Appalachian Strings

May 2 through June 8, 1996
by Randal Myler & Dan Wheetman
Directed by Randal Myler
Musical Direction by Dan Wheetman

Study Guide
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In order to find more information about Appalachia, immigration, hillbillies and their music, take a trip to your school or local library. There is a wealth of material on these subjects for both adults and children. Ask your librarian for help in finding the books, videos, records, tapes and magazines you need. Become familiar with your library and you will find that a world of information will be at your fingertips. Most libraries are not restricted by their own collections but can borrow from other libraries to satisfy your informational needs. Become a skillful library consumer. Never hesitate to ask questions. Planning is important, however, and the farther ahead you plan, the more time you give your librarian and yourself to find the best resources.

Each show the Denver Center Theatre Company produces has its own unique informational needs. We here at the theatre use the resources of our own and other libraries continually. Without access to information, it would not be possible to do what we do whether it is searching for the costumes of a particular period, defining the language of a specific time, discovering the customs and culture of when and where the play takes place, or finding technical information to produce the special effects on stage. Our people have to be well informed. We also think it's important that we share some of the resources we have discovered with you. In fact, this study guide has taken many hours of research, writing and editing in order to help you enjoy the production you are about to see and enrich your theatrical experience at the DCTC.

—Linda Eller
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Denver is fortunate to have a unique cultural funding program, The Scientific and Cultural Facilities District, which provides support for nearly 200 cultural groups in the 6-county Metro Region. Passed by an overwhelming vote of people in 1988, and passed again in 1994, the SCFD collects 1/10 of 1% on the sales tax (1 cent on a $10.00 purchase), which amounts to over $18 million annually. From the Zoo to Art Museum to small community theatre groups, the SCFD supports programs of excellence, diversity and accessibility which serve the entire metro population.

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The SCFD has been recognized as a national model for the enhancement of community quality of life through the arts: cities from California to Pennsylvania have sought to replicate this special funding District. The residents of the Denver Metropolitan area benefit every day from its programs.
Most of the more than one million Irish who emigrated to America in the two decades before the Civil War were peasant villagers or tenant farmers on English-owned estates—rustic, ill-lettered people who subsisted largely on the potatoes they grew on meager plots. For more than 100 years the Irish peasantry had been afflicted by periodic failures of their staple crop, but in 1845 disaster struck. In that and succeeding years, the plant disease known as potato blight wiped out virtually the entire crop. Without money to buy food even when it was available, men, women and children in the tens of thousands died from starvation and disease; for hundreds of thousands more the only recourse was emigration. Even after the potato famine, the exodus continued as the English evicted their tenants, tearing down peasant hovels and driving the desperate people away.

By the thousands, the Irish flocked to the ports and emigrated. Some journeyed to English colonies in Canada and Australia, but the majority, perhaps tempted by faint rumors of “America the Golden,” set sail for the United States. However, the voyage across the Atlantic matched the horrors left behind. They were herded by the hundreds into steerage, the cheapest quarters available. In these stinking, fetid holes, food and water were in short supply and disease ran rampant among already weak passengers. The numbers buried at sea will never be known.

In the cities, the new arrivals crowded into tightly packed slums, where entire families shared tiny, vermin-infested rooms, not unlike the dank, mud-floored cabins in which they had lived under British rule in Ireland. Some built shacks of scrap lumber on the outer fringes of growing cities, earning the label “Shanty Irish.” They were called other names, as well. They were Catholics in a predominantly Protestant country, the first great influx of Catholics to North America. So the Protestant press stereotyped them as “paddies”—coarse, loud, hard-drinking and clannish. Since work in the cities was scarce and the atmosphere hostile, many Irish left and found employment digging canals or laying the track of new railroads. Some early Irish settlers found their way to Appalachia where the hillsides offered richly watered farm lands, producing abundant grass for cattle and crops of corn. But this fair land soon erupted with names like Pottsville, Mauch Chunk, and Mahonoy Plane. These were the coal communities that grew up in the anthracite fields of Appalachia—completely dominated by the coal companies who owned the land, streets, houses, stores, schools, churches and community buildings.

