hank Williams is a classic country song. Written in 1952, it is considered to be classic country music. You will notice that the “g” is missing from the words cheating and falling like the typical country music of the time, and the simplicity of the lyrics.

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Your cheatin’ heart
Will make you weep
You’ll cry and cry
And try to sleep
But sleep won’t come
The whole night through
Your cheatin’ heart will tell on you

When tears come down
Like fallin’ rain
You’ll toss around
And call my name
You’ll walk the floor
The way I do
Your cheatin’ heart will tell on you
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Your cheatin’ heart  
Will pine some day  
And crave the love  
You threw away  
The time will come  
When you’ll be blue  
Your cheatin’ heart will tell on you...

When tears come down  
Like falling rain  
You’ll toss around  
And call my name  
You’ll walk the floor  
The way I do  
Your cheatin’ heart will tell on you.

True form of American music

Country music has the longest history of being a truly American form of music. Unlike a lot of other genres of where a source for electricity is needed to play the instruments, country music’s origins in acoustic instruments lends itself to be played anywhere from a barn to a concert venue and played by an individual or a large group. The themes that run through country music dealing with everyday events of life has made it a favorite genre of music worldwide.

LESSON QUESTIONS

1. American country music has its roots in which genre(s) of music?  
2. Who was the first A&R agent from Okeh Records to find and record old-time music?  
3. What type of rhythm did early western music have?
ANSWERS

1. American country music has its roots in which genre(s) of music?
   English folk music, church music, and the work songs of African American slaves

2. Who was the first A&R agent from Okeh Records to find and record old-time music?
   Ralph Peer

3. What type of rhythm did early western music have?
   Clippity-clop like the sound of horse hooves.