



## **Threads of American Music Series with Scott Ainslie**

In this series, traditional musician and singer Scott Ainslie draws on close to five decades of experience with traditional American and popular music to present graduated teaching concerts, pre-concert talks, workshops, and master classes surveying the key root elements of European and African traditions that contribute to shaping, sustaining, and defining American music suitable for elementary, middle school, high school, college level, adult and elder hostel educational settings.

### **Traditional Music and Culture**

Across the world, each nation, culture, and many sub-cultures, have developed their own particular traditional sounds, dances, and musics in response to their own unique histories.



These distinctive human cultures reflect the musical and cultural conventions invented by common, working people within those cultures (what we call 'folk' or 'traditional' music today).

The traditional folk amusements of common people over time move upward within the society to provide the raw material for the establishment of refined entertainments for the educated elite of the society.

Popular music, whether classically composed or simply invented, reflects the past of the cultures involved while leaning in the present toward the future.

Popular music, whether classically composed or simply invented, reflects the past of the cultures involved while leaning in the present toward the future.

### **Classical, Composed Music**

Much of the written music of the literate in society is always based upon the artistic creations, forms, and traditions of the illiterate. This remains true from the early Renaissance peasant dances of Michael Praetorius, through J. S. Bach's gavottes and other dance pieces, right up through Gershwin and Bernstein.

The Renaissance prepared the way for Bach, who laid us at the doorstep of the Classical era of Handel and Mozart, who delivered us at the threshold of the Romantic composers like Wagner, who paved the way for the formalism of the serial composers Schoenberg, Webern and Berg, and thence the minimalism of Reich and Glass.

Along the way, traditions from other parts of the world have barged into the classical composer's ears. The *Paris Exhibition Universelle* (1889) – held during the 100th Anniversary of the storming of the Bastille – showcased not only the Eiffel Tower (which was built expressly for the world's fair exhibition), but musicians from far flung places like *Gamelan* players from Java; drummers and singers from the African Congo; Ragtime, Blues, and Cakewalk dancers and musicians from America's black south; musicians from Cambodia and the far east.

French composers Ravel and Debussy were stunned by the sounds, instruments, scales and structures of these musics and dragged the 'academy' off into the weeds of Impressionism.

You can see how this works, both formally in classical music and informally in folk and traditional forms: We hear something moving, magical or wonderful from someone else's world and we pursue it our own.

This movement of musical and cultural ideas across national and class boundaries helps to knit us together, giving us shared musical and artistic experiences. The arts are a part of our common ground, as a species.

## **Luxury or Necessity?**

While the arts may be a luxury for the upper classes, they are a necessity for the lower and working classes. And the durability and vitality of a national culture has to be seen in these terms.

Far from being a luxury, the music and arts of a society are invaluable in establishing a shared, common identity. Knowledge and enjoyment of arts and music reminds us who we were and makes us who we are, as a people.

The Celtic traditions of Great Britain, Scotland and Ireland; the ancient roots of folk music and dances across Europe; the development of religious music in different branches Christianity, Judaism, and Islam; the thousand-year-old songs and ceremonies of African tribes – all are the products of cultures that have developed over many centuries.

## **American Music and Culture**

By contrast to Europe and Africa, the main continental contributors to American culture, America is very young. Setting aside the native culture decimated by disease and settlement wars (and a failed Spanish attempt in South Carolina in the early 1500s), European, colonial America got its start in the early 1600s as a slave-holding culture, economy, and society.

After a brief period of experimenting with indentured servants from its source cultures, Africans were settled on as slaves for their talents, strength, and the color of their skin, which made identifying runaways simpler.

It is important to note that racism, rather than being a cause of the slave trade, came after the fact as a moral rationalization for imposing an oppressive and inhumane economic and social system. Racism's viciousness accelerated hand-in-hand with the economic dependence of European-Americans on the slave labor of African-Americans and culminated in the Civil War, and then, a hundred years later, the Civil Rights moment.

In America, the social separation of these groups though never kept them from influencing each other across the otherwise successful barriers of class, race, religion, national background or education. Music, foodways, language usage, and many other cultural attributes moved readily across lines of class and color. And gradually an American music was born.

## **Component Cultures**

American music and culture – assembled from a wide variety of diverse cultural and national traditions – developed with great regional variation across the United States according to exactly who settled where.

Initially, and for a long time, regional music and cultures actually belonged more to their source cultures than to America:

- The Irish music in Boston was decidedly Irish;
- The fiddle traditions of the Appalachians were English and Scots-Irish;
- The polka of the Midwest (and Mexico) was an import from central Europe (where it is traditional in Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Czech Republic, Netherlands, Croatia, Slovenia, Germany, Hungary, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Ukraine, Belarus, Russia and Slovakia);
- The Black spirituals, worksongs, and blues of African slaves and former slaves presented distinct African scales, song forms, and conventions.

