

The Evolution of Appalachian Music and Influence on the 1960s Folk Revival

Ella Dorst

Fiddle and banjo tunes, along with ballads, form critical musical renderings of Appalachia. As diverse groups ranging from Native Americans to African Americans and European immigrants and their descendants encountered each other in mountain communities, musical traditions mixed together through a sharing of instruments and stylings to form the unique sound that is Appalachia's folk music. The rich evolution of traditional Appalachian music, influenced by the blending of migrants' cultures with those of indigenous peoples, played a fundamental role in the American folk revival in the 1960s. Traditional Appalachian music tells stories about everyday life, generations of poverty and hardship spanning continents, social justice, love, and death. The plaintive tunes of the region, use of acoustic instruments and storytelling aspect of Appalachian music had a profound influence on the folk music revival movement of the 1960s. The folk revival, which was from the 1940s to the 1960s, experienced its height in the early to mid 1960s, at which point it was centered in New York City's Greenwich Village (Cohen). Notable artists from the movement such as Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, and the trio Peter, Paul and Mary drew heavily from the time-honored traditions of Appalachian music in their catalogs. From Seeger's "Quite Early Morning," to both Dylan's and Peter, Paul and Mary's versions of "Blowin' in the Wind," the musicians' songs, rooted in Appalachian music traditions, came to portray the political and social struggles of the time.

While the history of Appalachian folk music development has been considered by scholars for more than 100 years, scholarly analysis of the genre's influence on subsequent music is significantly less robust. Specifically, a comprehensive search into the literature reveals a paucity of resources connecting the evolution of Appalachian folk music and the 1960s folk revival. At the same time, the very underpinnings of scholarship on Appalachian music aren't universally agreed on. Scholarship grew exponentially as collectors scoured the region for ballads in the early 1900s, but their limited focus ultimately led to a bias in their findings. While scholars and collectors such as Cecil Sharp in the early 20th century believed that English folk music could be found in the Appalachian Mountains, later scholarship by cultural and historical geographers poked holes in this approach (Gold and Revill 60). For example, John R. Gold and George Revill highlight how "this process of selectivity might meet certain academic objectives but undoubtedly provided a partial view of the true diversity of music of rural areas, whether in the US or Europe" (64). The results of Sharp's collecting were through just one person's view of what mattered and what "folk" meant, and what Appalachian people were. What I explore in this conversation builds on previous scholarship about the way in which Appalachian folk music was developed and preserved. I draw on various cultures and conduct my own analysis on how

these resulting characteristics of Appalachian music, from storytelling to instrumentation and styling, were of vital importance in the songs of the 1960s folk revival. My observations, which are merely a starting point in examining this cross-section of issues, nonetheless add a more nuanced understanding of the specific historical and sociological characteristics of Appalachian music that I believe are woven through the heart of folk revival music.

To understand the evolution of Appalachian music, it's important to first define what (and who) the region encompasses. While Appalachia has no single, clear border, the region's core is generally considered by scholars to include southern West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, the southwest portion of Virginia, as well as eastern Tennessee (Pollard 3). The larger region, with 26.6 million residents, encompasses a total of 13 states from Alabama to New York, and also includes eight Native American groups ("About the Appalachian Region"). Native Americans, particularly the Cherokee, as well as Black Appalachians, have historically been overlooked in research, documentation, and representation in the Appalachian region and in Appalachian music. Meanwhile, European immigrants, particularly those of "Anglo-Saxon or Scots-Irish heritage, have been the focus of Appalachian musical representation, portraying a white working-class (Revill and Gold 1408; Thompson 68).