There the Irish lived in shacks constructed of scrap lumber with tar paper nailed over it. Inside the furniture was rudimentary and some family members slept on mattresses rolled on the floor. Between the houses or on narrow strips behind were summer garden plots to supplement the family’s diet of potatoes and cabbage. Sometimes chickens or a pig might be kept. Water for domestic use was drawn from a well or pump located somewhere in the village. Young children, few of whom attended school regularly, were usually given the task of carrying it to the home.

Family life was a cycle of daily drudgery revolving around the start-and-stop whistles from the mines. The men, including male children as young as seven or eight, trudged off in the predawn darkness to the black pit. The women turned to household chores—shopping, cooking, cleaning, gardening and caring of the sick or injured workers.

The main institution of recreation was the tavern, where miners regaled each other with stories, tales, ballads and songs, which expressed their thoughts and feelings, wit and humor, hopes and fears. Roving minstrels were always welcome, and no wedding, christening or wake was complete without them. Strumming banjos or playing fiddles, the minstrels sang the old ballads, songs about the old country, or the woes of working down below. Their verses exuded sweat and blood, and echoed every coal mine sound and captured every coal mine smell.

“Men and women dropped into death mining the treasures of the earth for their masters and the people had no means of escaping their wretchedness.”

—Stephen Dedalus in Ulysses by James Joyce describing the years of the Irish exodus to America.
Deep in the earth, men worked in small teams of two, three or four. The air was damp with the acrid smell of coal dust always in their nostrils; they were always in complete silence except for the loose coal crunching beneath their boots or the dull clinking of their tools. They worked in total darkness but for the faint light from their lamps shining on the black, glossy coal. They drilled holes into the coal seams, tamped in the explosives and fired them from a safe distance, always alert for the deadly fumes of “rotten gas” and “stink damp,” for the creaking of timbers overhead, for falling rocks, or even the sudden scurrying of rats—for miners, a sure sign of an imminent cave-in. When a bad accident occurred, death sometimes came mercifully quickly, but for others hopelessly trapped, there was the agony of burial alive.4

But there were other hazards besides accidents. When the lungs of city dwellers are cut open after death in an autopsy, they are fairly black. When the lungs of miners suffering from coal miners’ pneumoconiosis are cut open at death, they are extraordinarily black. Therefore, the name “black lung” is given to this disease. Like other debilitating lung diseases, black lung leads to shortness of breath, incapacity to work and eventually, death.

Black lung is caused by the inhalation of coal dust. The dust accumulates in the lungs and forms small nodules call coal macules. The most frequent effect on the lungs is focal emphysema, which happens when the air sacs become disrupted. Although focal emphysema causes marked functional disability, the chest X-ray and simple breathing tests may show no abnormalities. Nevertheless, the miners show much shortness of breath from minimal exertion and are unable to continue working.

A miner named Kermit Clark of Weeksberry, Kentucky, described to a Congressional committee his symptoms of black lung:

I was a coal miner for 39 years. On eight different occasions, I was hauled out of the mine because I was passing out because I could not get enough air to breathe. I had to quit work on account of black lung—and I was advised by ten different doctors—that I am not supposed to drive my car. I am not supposed to go fishing. I am not supposed to do anything according to the doctors and I am supposed to fall dead at any time. I never sleep at night. I stay awake and sleep on the average about two and one-half hours a day, and most of that is sitting in a chair.5

Many miners die because of heart failure from the increased strain placed upon the heart by focal emphysema. Two percent of miners develop massive fibrosis (or scarring), which destroys one or more major areas of the lungs and also causes extreme stress on the heart.

