

8.7 COUNTRY MUSIC

Like many musical terms discussed in this chapter, **Country Music** has come to define a broad variety of musical styles encompassing Bluegrass, Hillbilly Music, and Contemporary Country among others. Generally speaking, most types of music that fall under this category originated in the American South (although it also encompasses Western Swing and cowboy songs) and features a singing style with a distinctly rural southern accent, as well as an instrumentation that favors string instruments such as the banjo, guitar, or fiddle.

Bluegrass music is a variation of country music that developed largely in the Appalachian region; it features fiddle, guitar, mandolin, bass guitar, and the five-string banjo. Often associated with Appalachia, bluegrass combines many of the song forms that are common in the region's Scottish/English musical heritage. For example, bluegrass blends the Scottish/English ballad with blues inflections. Some bluegrass songs are fast instrumental pieces featuring amazing technique by the performers. Listen to **Ricky Skaggs** and the Bluegrass Thunder perform via the link below.



Figure 8.13 | Hank Williams
Author | WSM radio
Source | Wikimedia Commons
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Ricky Skaggs, “Bluegrass Breakdown”

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

Hillbilly music was an alternative to the jazz and dance music of the 1920s. It was portrayed as wholesome and as the music of the “good old days.” Nashville’s *Grand Ole Opry* radio show became a very successful weekly network radio broadcast heard nationwide. Noticing an opportunity, record companies soon opened offices in Nashville. Country music became a source of big money for producers, song writers, and artists.

The Hillbillies – “Cluck Old Hen” 1927

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qizwcdHAWNU>

Honky-tonk music developed as Hillbilly music went west to entertain in saloons called “honky tonks.” Many of the songs dealt with subjects associated with honky tonks, such as infidelity and drinking. Although the first use of the term “honky tonk” referred to a ragtime-like piano style, it later came to refer to a country combo style that became quite popular in the 1940s and 1950s. **Duane Eddy’s** combo example of the honky-tonk style shows a more modern variation of honky-tonk:

Hank Williams – “Honky Tonkin” 1948

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=88XvpkHS4UE>

Western Music refers to music composed about the Great American West, such as the cowboy songs heard in movies of the 1930s and 1940s by singers such as Gene Autry and Roy Rogers.

One variation of this genre, **Western swing**, developed in Austin, Texas and other western cities and borrowed instruments from the dance band (saxophones, trombones, trumpets, piano, bass, and drums).

Mitch Ballard & The Western Swing Machine, “Ace in the Hole”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQawiRq-QDk>

Contemporary country music has become a mixture of rock rhythm sections and a singer singing with a country accent about many of the same topics that traditional country singers have used over the decades. Contemporary country artists often use electric guitars, electric steel guitar, electric bass, keyboards (often synthesizers), and drum set. Country music is still big business, selling millions of units per year. Watch and listen to the Carrie Underwood and Miranda Lambert performance linked below:

Carrie Underwood and Miranda Lambert, “Something Bad”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RfT2KqPCoI>

8.8 MUSIC FOR THE STAGE

Although music has been part of dramatic performances at least as far back as ancient Greece, American musical theatre has its own unique style, which developed from several earlier forms. The term **musical theatre** refers to a type of dramatic performance that tells a story through dialogue, with singing and dancing added to support and move the plot along. This differs from opera, which is presented purely through song, without any spoken word.

One precursor to modern musical theatre is the **minstrel show**. The first distinctly American form of theatre, minstrelsy was developed in the nineteenth century and featured white performers in blackface performing in a variety show of sorts. These three-act shows featured stock characters singing songs, performing in skits, and telling jokes. They often depicted black characters as happy participants in romanticized versions of the



Figure 8.14 | *West Side Story*

Author | Fred Fehl

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