

Old Time Music in Appalachia: “Crock-Pot Cooking” Not “Canning Preserves”

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Abstract

Old Time music, an acculturation of music styles from the British Isles and performance practices from Africa, has been an integral part of the Appalachian Mountains for hundreds of years. By looking at the history of the Old Time genre, we can see the ways in which it is changing. Upon examination of the techniques that give Old Time music its sound, we can see a peek into the lives of the players. Finally, a revamp of the Nationwide Insurance commercial jingle into an Old Time tune is shown as a demonstration of how old material can be re-conceptualized with genre specific techniques into a brand new piece of music.

1. Introduction

The Appalachian Mountains served as a figurative “crock-pot” for the creation of what is now known as Old Time music. Old Time music is combination of two music traditions, European and African, that met in the Appalachian Mountains.¹ Like in a crock-pot, these different musical traditions were isolated in the mountains and after a few centuries, when the lid was taken off, a new dish was presented to the world. Other genres are more comparable to preserves, in that once the mixture is cooked down and canned, the flavor will remain virtually the same – musically speaking, the sound and style of most genres are very reluctant to change. As someone who has played the fiddle in the Old Time style for the past ten years, I am very interested in the nuances of the music and the evolution of the genre as a whole. This paper will include a brief history of the genre, cover various traits, a social analysis, and a transformational-generative approach to making an Old Time tune.

Old Time music is an acculturation of repertoire from the British Isles and performance practices from Africa, formed in the Appalachian Mountains.² On the surface European and African musics may sound totally different but they share a few characteristics such as syncopation as well as call and response, which make them compatible to meld together. As the colonists from the British Isles came to North America, they also brought with them their culture and music. Then when slaves from Africa started to be brought to the early colonies, they also brought with them their musical traditions and emphasis on rhythm.³ As the years went by, the world outside of the Appalachian Mountains changed at a fast pace, but the modernization of Appalachia happened extremely slowly because of how isolated the locals were.

Old Time is referred to in a lot of literature and discussions as “traditional Appalachian” or “hillbilly” music.⁴ Both of those terms invalidate the music as a genre in its own right. Simply referring to a genre by the name of its location ignores the other styles of music traditional to the area, i.e. traditional Cherokee music. Additionally, “hillbilly” has turned into a derogatory term synonymous with uneducated, simple minded, and uncivilized.⁵ In short, this has come about because outsiders benefited from marketing the local Appalachians as simpletons in need of outside intervention, so that they could raise funds for various programs that would “help” civilize the mountain dwellers.⁶ Referring to the

genre as “hillbilly” is outdated and lessens the legitimacy of the style. Therefore, in this paper I will be referring to the genre exclusively as Old Time, the name used by local players of the style.

Another main difference between Old Time and other Western music genres is how much group participation is a key aspect of Old Time. Thomas Turino, in his book *Music as Social Life*, talks about the participatory atmosphere that is very often found in the Old Time music culture. In frequent get togethers called *jams*, a welcoming community environment is created by not only letting everyone have a chance to choose a song but also playing the songs at a moderate tempo so that someone unfamiliar with a song can easily pick it up.⁷ Also at jams and other performance situations, onlookers are encouraged to clap along to the tempo of the song and it is common to see people dancing along to the music. Everyone who attends a jam will be welcomed to participate in the creation of music in one way or another.

The stage performance practices of Old Time also differ from most Western music traditions. Turino’s presentational category refers to a genre’s onstage performance practices.⁸ Unlike in a jam, where songs are generally played slowly, on stage songs are generally played a good deal faster for a more dynamic audience experience. In most Old Time performances there is very little movement on stage as players tended to stand in front of their microphone for the whole set of songs. One general exception is that the fiddler steps back from the mic every couple of rounds so the banjo or guitar player can be more prominent. Audience interest is built from the music itself, the stage banter, and the stories told about the songs or the musician’s life.