This century has seen a dramatic increase in the number of black lung victims as a result of the mechanization of the coal mines and the generation of more dust from fast-operating machines. Roughly ten percent of all active coal miners have black lung. In 1969, the U.S. Surgeon General estimated that close to 100,000 active and retired coal miners suffered from the disease. Among coal miners, the death rate from respiratory disease is about five times that of the general working populations.6

“Coal dust everywhere, every step sends it up to the eyes and nostrils in choking clouds. Every wind threshes it across the prospect. But, in wet weather it is, if anything, even more disagreeable. Under the pelting of the rain at the end of the day—it had resolved itself to mere sodden mud—that clung, and clung and stuck with the tenacity of oil, and streaked and stained everything it touched.”

~ F. Norris, “Life in the Mining Region”

Everybody’s. September, 19027
Prohibition forbid by law the sale and, sometimes, the manufacture of alcoholic beverages. Such beverages included beer, gin, rum, whiskey and wine.

The issue of prohibition has been with us since before the Civil War. In 1845, 13 states passed statewide prohibition laws, but they were either repealed or declared unconstitutional in all states except Maine. After the Civil War, the liquor business developed rapidly and there was strong movement for prohibition. The leaders in this effort were the Prohibition Party formed in 1869; the Women's Christian Temperance Union organized in 1874; and the Anti-Saloon League, which started a national campaign for a prohibition amendment to the Constitution in 1913. During World War I, the prohibition leaders strengthened their cause through the food control bill, which carried a section prohibiting the manufacture of distilled liquor, beer and wine. In 1917, Congress provided for an amendment that would make the entire country prohibition territory. This was Amendment 18, which went into effect on January 16, 1920.

To enforce the 18th Amendment, Congress passed the National Prohibition Act, usually called the Volstead Act because Congressman Andrew Volstead of Minnesota introduced it in 1919. This law defined the prohibited “intoxicating liquors” as those with an alcoholic content of more than 0.5 percent, although it made concessions for liquors sold for medicinal, sacramental and industrial purposes, and for fruit or grape beverages for personal use in homes. Because the national and the state legislatures were reluctant to appropriate enough money for more than token enforcement—and because the opportunities for disregarding the law through smuggling, distilling, fermenting and brewing were legion—prohibition always represented more of an ideal than a reality.

The era inspired an extensive body of colorful literature; most of it alleging that the period was one of moral decay and social disorder precisely because of “Volsteadism,” which came to mean the intolerable searches, seizures and shootings by police who, with their token enforcement, seemed to threaten intrusion into the private lives of law-respecting persons. For example, in Appalachia, the longtime tradition of farmers making “moonshine”—whiskey made in the dead of night out of unused corn—was considered illegal. The literature alleged that Prohibition distorted the role of alcohol in American life causing people to drink more rather than less; that it promoted disrespect for the law; that it generated a wave of organized criminal activity, during which the bootlegger (one who sold liquor illegally), the “speakeasy” (an illegal saloon), and the gangster became popular institutions; and that the profits available to criminals from illegal alcohol corrupted almost every level of government. Historians, however, believe that in the beginning of the era, and at least until the middle of the decade, most Americans respected the law, hoped that it would endure and regarded its passage as directly responsible for the reduced incidence of public drunkenness and of alcohol-related crime, imprisonments and hospitalizations.

In the late 1920s, however, more and more Americans found the idea of repeal increasingly attractive. A major shift in public opinion occurred during the early years of the Great Depression when opponents could argue persuasively that prohibition deprived people of jobs and governments of revenue and generally contributed to the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment (AAPA), a nonpartisan organization of wealthy and influential citizens in all states who feared that through Prohibition the federal government might permanently compromise the tradition of individual freedom. Its goal was that Congress should submit to the states the 21st Amendment to the Constitution, which would repeal the 18th, and submit it in such a way as to circumvent the various state legislatures in which, it feared, legislators from rural districts that were “dry” (banned liquor), might present a serious challenge to ratification. To avoid this, Congress—for the first time since the Constitution itself was ratified and for much the same reason—called for ratifying conventions in each of the states. Delegates would be elected by the people for the specific purpose of voting yes or no regarding the question of the 21st Amendment. The elections for convention delegates in 1933 produced a repeal vote running almost 73 percent. In a remarkably coordinated effort by the states and the Congress, ratification was completed in December of that year and liquor control once again became a state rather than a federal problem.