Visibility of these different groups vis-a-vis Appalachian music correlated with their size and societal power. In 1790, the population of Black Appalachians, both free and enslaved, was 6% of the region's 307,000 inhabitants, and by 1860, had risen to 10 percent of the 5.4 million residents (Pollard 1). Despite their growing population, racial discrimination impeded Black artists from becoming more popular (Thompson 73). Black Appalachians also tended to live in more urbanized areas and were therefore not part of the ballad collection that took place primarily in rural areas (Thompson 76). As a result, the role of African Americans in this genre was dramatically disregarded. Meanwhile, between 1838-1839, roughly 17,000 Cherokee people were forcibly removed from their lands in the Southeast to present-day Oklahoma ("Migration in Appalachia"). Nonetheless, Cherokee music survived within the native population in the region through those who hid in the hills (Thompson 69). Assimilation and isolationism were strategies employed for the survival of indigenous people, which diminished the spread of Cherokee culture into white culture (Thompson 70). And because they were able to remain in the region, their musical traditions—though not fully acknowledged—became part of what is known as Appalachian music.

The white settlers in the area came in droves from countries throughout Western Europe. On one hand, historians maintain that the Scots-Irish (descendants of the Scottish and Northern English who migrated to Ulster in Northern Ireland in the 1600s and then to the American colonies a century later) were the dominant race, and that it was the Scots-Irish traditions regarding ballads and fiddle tunes from which traditional Appalachian folk music stems

(Campbell 53; Krim 107). However, Appalachia was populated by other groups as well, notably German, English, French, Dutch, and Scandinavian immigrants (“Migration in Appalachia”). This misguided perception steered documentation and understanding of the mountain music considerably. One of the leading ballad hunters, the aforementioned Cecil Sharp, and his colleague Maud Karpeles were seeking vestiges of English culture as they scoured the musical landscape of Appalachia (Gold and Revill 55, 60). Ballad collectors, in general, were connected with singers by local liaisons or white settlement schoolteachers who either wouldn’t have sought out or known about African American musicians due to their status as white outsiders (Thompson 71-72). Settlement schools played a key role in preserving Appalachian music by incorporating ballad singing and instrument playing in the curriculum (Morgan-Ellis, “Making of Appalachian Music”). This white-tilted bias of music preservation ultimately skewed the very definition and public understanding of the genre.

In spite of the barriers that different Appalachian communities faced regarding representation and influence in the continuation and evolution of regional music, one way that cultural exchange occurred was through instrument adoption. While the tradition of the ballad is the area of folk revival that I will focus on with both Dylan and Peter, Paul and Mary, the other staples of traditional Appalachian music—the fiddle and banjo—are part of the extensive cultural blending that occurred in every aspect of the music, which helped shape the genre as a whole. Though these instruments feature prominently in other songs throughout the folk revival—a topic I discuss with Seeger’s music—they do not necessarily receive the cultural attribution (e.g., African American and Cherokee) that they merit.

Although the banjo is mostly considered by the general public to be a white instrument, it is increasingly recognized as having African roots that combined with the European fiddle to forge this genre: “The transformation of the early, three and four string gourd banjo to its current five string hoop-style body makes apparent the combined African American emphasis on rhythm and the European American emphasis on melody, materializing the multiple sources of American and Appalachian musical culture” (Thompson 70-71). The banjo was adapted by enslaved Africans in colonial America and only played by Black musicians until the 1830s, when it was introduced to white audiences and brought into the mainstream by Blackface minstrelsy (Morgan-Ellis, “Fiddle and Banjo”). While the banjo was used to demean in this context, in the folk revival of the 1960s it became a literal instrument of protest, used as part of songs with themes of social justice. For instance, Pete Seeger’s “Quite Early Morning,” which he accompanied with his banjo, spoke to hope and fortitude throughout trying times. The folk revival icon sings “I know that you who hear my singing / Could make those freedom bells go ringing” while he plays his banjo, tranquil and warm (Seeger). The complex roots of the banjo, from the instrument’s arrival in America, to its physical evolution, and the development of its

role in Appalachian music—often combined with the fiddle—as well as its adoption by a wider range of people all led the instrument to be a tool of empowerment.

The fiddle's roots, although of different origin, are similarly intertwined. Fiddle tunes are largely thought of as having crossed the Atlantic with Scots-Irish settlers and that these and other Scots-Irish songs created the groundwork that other settlers helped build upon with their own musical practices to create the genre of traditional Appalachian folk music ("Migration in Appalachia"). And while the fiddle itself is of European origin along with the tunes, the styles of playing came from cultural melding and interpersonal interactions in Appalachian communities (Morgan-Ellis, "Fiddle and Banjo"). For instance, fiddling is important to musical traditions in West Africa, including in areas from which enslaved people were taken to the Americas (DjeDje). Furthermore, the fiddle and banjo were first played in combination by musicians of African descent (Morgan-Ellis, "Fiddle and Banjo"). Additionally, folk music authors Fiona Ritchie and Doug Orr contend that Cherokee flutes, whistles, and fiddles influenced fiddlers of European descent (qtd. in "Migration in Appalachia"). This confluence of fiddling traditions created the sound that is heard in the fiddle tunes of the 1960s folk revival. One example of this is Pete Seeger's 1960 tune "The Country Fiddle C," which he performed on the banjo, along with his half-brother Mike Seeger on the fiddle. The mixed origins of Appalachian music, containing European, African American, and Native American influences can be seen in this piece. The melody and structure are of primarily European but also Cherokee origin, while the rhythm is from African American roots. The fiddle portion carries the melody and is lively, alternating between repetitions of the "fine" strain (using the high range of the instrument) and the "coarse" strain (the low range), each with their own melodies—this is a common formula in traditional Appalachian fiddle tunes (Morgan-Ellis, "Fiddle and Banjo"). Meanwhile, the banjo in this ditty carries the rhythm more subtly in the background, but there is a playful interplay between the two instruments. This epitomizes the commonly known and more unknown influences present in the Appalachian musical traditions of folk revival songs.

This complex transformation of the Appalachian soundscape was also a reflection of individual styles of play; these individual approaches to fiddling (as well as banjo playing and ballad singing) depended on the unique surroundings of each person. Appalachians were not totally isolated from each other, and tunes were passed on through oral tradition—songs were learned by ear, with one musician passing on a tune to the next who tried to imitate it (Morgan-Ellis, "Fiddle and Banjo"). This, and each musician's individual touch, explains a critical component of traditional Appalachian folk music: why there are so many versions of the same tunes.

This process of musical adaptation can be seen in the 1960s folk revival movement with Bob Dylan's 1963 song "Blowin' in the Wind." While Dylan wrote "Blowin' in the Wind," making its status decidedly not an original Appalachian folk song, this is not unusual in the genre as tunes

develop from various sources, whether from popular songs of the time, hymns or traditional songs (Morgan-Ellis, "Fiddle and Banjo"). Dylan followed the folk process—he adapted the melody of "Blowin' in the Wind" from the traditional African American spiritual "No More Auction Block," and "Blowin' in the Wind" became a civil rights and anti-war anthem ("Explaining Bob Dylan's 'Blowin' in the Wind'"). Dylan's lyrics in "Blowin' in the Wind" such as "how many years can some people exist / Before they're allowed to be free?" question human injustices and inequality. The themes of this song were befitting of the era of its release—the 1960s were a time of fraught political and social tensions. The Vietnam War was a flashpoint in American history, with protests erupting at unprecedented levels across the country: "The decade that began with the protests of the civil rights movement would end in a wave of activism by students, marginalized communities, and women that continued into the mid 1970s" ("Protesting in the 1960s and 1970s"). The time was ripe for using storytelling as a vehicle for creating a sense of community among disenfranchised ethnic groups battling for basic rights and student groups protesting the Vietnam War. According to Brandon et al., "Music was an integral part of the social change and turmoil that defined the 1960s," and it was Bob Dylan who "catalyzed the social upheaval of the 1960s" (366). Dylan's voice and lyrics have the intimacy of a storyteller, inviting the listener to learn more and join him in challenging the status quo. This demonstrates the role of music in Appalachia, as a way to "express the joys and sorrows of everyday lives" (Phillips 01:16). Dylan carried on this legacy of music with social meaning.

Ballad singing, another highlight of Appalachian music tradition, is strophic in nature, meaning it has the same melody for each verse, and tells a story, which can be historical, allegorical, or mythological (Morgan-Ellis, "Unaccompanied Singing"). "Blowin' in the Wind," for example, fits these criteria. Ballads, like the fiddle and banjo, have mixed origins. While most Appalachian ballads have British roots, some came to be in the mountains of Appalachia (Morgan-Ellis, "Unaccompanied Singing"). Moreover, ballads possess an African American connection like many other aspects of Appalachian music: "The essential nature of the ballad-singer as telling stories through song has a West African counterpart in the griot tradition, so it is likely there is an African American tradition as well, although less well documented" (Thompson 71). Within this storytelling tradition exists the same trait as with fiddling and banjo playing: variation in ballads due to the process by which they were passed from person to person. Ballads were often learned by ear and reproduced from memory, therefore differing slightly in the story details, title, or featuring other minor changes for personal preference, but still conveying the same narrative overall (Morgan-Ellis, "Unaccompanied Singing"). These overlapping influences merged to create musical traditions that are key to this genre and heavily featured in the 1960s American folk revival.

Balladry and the musical alteration process are observed in the folk revival movement through Peter, Paul and Mary's 1963 rendition of Dylan's song "Blowin' in the Wind." The trio, consisting of Peter Yarrow, Noel Paul Stookey and Mary Travers, catapulted to fame adapting Dylan's song, drawing on Appalachian musical customs. The Appalachian musical stylings—acoustic, harmonies—told a story, evoked empathy, spurred action, and satisfied a community. Their approach also reflects another change—traditionally, ballads were unaccompanied (sung individually and without instrumentation), but more modern ballads are accompanied, such as both variations of "Blowin' in the Wind" discussed here (Morgan-Ellis, "Unaccompanied Singing"). Dylan's original piece is uncluttered, featuring just himself singing accompanied by his acoustic guitar. On the other hand, Peter, Paul, and Mary's version features three-part harmonies, a slower-moving pace, and melancholy tone. Yarrow remarked in a PBS documentary on Peter, Paul, and Mary: "Now music began to inspire America. Tweak its conscience and articulate its dreams" ("50 Years With Peter, Paul and Mary" 24:20). What Yarrow left unsaid is that this inspiration, articulation of dreams, call-to-action, and community storytelling is really just a continuation and evolution of what our Appalachian, Native American, African, Irish, and Scottish ancestors brought so beautifully and eloquently to the unique blend of music from Appalachia.

Overall, this interwoven musical history provides the foundation for the specific characteristics of Appalachian folk music that I have identified in songs at the core of the folk revival. Future discussion on these issues would benefit from further research on a wider range of folk revival artists, Appalachian folk artists from underrepresented groups, such as the Cherokee, the impacts of other cultures, including Scandinavian and Italian, and connections to more contemporary music. This analysis and further research could facilitate discussions on the largely unacknowledged contributions of marginalized groups throughout music history and at present.

Influenced by this migration of settlers to the region and the blending of their cultures with indigenous peoples', the evolution of traditional Appalachian folk music contributed massively to the 1960s American folk revival. Life was hard in the hollers of Appalachia, and ballads often told a story of struggle. From the intermixed backgrounds of African, Native American, and European musical traditions to varied ballad, banjo, and fiddle stylings, Appalachian music's customs were gracefully embodied in the very heart of these folk revival artists' protest songs.

Works Cited

"About the Appalachian Region." *Appalachian Regional Commission*, 7 Jan. 2026.
www.arc.gov/about-the-appalachian-region/

Brandon, Stephen, et al. "Bob Dylan: The Prophet of Social Change in the 1960s." *Media Watch*, Vol. 8, No. 3, Sept. 2017, pp. 366–377. https://doi.org/10.15655/mw_2017_v8i3_49154

Campbell, John C. *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland*. Russell Sage Foundation, 1921. <https://archive.org/details/southernhighland00camp/page/22/mode/2up>

Cohen, Ronald D. *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940-1970*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb33610.0001.001>

DjeDje, Jacqueline Cogdell. "The (Mis)Representation of African American Music: The Role of the Fiddle." *Journal of the Society for American Music*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Feb. 2016, pp. 1–32. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1752196315000528>

Dylan, Bob. "Blowin' in the Wind." *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, Columbia Records, 1963. *Spotify*. [Open.spotify.com/track/18GiV1BaXzPVYpp9rmOg0E](https://open.spotify.com/track/18GiV1BaXzPVYpp9rmOg0E)

"Explaining Bob Dylan's 'Blowin' in the Wind.'" *Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.*, 2 Mar. 2026. www.britannica.com/video/did-you-know-60-seconds-Blowin-in-the-Wind-song/-257236

"50 Years With Peter, Paul and Mary." *PBS*, 28 Feb. 2025. www.pbs.org/video/50-years-with-peter-paul-and-mary-di92gp/

Gold, John R., and George Revill. "Gathering the Voices of the People? Cecil Sharp, Cultural Hybridity, and the Folk Music of Appalachia." *GeoJournal*, Vol. 65, No. 1-2, 2006, pp. 55-66. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/gathering-voices-people-cecil-sharp-cultural/docview/223670830/se-2>, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-006-0007-z>

Krim, Arthur. "Appalachian Songcatcher: Olive Dame Campbell and the Scotch-Irish Ballad." *Journal of Cultural Geography*, Vol. 24, No. 1, Jan. 2007, pp. 91–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08873630709478218>

"Migration in Appalachia." *Appalachian State University*, 19 July 2022. dsi.appstate.edu/projects/mountain-music/topics/migration

Morgan-Ellis, Esther. "Fiddle and Banjo Music of Southern Appalachia." *Accessible Appalachia: An Open-Access Introduction to Appalachian Studies*, edited by Lisa Day and Jacob Johnson, Eastern Kentucky University, 2024. https://manifold.open.umn.edu/read/complete-text/section/dbc0dd47-b67a-47bc-a314-78f6192a6940#ftnt_ref7

Morgan-Ellis, Esther. "The Making of Appalachian Music." *Accessible Appalachia: An Open-Access Introduction to Appalachian Studies*, edited by Lisa Day and Jacob Johnson, Eastern Kentucky University, 2024. <https://manifold.open.umn.edu/read/complete-text/section/01b75bbc-0293-4b78-b67d-7f47d3551caf>

Morgan-Ellis, Esther. "Unaccompanied Singing Traditions of Southern Appalachia." *Accessible Appalachia: An Open-Access Introduction to Appalachian Studies*, edited by Lisa Day and Jacob Johnson, Eastern Kentucky University, 2024. <https://manifold.open.umn.edu/read/complete-text/section/c8c770f4-60fa-4b91-9387-a3dd957ed15f>

Peter, Paul and Mary. "Blowin' in the Wind." *In the Wind*, Warner Bros. Records, 1963. *Spotify*, <https://open.spotify.com/track/62Yu8QL1g9pdbvN4XL9Rah>

Phillips, JD [The Appalachian Storyteller]. "Appalachias Music Documentary." *YouTube*, 17 June 2023. www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Vxgd9TaZ1Q&t=238s

Pollard, Kelvin M. "A 'NEW DIVERSITY': RACE AND ETHNICITY IN THE APPALACHIAN REGION." *Appalachian Regional Commission*, Sept. 2004. www.arc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ANewDiversityRaceandEthnicityinAppalachia.pdf

"Protesting in the 1960s and 1970s." *American Archive of Public Broadcasting*. americanarchive.org/exhibits/first-amendment/protests-60s-70s.

Revill, George, and John R. Gold. "'Far Back in American Time': Culture, Region, Nation, Appalachia, and the Geography of Voice." *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, Vol. 108, No. 5, Sept. 2018, pp. 1406–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2018.1431104>

Seeger, Pete, and Mike Seeger. "The Country Fiddle C." *Indian Summer: Original Sound Track Music*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1960. *Spotify*, <https://open.spotify.com/track/4TfwDh99bSYixT8KVIDmVC>

Seeger, Pete. "Quite Early Morning." *Banks of Marble*. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings: 1974. *Spotify*, <https://open.spotify.com/track/436YMkbq4B87B0Tc0lwuNt>

Thompson, Deborah J. "Searching for Silenced Voices in Appalachian Music." *GeoJournal*, Vol. 65, No. 1-2, 2006, pp. 67-78. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-006-7055-2>