



Sound of American Music

In the beginning, American music consisted of variations of Old World tunes and songs from the places in Europe and Africa. Ballads, folk songs and classical compositions were from the Old World. By the 19th century, America was developing its own music and instruments for an American sound. The American sound has swept around the world today. That sound is made of many different cultures and sound variations.

During the colonial period ballads, folk songs from Europe such as “Paper and Pins” or “Yankee Doodle” were European tunes before the colonists put their own spin on them. Then, by the 19th century, new instruments were added to the musical sound. African slave communities developed the banjo and applied the call-and-response singing to European and Latin sounds.

Call-and-response singing was used in African worship, public gatherings, children’s rhymes and work songs. No group used music more often in civil affairs. The colony’s music from Africa was alive in slave societies. It was used for the same purposes as it was in Africa and also became a way to express protest. “Blue-Tail Fly,” also known as “Jimmy Crack Corn,” has a hidden message as to who killed the slave master. Traveling shows and medicine shows had taken the sounds of Europe and Africa around the county.

Louis Moreau Gottschalk was performing music with a Latin, African and European sound. He could be considered the first American classical composer. He was big in Latin America, performing before large audiences. Unfortunately, he died young. His music was created from the sound he listened to in New Orleans. New Orleans by the end of the 19th century saw the development of a brand-new sound with Scott Joplin and ragtime syncopation. Listen to Gottschalk and Joplin, and you’ll hear the progression of the sound to new musical instrumental forms.

Tin Pan Alley became the musical mecca by 1900. By 1921, Aaron Copland was producing *Three Moods*, with the final movement titled “Jazzy.” The European singularity of rhythm style mixed with the polyrhythms of Africa blended from ragtime to jazz to swing and finally to hip hop and rap. However, rap is just Gregorian chants without much musical variation—monotone.

The European folk songs and ballads took Latin influences and produced variations on old tunes. “Clementine” was based on a Spanish ballad during the California Gold Rush period. “The Yellow Rose of Texas” was based on a young mulatto, or high yellow, who was rumored to be the mistress of General Santa Anna. The song went through many variations over time to change the words.

By the 1930s, a new country sound came out of the Great Depression with Bill Monroe and Jimmy Rogers. Producers began collecting songs from around the country for recording sales. Folk songs, gospel, rhythm and blues, and spirituals would all merge into a new sound in the 1950s. By the 1960s, bluegrass, folk and protest songs dominated the air waves. Country, rock and pop music broke into different genres, like heavy metal, punk, grunge and rap.

Today, American music is found around the world and has come back with variations to the sound by others, as with the British Invasion of the 1960s.

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