“If we take habitual drunkards as a class, their heads and their hearts will bear an advantageous comparison with those of any other class.”
~ Abraham Lincoln in a speech in Springfield, Illinois, February 22, 1842
Folk music possesses many distinctive qualities. First, it is an expression of the character of the people. This character is conveyed in a folk song's melody and lyrics, which have been passed on and refined through the years. Although folk song melodies do remain basically unaltered, their lyrics adapt to suit their environment and their cultural setting.

For this reason, songs that evolved in the Appalachians developed their own unique flavor. This is the result of both the harsh living conditions that existed in the mountains and the heritage of the English and Scottish settlers who arrived there in the early 17th century. These immigrants, seeking to ease the transition of relocating in a new land, attempted to create a musical community corresponding to the one they had left in the old world. The songs that the settlers carried with them that were suited to the mountains and to their emotional needs were retained.

Most of the songs transported from the Old World to the Appalachians were ballads, narrative songs with many stanzas. The majority of the Appalachian ballads can be traced to 16th and 17th century England. There they had originated as “broadsides,” printed music on one side of a piece of paper, which were commercially written and distributed. In Britain, ballads usually contained more than 100 stanzas. In Appalachia, these ballads were pared down considerably to blend in with the stark living conditions. The remaining stanzas were packed with realistic detail and have become essential constituents of all American folk songs, not only the “historic” examples, but those composed by contemporary writers such as Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs.

These old ballads underwent many other modifications in their new land. Each ballad exists in numerous versions, for all have traveled in distance and time. All are embellished with distinctive detail and, almost always, end with a final verse that includes a moral drawn from the facts of the tale. In Appalachia, the common man, of little importance in British ballads, made an emergence in the wilderness.

The lyrics that survived dealt with universal themes of romance, battle, adventure and history. It is easy to understand why, in this harsh setting, the most prevalent song lyrics sung by people pertained to battle, adventure and history. However, women were motivated to sing romantic songs for other reasons. Mountain women had little control over their personal lives. Guilt and repression were widespread and these vengeful, romantic songs, though so evil that they were never sung before children, often were directed at the women's frustrations.

Although a majority of Appalachian music originated in England, mountain music was also shaped by American blacks. Many blacks found their way into the mountains working on farms and railroad crews. They brought with them their native African banjo along with their own distinctive musical style. Their music, imbued with a joyous and sensual style, was a vivid contrast to the straight-laced English immigrant singing.

Appalachian music was also influenced by religion. The early Baptist church, which gained momentum in the mountains in the early 20th century, put musical instruments aside as the devil’s work. These Baptists wouldn’t even tolerate instrumental music for their religious songs.

Not long after this religious upsurge, the technological breakthroughs of the 20th century destroyed the barriers of isolation that shielded the mountain songs from change for over three centuries. One of the largest bodies of American folk song, preserved by hundreds of years of isolation, then became accessible to the remainder of the country.

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### HOME REMEDIES

#### CHEST CONGESTION
- Make a poultice of kerosene, turpentine, and pure lard (the latter prevents blistering). Use wool cloth soaked with the mixture. Place cheesecloth on chest for protection, and then add the wool poultice.

#### TOOTHACHE
- Make a small amount of wine from pokeberries, and mix one part of the wine with eight parts white whiskey. Take a small spoonful just a couple of times a day. It's also good for rheumatism and muscle cramps.

