

# DISCOVER BLUEGRASS

Exploring American  
Roots Music

## “Don’t Forget Me When I’m Gone”– Writing Simple Folk Lyrics

(Section 1: The Roots of Bluegrass Music)

It was impossible for our ancestors to bring to this new land all the belongings they had to remind them of home—but there was no limit to the songs they could carry in their heads and hearts. Songs written to capture scenes and stories became treasured heirlooms. Melodies and lyrics were written in a catchy way so they could be remembered from generation to generation. This lesson helps learners tell and preserve their stories in easy-to-remember song lyrics they can share and cherish just like their mountain ancestors.

### Typical standards addressed:

- Poetry (rhythm and rhyme)
- Storytelling
- Culture

### Things you will need:

- Tape recorder
- Rhyming dictionaries

### Procedure:

To the learners: Think of something of great personal value to you, something that you never want to forget and wish to share with others. It might be a story, experience, a relative, friend or something you own.

Turn this into rhyming lyrics that you can recite as you tap the beat with your hand or a rhythm instrument. Write it in the form of four to six stanzas with a refrain. Keep the lyrics simple so they can be easily spoken and remembered. Make your song as catchy as possible. Use images and examples that are surprising and novel. Try rhymes that are humorous, musical and not expected. Use a rhyming dictionary if you like. Take a look at this song at the bottom of this page, as an example.

When the lyrics are refined and rehearsed so they work well and sound appealing, have learners pair up and teach their songs to each other.

As the culmination activity, either have the learners present them to the group or tape record them into a class compilation.

## Cookie Up A Tree

*I had a dog named Cookie  
As sweet as she could be.  
I thought that she was pretty smart  
‘Til she climbed up that tree,  
‘Til she climbed up that tree.*

*I went to call the doggies  
To come in for the night.  
I looked and looked for Cookie,  
But she’s nowhere in sight.  
No, she’s nowhere in sight.*

*I finally heard some yelping  
From a shady grove of pines.  
I thought a sly coyote  
Had got that dog of mine,  
Had got that dog of mine.*

*But when I started looking  
No doggie could I see?!  
‘Til I looked up above me,  
Way up in an old pine tree,  
Way up in an old pine tree.*

*There she was a-panting,  
Confused and hurt and scared.  
Chased a fat gray squirrel  
And landed way up there.  
She landed way up there.*

*In the dark I climbed the tree  
And put her ‘round my neck.  
Almost broke my arm and leg;  
I was a nervous wreck,  
A shaky nervous wreck!*

*But when I got back on the ground  
Almost broke in half,  
She licked my sweaty face so hard,  
All I could do was laugh,  
All I could do was laugh.*

*I had a dog named Cookie  
As sweet as she could be.  
I thought that she was pretty smart  
‘Til she climbed up that tree,  
‘Til she climbed up that tree.*

(Tom. Kopp, 2004)

## Additional Lesson Ideas:

Have students comment on how the lyrics change as new people learn them, just as folk tunes evolved over the years.

Consider the notion of “giving a song to another.” As gifts go, what does this mean to you?

Discuss how flattering it is to know that other people, maybe even complete strangers, have your story deeply stored in their brains.

Let a week or two pass, and again ask if learners can still remember the song lyrics. Discuss the nature of catchy words and images in memory.

Guide them to discover how grammar in lyrics is sometimes violated (“almost broke in half”), how new words are formed (“panting” becomes “a-panting”) or modified (“until” becomes “’til”). If lyrics are not standard English, is it OK? Does such non-standard English add anything?

Compare the lyrics they write to real traditional tunes such as “The House Carpenter” that The Reeltime Travelers and Nickel Creek sing in *Discover Bluegrass: Exploring American Roots Music*.

Perhaps have learners compose their lyrics to the tune of familiar songs (e.g., “Old MacDonald Had a Farm”) to encourage them to actually sing their creations aloud. Another option if you have access to a local musician/songwriter (or if your local music teacher has a flair for composition), is to have students write the lyrics and then have an adult musician set them to music—followed by a performance for the class of their songs.

Lesson Plans written by Tom Kopp, Ph.D., Miami University, for the International Bluegrass Music Association. For more info: [www.ibma.org](http://www.ibma.org)