2. Stylistic Techniques

There are a few techniques that instrumentalists use to create the Old Time sound. On the guitar there is the omnipresent strumming rhythm of the *boom-chuck*, where the guitarist will be playing a chord and will pluck bass note of the chord on the beat then strumming the rest of the strings halfway to the next beat. The guitarist can also alternate bass notes, typically between the first and fifth notes of the chord, to add more texture to their playing, shown in Figure 1. Old Time vocalists use a very nasal sound that approaches a melodic speaking voice. Vocalist also use their voices to imitate fiddle ornamental techniques.

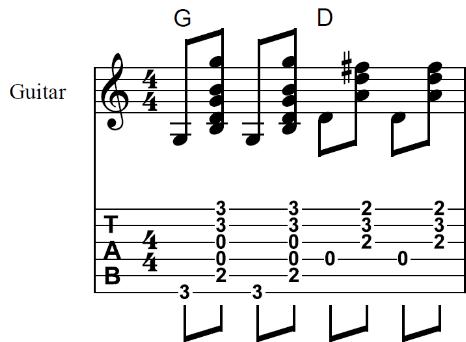


Figure 1: The Guitar Boom-Chuck

For a five string banjo there is specific style of picking for Old Time called either claw-hammer or frailing. The name claw-hammer comes from the player holding their strumming hand in a ‘C’ shape, then strumming the lower four strings twice before plucking the upper fifth string. This creates a distinct *strike-strike-pluck* rhythm that is maintained throughout the duration of the tune, even if the banjo player alternates between playing the melody or the chords of a piece.⁹ Because this strumming style is played throughout a tune, it is necessary for the player to retune the strings of the banjo so that when the open strings are all played simultaneously they create the tonic chord of the key the song is played in. An exception to this rule is that if a song is played in a minor key the banjo can be tuned to the relative major key, i.e. “Glory in the Meeting House” in E minor can be played with the strings tuned the key of G major.

Old Time tunes are mostly played in an AABB pattern, with two sections, each repeated twice, and all together lasting about 30 seconds. While compositional, melodic, and rhythmic qualities vary from piece to piece, the repetitive looping of the tunes does not. From a structural functionalism perspective,^{10 11} this could be explained by looking at

the traditional lifestyle that the founders of this genre had. They would have been farmers, hunters, and foresters, doing the same thing from day in to day out. From childhood to adulthood these people would have been living off the land to make a life for themselves and their families. One could conjecture that these mountain people would have subconsciously wanted their music to reflect their life and therefore the repetition could be seen as a reflection of the people's never changing lifestyle and or lifestyle preference. The big problem with approaching the AABB form in Old Time from this perceptive, however, is that one can easily construe the Appalachian people are simple minded for preferring to live in the manner that they do. Unfortunately, this is an all too real assumption people commonly make of the Appalachian people. While the form of the music maybe simple, the detail in the melody and rhythms are far from basic.

In reality, the main reason for the AABB form becoming so prevalent in Old Time tunes is because it made the tunes easier to learn. Before cars and other types of quick transportation became more affordable, a musician would have to walk for several miles to someone's house to learn a new tune. To make the tunes easier to remember for the trip back, they would repeat the sections which led to the AABB form. This also made the tunes longer and therefore they had more material to play for contra or square dances held in the communities.¹²

3. Social Analysis

Because the Old Time genre is one where musical evolution, although slow, is an established element, the music is often referred to by its players as being alive or a *live genre*.¹³ In the majority of Western music, playing a piece as the composer intended is the established practice, with subsequent variations being viewed as less valid than the original. However, in Old Time, the validity of a player's version is dependent on their skill and creativity more so than whether or not they are the original author. A quick example of this is "Bonaparte's Retreat", a tune based on the Irish melody "Eagle's Whistle" played in the typical AABB pattern. As time went on a different version of Bonaparte's Retreat was developed, where the A and B sections were switched around and an alternate C section was added in, becoming a ABB style song that occasionally switches to a CBB form. One person can compose a tune, and another can change the tune either minutely or drastically, but in either situation the fact that this is executable in Old Time shows the live aspect of the music.