These are just a few examples. Given the diversity of America's immigrant population, this list of contributing cultures could be extended almost indefinitely.

## **Foreign Cultures on American Soil**

We can think of each of these traditions as distinct cultural transplants taking root locally in isolated and particular plots of American soil.

But as the separation of these communities begins to yield to America's growth and to the mixing of its population and the artistic and cultural raw materials they bring from their source traditions, the beginnings of a distinctly American music and culture slowly start to take shape.

And, as is usual in older human cultures, the development of an elite, literate American arts culture has been built firmly on a foundation of the creativity, resourcefulness, and genius of the less literate working class musicians, dancers, storytellers, and artists in the culture.

## **Creating an American Hybrid**

This plant metaphor is useful. Let's press it a little farther.

In the same way that pollen from one farmer's field can blow across the physical boundary and cross-pollinate with another farmer's variety of a species to create an entirely new hybrid set of seeds with specific characteristics from both source plants and the possibility of some new characteristics entirely unique to that hybrid, what we identify now as American culture and music is a resilient hybrid bred out of centuries of selective and inventive cultural and musical cross-pollination.

# Africa and Europe

In the broadest sense, America has always been a mixed-race culture. The two sets of cultural and musical heritage that have become dominant in the formation of American music and popular culture spring from two different continents: Europe and Africa.

From **Europe**, we get:

- The root stock of Christian religious hymns and music;
- Scots-Irish fiddle tunes and bawdy songs;
- English story and outlaw ballads;
- The guitar, the fiddle, the accordion, organ, and piano family of instruments;
- The seven note major and minor scales;
- And a certain emotional restraint in the singing style marked by a purity of tone and measured delivery consistent with Calvinist and more generally Protestant religious understandings and practices.

From **West Africa**: we get:

- Rhythmic vitality [polyrhythms (many-rhythms at once and in succession) and pronounced syncopations (where rhythmic stresses fall off the established beat)];
- Call and response song structures;
- The three line verse structure (precursor to the Delta Blues verse);
- Work songs for coordinating group labor;
- The banjo and a variety of plucked mono-chord instruments (known by many regional names, as well as: cigar box guitars, one-strings, or diddley bows);
- The minor pentatonic scale;
- And a certain emotional abandon in the singing style marked by dramatic speech-style use of the voice and marked tonal variation to convey emotional meaning, consistent with African religious understandings and practices.

It is no surprise that the region of the country where these elements and people who carry them collide most fruitfully is the American South – where Blacks and Whites have lived intimately, if uneasily, even violently, for more than three and a half centuries.

The South has been the cradle for the birth of every significant, distinctly-American, traditional and popular music, because the South is where these distinct cultures co-existed, co-habited, interbred, and produced musical and cultural off-spring.

# Africanized European Traditions

In moving from the South to the North (or North to South) even as late as the year 2000, the Africanization of the music in the South is obvious, even to an uneducated ear.

In the North, the fiddling, dance and singing traditions are still much closer to their Irish, Scots, English and French antecedents. Jigs, reels and waltzes show their origins. A restrained and refined tone is prized in both instruments and voices. Northern musicians are largely clinging to music as it was passed down to them and the Old World roots of the culture and the music are both preserved and venerated there.

In the South, however, often the same fiddle tunes and songs (sometimes renamed or refashioned) are played in what can only be described as an Africanized-style: decorating melodic notes come more from the African minor-pentatonic scale than from the pipe decorations of the British Isles (often confusing the major-minor tonality of the piece); rhythmic variations are highly prized and a pronounced back beat with a strong emphasis on beats 2 and 4, in 4/4 meter that entirely supplants the Irish, Scots and French penchant for landing strongly on beats 1 and 3.

## Contacts:

All booking inquiries will be tended to by my representatives at Loyd Artists. Existing programs can be reviewed at their website.

Loyd Artists: [info@loydartists.com](mailto:info@loydartists.com)  
tel. 518/647-5916  
<http://www.LoydArtists.com>

To inquire about custom-tailoring some of the focus of a program to suit the academic goals and trajectory of your students, please contact Loyd Artists or me. Thank you for your time and interest.

Scott Ainslie:  
[scott@cattailmusic.com](mailto:scott@cattailmusic.com)  
tel. 802-257-7391  
<http://ScottAinslie.com>  
<http://CattailMusic.com>  
<http://DeltaBluesPilgrimage.com>  
<http://ThundersMouthCD.com>  
<http://RobertJohnsonGuitarDVD.com>