#### NAIL PUNCTURE
- Take a hammer and draw the nail out. Grease the nail and put it away to prevent lockjaw.

#### FEVER
- Tie a bag containing the sufferer’s nail parings to a live eel. It will carry the fever away.

#### NOSEBLEED
- Lie down, put a dime on your heart and hang a pair of pot hooks about your neck.

#### SPIDER BITES
- If bitten by a black widow spider, drink liquor heavily from 3pm to 7pm.

#### CRAMPS
- To cure cramps in the feet, turn your shoes upside down before going to bed.

#### SORES
- Put butter around the sore so a dog will lick it. The dog’s saliva will cure it.

#### EYEAILMENTS
- A sty can be removed by running the tip of a black cat’s tail over it.

#### PNEUMONIA
- Give the person two teaspoonsful of oil rendered from a skunk.

#### ARTHRITIS
- Drink a mixture of honey, vinegar, and moonshine.

#### BLEEDING
- Place a spider web across the wound.

#### HICCUPS
- Take a teaspoon of peanut butter.
“A hillbilly is a poor farmer who lives in the Southern hill or Ozark region. The image is of a poor, hill farmer, or member of his family, living in an isolated region in a log cabin or shack. Such a farmer may raise a small crop of corn or other vegetables, own a cow and a mule, and often possesses many children and chickens. According to popular tradition all hillbillies carry long rifles and make moonshine whisky at their own stills.”

Until the 1920s, hillbilly music was performed largely at home, in church, or at such local functions as pie suppers and county fairs. Rural entertainers, however, were not adverse to commercialism; they performed in medicine shows, fiddle contests, itinerant tent shows, and vaudeville.

The themes of hillbilly song are similar to those of the old English ballad, with the mountains replacing the sea. There is a tendency to include as much “plot” as possible, intensified with whiffs of horror: theft, rape, adultery, dissolute crimes, the death sentence and spilled blood in all directions. The songs are sung with a teasing tone and even a party spirit. The singer laughs at the misfortune of others and hasn’t the hypocrisy to pretend otherwise. The best example and mostly famous authentic hillbilly group is the Carter Family who recorded from 1927 to 1943. The music was diffused by the radio and won national audiences; the Grand Ole Opry won a national network spot; and Nashville, Tennessee became a performance center.

About 1955, with the rise of rock and roll and amplified instruments, slicker pop-style arrangements were adopted. Record companies then replaced the label “Hillbilly” with a more sophisticated term—“country and western.”

The term is often used disparagingly to mean a rustic or uneducated person. However, in the late 19th and beginning of the 20th century the term has come to mean an important style in American folk music: hillbilly music. Typical of Appalachia and similar regions—Kentucky, Virginia, Carolina, Tennessee, Oklahoma—hillbilly music is identifiable by certain easily recognizable characteristics.

First of all, there is the voice: an extremely nasal tone in a constricted and high pitched accent. The final syllables of each line are often stretched out and exaggerated to produce an effect, which is partly comical, partly insistent. The addition to the lyric of various cries in the form of yodels, common to both hillbillies and certain mountain peoples of Europe, may be designed to exploit the echo effects produced by the mountains.

The basic instruments of hillbilly music are the violin, banjo, mandolin, harmonica, the three-string dulcimer (an elongated oval sound box of wood on which is mounted a narrow fretted fingerboard) and the auto harp, the latter two both plucked. Occasionally, the accordion is used and the guitar, which was something of a latecomer. In this production of Appalachian Strings, some uncommon instruments have been included. Among these are the fretless banjo (no ridges on the fingerboard to mark positions for stopping the strings) and the Jew’s harp (a type of mouth-resonated instrument consisting of a flexible “tongue” or lumella fixed at one end to a surrounding frame). Unlike country and western, hillbilly does not make use of percussion or amplification.

Sources:

When a folk song is passed from singer to singer, it tends to undergo change arising from creative impulses, faulty memory, the aesthetic values of those who learn song thus develops variants, gradually changing—perhaps beyond recognition—and existing in many forms. Since many people participate in determining the shape of a song, this process is called communal re-creation.

The song, “Come All Ye Fair and Tender Ladies” used in *Appalachian Strings*, is an example of how a song can change. These are the lyrics as collected by the musicologist, Alan Lomax.

“Come all ye fair and tender ladies,
Be careful how you court young men,
They’re like a star in a summer’s morning,
First appear and then they’re gone.

They’ll tell to you some loving story,
They’ll tell to you some far-flung lie,
And then they’ll go and court another,
And for that other one pass you by.

If I’d a-knowned before I courted
That love, it was such a killin’ crime,
I’d a-locked my heart in a box of golden
And tied it up with a silver line.