Traditional music evolving with the times is something that Daniel Neuman talks about in his book *The Life of Music in North India*. We can draw parallels between the change of the traditional music of India and the traditional music of the Appalachian Mountains. Both styles are being faced with the dilemma of changing to not be forgotten as popular tastes change, while not losing the element that makes them unique. Neuman mentions that: "The adage that "in order for things to remain the same they have to change" finds its mirror image in India. There we might say that "in order for things to change, they have to appear the same."¹⁴ This can also be said about Old Time and Erynn Marshall's 2016 song "Oak Ridge Waltz" is an example of this adage.¹⁵ Although written recently, the tune contains many traditional Old Time techniques: shuffles, double stops, hammer-ons, etc.

Revamping songs to sound like they are from other genres is a common practice that is can even be seen in the work of Jimmie Rodgers who bridged traditional Appalachian music and the popular tastes of his time. In his book *Creating Country Music*, Richard Peterson discusses the ways in which Jimmie Rodgers would add to his repertoire by rearranging old songs.¹⁶ Peterson also mentions that A. P. Carter, from the legendary Old Time band The Carter Family, would travel around the Appalachian Mountains on "song-catching trips" so that they would have new material for records.¹⁷ Both Rodgers and the Carter family would change these songs to fit their styles and unique sounds. In addition, these artists wrote new songs that had the right musical feel so that they could fit seamlessly into their respective genres. Both practices lend themselves to the development of a renewable music practice where one genre does not have to only contain the same songs that it did a hundred years ago; genres can expand to fit new songs that represent newer thoughts and ideas.

The reason that we have a concept called genre is because humans innately want to group like things together in order to more easily process information. Jimmie Rodgers and Florida Georgia Line are both country music artists, however considering that they have an almost one hundred years that separate their musical careers, it is no wonder that they sound extremely different. What makes a genre unique and distinctive from other genres is the history and the concept of shared identity. The integral part of what makes the Old Time genre "Old Time" is, at the core, the history, identity, and thought of it being "Old Time". Yes, there are distinctive technique combinations as well as a distinctive sound profile but the reason that Old Time has an identity separate from the genres that influenced its creation, is the writing of a new history and new identity in Appalachia that will continue to be written for generations.

4. Transformational Commercials

I wanted to see if I could create a transformational-generative model that can be used to create a set of rules that allows for new combinations to be generated.^{18 19} Using this technique, one can outline the different techniques and structures that are part of Old Time music, and create a model for new Old Time songs to be created. Here I will explain a few of the techniques and how to use them to make an Old Time tune from the commercial jingle of Nationwide Insurance, written by Steve Karmen in the late 1960s.²⁰ Below is the step by step process that shows how I got from the original melody to the Old Time version, with each letter coinciding to a section of Figure 2.

At letter A, the original tune is shown. While the original tune is in the key of G and is used as an ending phrase, for the purpose of this analysis I used the melody as an initiating gesture in the key of D. This means that instead of the scale degrees of the melody being `2 `5 `5 `5 `6 `1 `1, they now are `5 `1 `1 `1 `2 `4 `4. The instability of scale degree four in the place of scale degree one means that the melody demands continuation in its new context.

At letter B, I have added another bar of melody along with shuffles, an eighth and two sixteenth notes. The shuffle, also called a potato because of the way the word rhythmically sounds when speaking in the Appalachian dialect, is a very common rhythmic addition.

At letter C, I dropped the seventh note of the scale a half step, also very common in this genre. Of the songs that come to mind with a flat-seven in them, the seven never goes directly to one, so I have avoided doing it here.

At letter D, since in any Old Time tune you are bound to have multiple repetitions of various kinds, this measure is almost identical to that at the letter B.

