Origins of
Folk Music
LIVEWORKSHEETS

Folk music is traditional music that belongs to a particular culture or group of people.

Most folk music includes singing and musical instruments.

It is music created by ordinary people within a culture, that's been played or sung to one another, for a very long time.

People would learn the music by listening to other people playing it and then copy them. This is known as an oral tradition.

Folk comes from the German word 'volk' meaning 'the people' and folk music is often thought of as being the music belonging to 'the people'.

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Folk music exists all around the world. It can reflect the roots of a people and their community, or remind people who have been displaced of their home country and traditions.

Each type of folk music is very different and can teach us things about a particular culture.

Ballads are the most popular kind of folk music. These are folk songs which tell a story of love or myths. There are also work songs, lullabies, sea shanties and religious songs.

Instrumental folk music doesn't require a singer. It is used to accompany traditional dances such as a céilídh in Scotland and Ireland, or Morris dancing in England.

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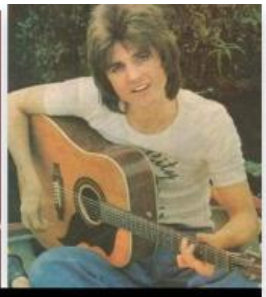

It is impossible to say exactly where much of folk music originally came from. Often there were no historic records. However, in the late 19th century, there was an effort to collect and conserve folk music across Europe and further afield. Some pioneers who recorded folk music were the English lecturer Cecil Sharp and the Hungarian composer Bela Bartok. These men spent years travelling to remote communities; Bartok even incorporated folk songs in his own music.

During the 20th century, folk music grew to become a distinct, living genre. There have been many folk revivals too, influencing classical and pop music. A big folk revival occurred in the UK in 1960s with singers like Ralph McTell.

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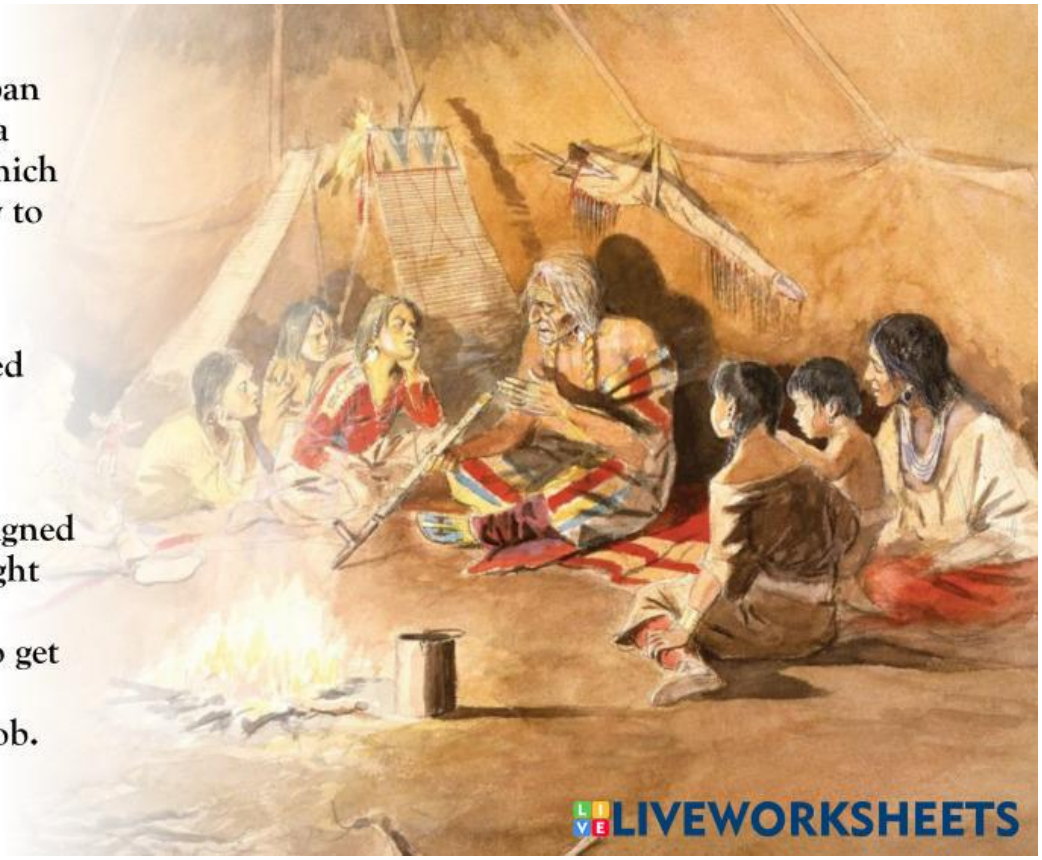
Folk music can be commemorative, rural, urban or political. Often there is a narrative or storytelling, which is seen as an important way to keep the culture alive.

Song structure is often based around a repetitive chorus punctuated with changing verses (this form is called strophic); the chorus is designed so that multiple people might join in, and in the case of workers songs, aids them to get through the repetitive, mechanical aspects of the job.



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Folk instruments can vary from country to country. Most of these instruments are acoustic, producing their own sounds.

Typically in the UK, you would expect to hear the following instruments:

Tin Whistle

Harmonica (mouth organ)

Acoustic guitar

Bagpipes

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Accordian

Fiddle (violin)

Mandolin

Banjo

Concertina

Clasarch

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