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Ballads

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Ballads

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BALLADS



Arguably the most enduring artifacts from the early days of European settlement in Appalachia, ballads are still sung in households and on festival stages along The Crooked Road. Indeed, balladry has long been a living tradition, reinventing itself over the years and engaging new audiences along the way.

A ballad is a narrative song—a song that tells a story. Ballads are structured by means of a recurrent melody-line repeated through a series of thematically linked verses. Whether sung from memory or from a written-out set of lyrics, ballads generally feature verses four lines in length, with the second and fourth lines typically rhyming. In some ballads, a chorus or refrain is utilized between verses. In Appalachia, the traditional performance style for singing ballads is often characterized as impersonal and emotionally restrained, though some singers in the past (and many in the present) have animated their performances of ballads with vocal colorations and physical gestures.

Many ballads still sung in Appalachia (such as “Barbara Allen” and “Lord Bateman”) were originally crafted by British balladeers in the oral tradition, while other ballads (including “Four Nights Drunk” and “Mary of the Wild Moor”) descended from British broadsides (that is, pieces of paper offering mechanically typeset or handwritten lyrics of commercially-sold narrative songs, written by known or anonymous songwriters). Emigrants to the New World continued to sing British ballads, albeit in changed form because reinterpretation was inevitable in an oral tradition. From colonial times into the early twentieth century, singing British ballads was a favorite activity among people in the Appalachian frontier because this beloved tradition served to entertain and enlighten listeners in close-knit communities.

Many other ballads, such as “Omie Wise,” “Banks of the Ohio,” and “Tom Dula,” emerged entirely in the New World, a fact leading folklorists to call such creations “native American ballads” (referring not to North American Indians but to ballads that, while often modeled on British templates, emerged within American settings).

While many if not most ballads in Appalachia are traceable to the region’s Anglo-Celtic heritage, ballads grew out of other cultural influences. For instance, a distinctively African American tradition of ballad singing developed out of cultural interaction between blacks and whites. Such material, collectively known as “blues ballads,” included the classic “John Henry.”

Balladry as a living tradition may have declined across the English-speaking world, but its legacy in Southwest Virginia was carefully documented by such ballad scholars and collectors as Cecil Sharp, Alan Lomax, and Arthur Kyle Davis.

Ballads have long been highly valued components of the traditional music repertoire in many Appalachian communities. Historically, some singers (such as Jane Gentry of Hot Springs, North Carolina) could recount dozens of different ballads from memory. And some families (such as the Ritchie family of Viper, Kentucky) knew hundreds of ballads. The Crooked Road area in Southwest Virginia has been home to renowned ballad singers both past (including Texas Gladden, Fields Ward, and E. C. Ball) and present (for instance, Kay Justice, Rich Kirby, Elizabeth LaPrelle, and Corbin Hayslett).



*Ted Olson is the author of **Blue Ridge Folklife**, a study of Blue Ridge culture, and a Grammy Award-nominated music historian.*