At letter E, for the ending measure I decided to use standard Old Time finger patterns to create the closing section of the A part. These finger patterns are useful because of their familiarity.

At letter F, since I had already used the original jingle as the beginning of the tune, I inverted the first interval and continued ascending, to start the second half of the song.

At letter G, I inserted a couple more notes, and added a hammer-on.

At letter H, we have the full song in its AABB form. Another thing that I added in the final full section, are the drones seen on the first line. In traditional Old Time fiddling, it is very common to play more than one string at a time, when the melody and harmonies allow, to create a fuller sound. Here we see that the D string is bowed while the melody note is played on the A string briefly. Using this technique at this spot lets the fiddler used the least amount of movement in changing strings, since instead of changing from one string to another they just stop playing the A string to continue the melody on the D string. The other place instance where this occurs is at the beginning of measure two of section H, playing the drone D here grounds the melody as it becomes more dissonant and reinforces the tonic, D, of the scale.

Nation Wide

Nationwide Insurance Commercial

Nicole Carpenter

Na-tion-wide is on your side.

4

7

9

13

D

E 3 1 0 1 0 3 2 0 1 2 0

F

G

H

H H

V

V

Figure 2. Process of the Nationwide Insurance Commercial to Nation Wide the Old Time Tune

5. Conclusion

Exploring the origins of Old Time music is important, because we can then see the ways in which artists are developing new content which reflect their lives. From a musician having to walk several miles just to learn a new song to being able to learn a new Old Time piece by hearing it on the internet, is a very drastic shift in lifestyles. Something that we can see in changing a fifty-year-old commercial jingle into an Old Time tune, is that the old can be revamped into something new, and the new can still sound old. Over time, the combinations of the different European and African musics has led to new flavors in the figurative crock-pot of the Appalachian Mountains. Taking outside influences to create new material is essential as well as completely in line with the development of the Old Time genre and essential to the continuation of any style. Without new material, interest would fade away and the genre would forgotten. However, we can see that the traditions of the past, like the AABB form, have not been discarded and are still very much in use.

6. Bibliography

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7. Endnotes

1 Deborah J. Thompson. "Searching for Silenced Voices in Appalachian Music." (*GeoJournal* 65, no. 1/2. 2006)

2 Deborah Thompson. "Searching for Silenced Voices in Appalachian Music." (2006)

3 Deborah Thompson. (2006)

4 Fred J. Hay. "Black musicians in Appalachia: An Introduction to Affrilachian Music." (*Black Music Research Journal* 23, no. 1/2. 2003)

5 Harkins, Anthony. *Hillbilly A Cultural History of an American Icon*. (Oxford University Press, 2005).

6 Fred Hay. "Black musicians in Appalachia: An Introduction to Affrilachian Music." (2003)

7 Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: the Politics of Participation*, (University of Chicago Press, 2008), pg 28.

8 Turino, *Music as Social Life: the Politics of Participation*, pg 51.

9 Sadie Wicker, interview by the author, University of North Carolina at Asheville, Asheville, NC, March 6, 2019.

10 Ruth Stone, *Theory for Ethnomusicology*, (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), pg 37.

11 Structural Functionalism is defined as studying social phenomena in terms of consequences to of broader society.

12 Lyndsay Pruett and Bill Pruett, "Your Paper" e-mail message to the author, April 4, 2019.

13 In my time playing Old Time this is what I have heard players call it.

14 Daniel M. Neuman, *The Life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition*. (University of Chicago Press), pg 234.

15 "Oak Ridge Waltz, by Galax Bogtrotters." Erynn Marshall. April 01, 2017.

16 Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*, (University of Chicago Press, 1999), pg 45.

17 Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*, pg 42.

18 Ruth Stone, *Theory for Ethnomusicology*, pg 59.

19 The transformational-generative model is defined as a set of rules or parameters that are developed to facilitate new creations.

20 Steve Karmen, *Who Killed the Jingle*, (Hal Leonard Corporation, 2005) pg 79.