I wish I was some little sparrow
That I had wings could fly so high,
I’d fly away to my false true lover
And when he’s talkin’ I’d be by.

But as I am no little sparrow
And have no wings so I can’t fly high,
I’ll stay at home in grief and sorrow;
I’ll try to find some way to die.

This ballad of unrequited love and the betrayal is a tale of woe. It contains no hints of violence for either lover or lass and is sung slowly and plaintively.

The song appears in Sharp’s *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*. As sung by a Mrs. Coates of Flag Pond, Tennessee in 1916, a new verse has been added.

“I hope there is a day a-coming
When love shall put an end to thee.
I hope there is a place of torment
To secure my love for deceiving me.”

Mrs. Coates feels her lover should not go unpunished for his philandering. However, Mrs. Broghton of Knox County, Kentucky (1917) alters her version to do away with the loveless lass.

“But as it is I ain’t no sparrow
I have no wings and can’t fly high;
I’ll stay at home in grief and sorrow;
I’ll try to find some way to die.”

Some 50 years later Jacques Vassal heard the song again in the Appalachian area of the Southern states. The tempo has been increased and an ironic dialogue takes place between the lass and her lover. The mother of the girl has entered the story and so has a silver dagger, which gives the song a new symbol and a new title. From the first verse, the style becomes more humorous then before:

“Don’t sing love songs, you’ll wake my mother;
She’s sleeping here, right by my side.
And in her right hand, holds a silver dagger;
She says that I can’t be your bride.”

The next verse justifies this attitude:

“All men are false, says my mother
They’ll tell you wicked, loving lies.
The very next evening, they’ll court another
Leave you alone to pine and sigh.”

And the last verse affirms the feminist attitude and desire for independence common to American women:

“Go court another tender maiden
I hope that she can be your wife.
For I have been wounded and I’ve decided
To sleep alone all my life.”
1. Compare the conditions the Irish emigrant endured in the United States with that of the African Americans. How are they the same and how different? Find out why the Germans, Italians, Jews, Poles, Latinos and others emigrated to the U.S. in the 19th century and what conditions they encountered.

2. Research and discuss how our government's immigration policies have changed since the 1920s. What are the current policies? What are some reasons for our policies? Do you agree with them? Why or why not?

3. Compare “black lung disease” to some other diseases supposedly caused by environmental factors and/or industrial chemicals. These might include emphysema, lung cancer, radiation sickness, Gulf War syndrome, post traumatic stress disorder of Vietnam, as well as conditions caused by “agent orange.” How can we exert any control over the health of our lives if we live and work in polluted places and stressful times?
   A. What is a “whistle-blower”? Does our society support or condemn him or her? What kind of courage or ethics does it take to be a “whistle-blower”?

4. Research the “Molly McGuires,” a group of coal miners who tried to correct poor conditions in coal mines, and discuss their methods and what happened to them.

5. Prohibition was an attempt to legislate morality. Compare current attempts to legislate for gun and abortion control.

6. Research some early country music artists and listen to their recordings. Some names would include the Carter family, Jimmie Rodgers, Roy Acuff, Ernest Tubbs, Hank Williams, Merle Haggard, Buck Owens, Charley Pride, Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson, Loretta Lynn, Patsy Cline. What are the themes of their songs? Why do they and their songs hold universal appeal?


8. Take the lyrics of “Come All Ye Fair and Tender Ladies” and re-create it to fit your feelings or community.

9. These Anglo-Scottish-Irish folk songs were the “pop songs” of their day. What pop songs of today will become the “folk songs” of tomorrow? Give your reasons.

10. “Yankee Doodle,” published in London in 1775, was first a song of humiliation about the rag-tag American army. After the Revolutionary War, it became America’s musical alter-ego. Later, it was used by political satirists and patriotic balladeers to parody United States’ policies and especially, presidential candidates. Write your parody of “Yankee Doodle” to fit this election year.

You can find out more about America's patriotic songs such as “America” and the “Star Spangled Banner in these books: