



## From Folk to Country

How the Ulster-Scots influenced music in America



**Ulster-Scots Agency**  
Tha Boord o Ulstèr-Scotch

The distinctive styles of many modern-day American country, bluegrass and folk music performers can be traced directly back to the 18th century Ulster-Scots or Scots-Irish settlers. And the dance tradition of Appalachian region in the south-eastern part of the United States has also very strong Ulster-Scots roots.

This is music and dance which crossed the Atlantic during the great waves of emigration and, in the modern idiom, it is a rich cultural expression which is being taken back to the homeland.

The Ulster-Scots sound of drone notes, associated with the pipes and fiddles, are very pronounced and the story-telling balladry of the Scots-Irish diaspora remains deeply rooted in what is American country and folk music today.

These were a people who brought with them to North America the old Scottish, Irish and English folk songs and ballads, and in remote communities in the Appalachian, Cumberland and Great Smoky Mountains, the songs stayed unaltered until the 20th century.

Music lightened toil for the early Scots-Irish pioneers, with the fiddle giving the lift at weddings, and Jew's harp providing accompaniment along the wagon roads to the new settlements. Dulcimer, banjo and mandolin were other favoured instruments on the American frontier, traditional backing for the nasal-vocals of the hardy settler people.

The fiddle, distinctively Scottish and Irish, was the main instrument for playing the tunes and providing the backing for the traditional songs. It was the first musical instrument in the Appalachian region 200/250 years ago. There might just have been one fiddle in a whole community and one player.

The Appalachian mountain people where Scots-Irish

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culture is so strong, have maintained a folk-song culture for several centuries and leading balladeer and folk historian from the early 20th century Cecil Sharpe related how he discovered that nearly every one he met in the mountain region, young and old, could either sing or play an instrument.

The ballads which Sharp collected in Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, the Carolinas and North Georgia were in the traditional vein, with Scots-Irish influences a very dominant strain. Popular Appalachian folk songs and tunes like the Girl from Knoxville, Barbara Allen, The Irish Washerwoman, Haste to the Wedding, The Virginia Reel, The Green River March and Turkey in the Straw are in that tradition.

The music of the American frontier was primarily vocal, through the singing of hymns and folk songs. In the very early settlements in Pennsylvania from the 1720s the fiddle provided the musical background for the reels and jigs which the Ulster-Scots enjoyed. In the austere and, at times lonely surroundings of the frontier, music was the source which brightened the lives of the settlers.

Fiddle styles varied from state to state, and even within states. Individual fiddlers differed in the way they held the instrument, the emphasis which they devoted to noting and the manner in which they bowed.

Some fiddlers stuck resolutely to the melody, while others improvised freely and or employed their own prepared techniques. All a very Scots-Irish trait!

Richard Nevins, in his book *Old-Time Fiddle Classics*, notes that since fiddling was a Celtic art, modern aficionados strain to establish a direct link between Celtic styles and Appalachian renditions. Nevins maintained it is likely all the countless variations in southern fiddling are traceable to seven or eight

different styles brought over to America by the predominantly Celtic-cultured immigrants from various sections of the north of Ireland, southern Scotland and, to a lesser degree, parts of England.

While yodelling has its origins in the Swiss mountains, many performers of a Scots-Irish background in states like Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia and Georgia were adept at raising the tone to a falsetto head voice.

Gospel music was very dear to the God-fearing Scots-Irish and many colloquial hymns, later adopted in mainstream Christianity, had origins in the Appalachian region. Methodist evangelical hymns of Isaac Watts, John Newton and John and Charles Wesley struck a chord with those moving along the Great Wagon Road to the frontier.

Bluegrass music is strongly linked to the Scots-Irish folk of Kentucky, Virginia and Tennessee and top Nashville performer Ricky Skaggs is very proud of his roots.

“My family on my mother’s side were Scots-Irish - they were the Fergusons, who left Limavady and East Donegal in the early part of the 18th century. They eventually moved to Kentucky, where I grew up with a real taste for bluegrass music, which has its origins in the north of Ireland and Scotland. To me, traditional country music has a value in it, a wholesomeness and warmth that some of the other kinds of music don’t have. It’s our heritage, our roots, it’s everything that we’re about,” says Ricky.

Dolly Parton, Nashville’s first lady of country music, also has strong Scots-Irish family links - her late father Robert Lee Parton could trace his roots back to the early settlers.

At Dolly’s theme park at Pigeon Forge in the Great

Smoky Mountains of East Tennessee, the musical documentary 'Fire on the Mountain' tells the fascinating story of American country music and its historical roots, particularly the Scots-Irish theme.

The musical narration confirms the link: "And so they came . . . a strong-willed people who forged their homes out of this region and brought their love and beauty with them. The deeds of our Scots-Irish ancestors are blended with the skills of the musicians who seized the Smokies' fiery spirit and this heritage has been passed on from generation to generation!"

Other American country stars with Scots-Irish family connections include bluegrass performers the late Bill Monroe and Jim and Jesse McReynolds, as well as the Everly Brothers, Loretta Lynn and her sister Crystal Gayle, Jean Shepherd, Emmylou Harris, George Hamilton IV, Billy Walker and the late Roy Acuff, presenter at the Grand Old Opry in Nashville.

Not forgetting, Clayton McMichen, a noted old-tyme early 20th century musician from Georgia, whose family left Ulster in the late 18th century.

- The dance tradition in America is very ethnically-based. Irish, Scottish and English 'clogging' form of dancing blended over the years in the Appalachians, although there were slight variants from region to region, hill and hollar and one to another.

The cultural roots in a community could be detected by the dances they did. There was a lot of instrument backing for the Scots-Irish forms of dancing, with dancers operating quite a bit on their toes, from a very erect still upper and body movement.

- Celebrated American songwriter Stephen Collins Foster was a second generation Ulster-Scot

whose family emigrated from Londonderry to Pennsylvania in the late 18th century.

Foster, born near Pittsburgh in 1826, wrote 200 classic songs, among them Beautiful Dreamer, Jeannie With the Light Brown Hair, My Old Kentucky Home and Campton Races. Foster wrote both the words and the music of most of his songs.

- Jimmy Kennedy, a songwriter born in Omagh, Co Tyrone in the early part of the 20th century, became a renowned name in American music, writing classic songs such as South of the Border Down Mexico Way and Red Sails in the Sunset.

Historical research for this leaflet was carried out by BILLY KENNEDY, author of the Scots-Irish Chronicles (10 volumes), 1995 – 2009.



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