

DISCOVER BLUEGRASS: Exploring American Roots Music

Unit 2: The Roots of Bluegrass Music, “Don’t Forget Me When I’m Gone” – Writing Simple Folk Lyrics

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 addresses:

Poetry (rhythm and rhyme)

Storytelling

Culture

Things you will need:

Legal pads

Possibly a Rhyming Dictionary (hard copy or online, like www.rhymer.com)

Digital or cassette tape recorder, smart phone with voice recording app, etc.

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, a 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 the 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 record them on a class compilation.

“Cookie Up a Tree”

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

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. 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.

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

6. 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.

7. 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.

(Repeat verse 1)

Additional Lesson Ideas:

Have students comment on how the lyrics change as new people learn them, just as folk tunes have 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 ask if learners can still remember the song lyrics. Discuss the nature of catchy words and images in memory.

Guide students 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 learners write to read 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 tunes of familiar songs (e.g. “Old MacDonald Had a Farm,” “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star”) to encourage them to 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 Foundation for Bluegrass Music. For more info: www.bluegrassfoundation.org