HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

America has a rich history of performing arts. Music and dance have long served as both an outlet of entertainment for Americans and as a commentary on different eras. America is also a melting pot of different cultures. Traditions from these many different cultural groups shine through in America’s music and dance traditions.

Looking closely at trends in the performing arts over the years will reveal commentaries on different eras. Slaves performed the “Cakewalk” dance, which mocked the mannerisms of the Southern elite. The Fisk Jubilee Singers, originally comprised of former emancipated slaves, toured America and helped to negate stereotypes of African Americans. Songs written during the Great Depression are often a commentary on the hard times many Americans faced. Folk singer Pete Seeger’s songs were often a form of political and social activism. These dances and songs serve as a reminder of the racial, social, and economic divisions in America at the time that they were popular.

Many American cities have become known worldwide for their strong performing arts traditions, such as New York City and its famous Broadway shows, and of course, Nashville, also known as “Music City,” and its strong tradition of country music. From the small towns to the big cities, the performing arts can be found anywhere in any town, so take the time to explore them and learn a little about their history in the process.

ADDITIONAL LINKS:

- Performing Arts Encyclopedia
- Lyrical Legacy: 400 Years of American Song and Poetry (from the Teachers Page)
- Music and Dance Themed Resources (from the Teachers Page)
- “Now what a Time:” Blues Gospel, and the Fort Valley Music Festivals, 1938-1943
- An American Ballroom Companion: Dance Instruction Manuals, ca. 1490-1920
- Omaha Indian Music
- Sound Recordings

Teaching with Primary Sources — MTSU

PRIMARY SOURCE SET

PERFORMING ARTS: MUSIC & DANCE

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS:

The Library of Congress Web site is a great place to find primary sources related to music and dance, from songs to sheet music to photographs to films of dances. This particular primary source set explores several categories related to the music and dance:

- p. 2 Popular Music
- p. 3 Folk Music
- p. 4 Dance
- p. 5 Singers & Dancers

(pp. 6-7 are bibliographic citations)

A great place to start is the Performing Arts Encyclopedia, which allows explorers to both search and browse the primary source collections and exhibitions relating to various performing arts, including music and dance. Students can explore the different songs and dances of different cultural groups, such as Native Americans, Africans Americans, and Hispanics. Students can also learn to sing and play songs using sheet music. Do the lyrics reflect the time period the songs were written in? If so, why? Look at specific singers and dancers. How did their personal work impact the music or dance profession throughout the years? How does Tennessee and your local community support musicians and dancers?

For additional ideas see the June 2009 TPS-MTSU Newsletter that explores popular culture and the performing arts and the May 2010 TPS-MTSU Newsletter that explores music.
Fred R. Hamlin's musical extravaganza, The wizard of Oz [1903]

Babes in Toyland a musical extravaganza, “I can’t Do The Sun” [1903]

"We Shall Overcome," [1963]

Close dem windows [1879; 4 pages]

Opera House [1890]

Additional Links:
- Dolly Parton & the Roots of Country Music
- War Song—Buster Brown [1943]
- Amazing grace / Elvis Presley [compact disc] [1971] - Real Media Player is required
- Amazing grace / Johnny Cash [compact disc] [1974] - Real Media Player is required

Detail, Ryman Auditorium, Nashville, Tennessee [2008]

Sun Records Studio, Memphis, Tennessee [2008]
FOLK MUSIC

Songs:
- I'm Going Away to Leave You, Going to Tennessee [1967]
- Disc 13, Side A: Take a Trip on the Canal if You Want to Have Fun [part 1 of 3] [Audio] [1937]
- Smoky Mountain Blues [1939]
- [Yo cuando era niño - mi padre querido …] [illustrated] [1939]

I Like to Live in the Country [Textual Transcription] [1939, detail]

Folklore music map of the United States from the Primer of American Music [1946]

English guitar, front and side views and elevation, mechanical drawing drawn by Jos. H. Hando [1938-1940]

Dulcimer made of walnut, featuring a sound hole framed by a cross-section of a walnut [1994]

Gabriel Brown and Rochelle French, Eatonville, Florida [1935]
DANCE

Carmen Amaya : and her troupe. [19—?]  

Montgomery Ballet performs "A New Ballet by Paul Gilliam" at the Davis Theatre in downtown Montgomery, Alabama [2010]

Cake walk / American Mutoscope and Biograph Company. [1903]

Myra Kinch & group "Festival of modern dance" [1938]

Male Traditional Dancer  
[1983]

Wehman Bros.' book on the way to dance : a book which teaches the art of dancing without a master. [190-?; 60 pages]
SINGERS & DANCERS

[Portrait of Martha Graham and Bertram Ross, in Visionary Recital] [1961]

Abbott, Emma, Singer [between 1865 and 1880]

Pete Seeger with arm raised and holding banjo standing with microphones on stage [1967]

Abbott, Emma, Singer [between 1865 and 1880]

Jubilee Singers, Fisk University, Nashville, Tenn. [between 1870 and 1880]

Alabama born singer Eddie Levert at Alabama Country Music Hall of Fame concert for the Inductees into the Hall of Fame, Montgomery, Alabama [2010]

Anna Pavlova, 1885-1931 [c. 1916]

Jubilee Singers, Fisk University, Nashville, Tenn. [between 1870 and 1880]

Pete Seeger with arm raised and holding banjo standing with microphones on stage [1967]

Woody Guthrie, half-length portrait, seated, facing front, playing a guitar that has a sticker attached reading: This Machine Kills Fascists [1943]
Teachers: Providing these primary source replicas without source clues may enhance the inquiry experience for students. This list of citations is supplied for reference purposes to you and your students. We have followed the Chicago Manual of Style format, one of the formats recommended by the Library of Congress, for each entry below, minus the access date. The access date for each of these entries is April 19, 2011.


Aumuller, Al, photographer. “[Woody Guthrie, half-length portrait, seated, facing front, playing a guitar that has a sticker attached reading: This Machine Kills Fascists]/ World Telegram photo by Al Aumuller.” Photograph. 1943. From Library of Congress: Miscellaneous Items in High Demand. https://www.loc.gov/item/2002709330/.


