

An Introduction to Bluegrass

Study Guide for the performance of EmiSunshine



Objectives

Through a presentation of the music of Emisunshine and study guide materials, students will:

- ❖ develop an understanding of the characteristics of bluegrass music
- ❖ understand why bluegrass music is unique
- ❖ be introduced to the instruments that comprise a bluegrass band
- ❖ be introduced to the history of bluegrass music
- ❖ be exposed to a high quality, inspirational arts experience

A Good Audience Member Will...

- ❖ behave respectfully towards the performers and other audience members
- ❖ listen attentively to the music, narration, and instructions
- ❖ participate at appropriate times in the program
- ❖ attempt to remember elements of the program for later discussions

Sponsored By



What is Bluegrass Music?

Bluegrass music is a form of American Roots music, or a musical style that originated here in the United States. Bluegrass music is really more of a style of performance than a particular set of tunes or songs. Although there are pieces that have been written specifically as bluegrass numbers, most bluegrass music is taken from or based on earlier American folk traditions such as old-time or old-timey as it is sometimes called. However, it is probably possible to take almost any song or tune and turn it into a bluegrass number.

The typical bluegrass band is acoustic, which means the instruments are not electric, and includes these stringed instruments:



Five-String Banjo



Flat-Top Guitar



Fiddle



Mandolin



Dobro



Bass

Early bluegrass saw the occasional use of other instruments such as spoons, bones, washboards, or harmonica, but it is usually just the traditional six instruments.

The Sound of Bluegrass Music

Bluegrass is distinguished by its high-energy, fast-tempo sound. The guitar and bass carry the downbeat, which provides the rhythmic foundation. Generally, if the other instruments are not soloing or playing background, they carry the offbeat.

- The downbeat is the first beat of a measure in music, the impulse that occurs at the beginning of a bar in measured music.
- The offbeat is the weaker beats of a measure of music.

Bluegrass songs are played with each instrument taking turns carrying the melody while the other instruments back it up. This is in contrast to old-time music, in which all instruments play the melody together. Because the instruments take turns being the leader, bluegrass music sometimes sounds like the different instruments are having a conversation with each other.

Bluegrass Singing

Unlike country music, bluegrass singing is usually high-pitched. This singing style started with a man named Bill Monroe, who is known as "The Father of Bluegrass". This high-pitched singing is known as that "high lonesome sound." Another trait of bluegrass singing, and one that at first can be irritating to some people, is the unusual way in which singing parts are voiced. Harmony is never sung in unison, where the voices are together on the same notes. Depending on the type of harmony, it's always above or below the lead singer.



Passing a Break

Another unique trait of bluegrass is the tradition of soloing, or "passing a break." If musicians are soloing, that means their instruments are playing the main melody of the song and getting all of the attention, while the other instruments are backing them up. Anyone with an instrument is invited to take a turn soloing, no matter their age or expertise. From youngster to old-timer, no matter the expertise, "if ya wanna try it, we'll pass ya the break."

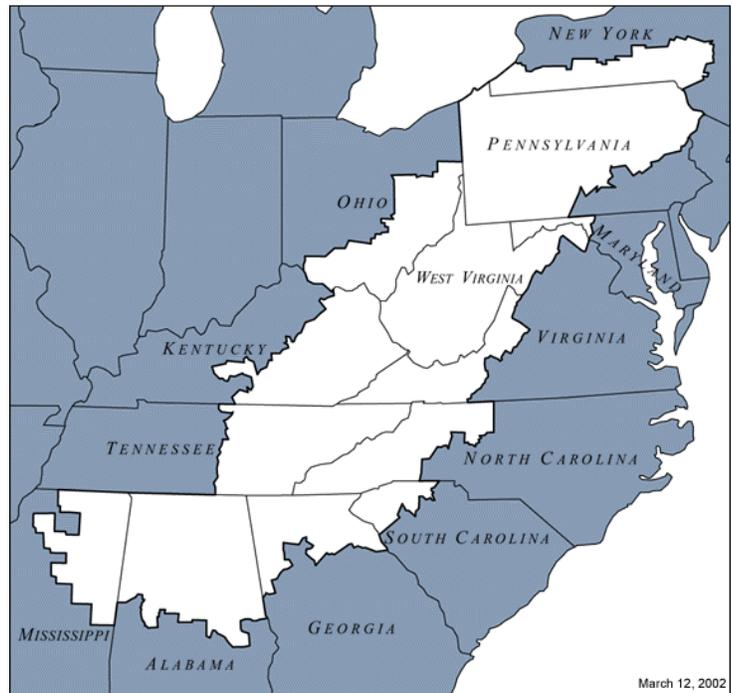
The History of Bluegrass Music

Bluegrass was inspired by the music of immigrants from Scotland and Ireland who ended up in Appalachia, a region in the eastern United States that stretches from southern New York state to northern Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia. Bluegrass was also inspired by the music of rural African-Americans (in fact, slaves from Africa brought the design idea for the banjo--an instrument now integral to the bluegrass sound), jazz, blues, sacred, and country music.

Bluegrass music came out of the rural south after World War II, but its roots date back to the 1930s from the various types of mountain music that were popular with the farm families and blue-collar workers in Appalachia. Most everyone knew of someone who played an instrument and not uncommon were whole families that played. They shared that entertainment by playing at get-togethers, church picnics, and barn dances.

Bluegrass songs were about issues important to everyday people. Religion was a prominent subject and gospel music figured heavily in the development of the bluegrass sound. Secular songs tended to focus on love, home, and family, sometimes exploring the darker side of these issues.

The Appalachian Region



Source: Appalachian Regional Commission



The invention of the phonograph and the onset of the radio in the early 1900s brought this old-time music out of the rural Southern mountains to people all over the United States.

Bill Monroe, the Father of Bluegrass

The Monroe Brothers were one of the most popular duet teams of the 1920s and into the 1930s. Charlie played the guitar, Bill played the mandolin and they sang duets in harmony. When the brothers split up as a team in 1938, both went on to form their own bands. Since Bill was a native of Kentucky, the Bluegrass State, he decided to call his band "Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys," and this band sound birthed a new form of country music.



"Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys" first appeared on the Grand Ole Opry in 1939 and soon became one of the most popular touring bands out of Nashville. Bill's new band was different from other traditional country music bands of the time because of its hard driving and powerful sound, using traditional acoustic instruments and featuring an interesting and new singing style that Bill called "that high lonesome sound". After experimenting with various instrumental combinations, Bill settled on mandolin, banjo, fiddle, guitar and bass as the format for his band.

By the 1950s, people began referring to this style of music as "bluegrass music." Bluegrass bands began forming all over the country and Bill Monroe became the acknowledged "Father of Bluegrass Music". Other popular bluegrass artists of the time included Earl Scruggs and Lester Flatt.

Bluegrass Today

Bluegrass music is now performed and enjoyed around the world. The International Bluegrass Music Association alone claims members in all 50 states and over 30 countries. In addition to the classic bluegrass style that is still performed widely, bluegrass bands today are influenced by a variety of sources from jazz to Celtic music to rock 'n roll. Song lyrics have been translated into various languages as bluegrass continues to increase its popularity worldwide.





EmiSunshine

The exceptional talents of critically-acclaimed teen music prodigy, EmiSunshine has



captured the nation's attention. The singer, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist has been hailed by outlets such as No Depression, Billboard and Rolling Stone: "Sounds like the spunky, intense little sister to artists Iris DeMent, Natalie Maines, Nanci Griffith and Janis Joplin."

EmiSunshine has already graced some of the most-prestigious stages—from the "Today Show," to the Grand Ole Opry (over a dozen times) and most recently, "Little Big Shots starring Steve Harvey" last April. Additionally, EmiSunshine stars in and performs three songs in her latest film appearance on "The King," alongside such celebrities as Roseanne Cash, Emmylou Harris, Ethan Hawke, Alec Baldwin and more. The film featured at this year's Sundance Film Festival and premiered at Cannes Film Festival, where Emi performed.

A well-crafted storyteller, Emi's music has been described as an "old-timey," unique blend of roots music that is equal parts Americana, Bluegrass, Gospel, and Country, with a sprinkle of Blues

SUGGESTED AUDIO AND VIDEO CLIPS TO GO WITH THIS GUIDE

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WvSYtYDIpA&index=1&list=PL149CF62EC4A4D8CB>

Dock Walsh – Going Back to Jericho

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWS6fXU79wc>

Appalachian Mountain Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAVFpThoeb4>

Bill Monroe - Blue Moon of Kentucky

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5v7dXA-LWVk>

Iris DeMent & EmmyLou Harris – Our Town

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ve66752SNno>

EmiSunshine on Little Big Shots in April 2018

\