



## Collaboration and Innovation in Country Music: Analyzing Lyrics

A.P. Carter was called a “songcatcher,” a musician who collected lyrics and melodies from family members, friends, and neighbors. Carter worked and traveled with African American musician Lesley Riddle to gather music from towns throughout the U.S. On one of these song-catching trips, Carter found the folk tune that became the the Carter Family's 1929 “I’m Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes.” A string of country song-writers — Roy Acuff, Hank Thompson, and Kitty Wells — produced their own hit songs by writing new lyrics to the same melody in the decades that followed. In this ELA exercise, students will compare meaning through lyrical analysis, learn about the concept of an “answer song,” and consider the role of collaboration and iteration in music and art more broadly.

### Lesson Summary

In this three-part activity, students will trace the evolution of two melodies and their associated lyrics through country music's history. As they explore how these melodies have been adapted to different messages over time, students will have the opportunity to discuss the role of collaboration in music. They will be introduced to foundational acts in country music, including the Carter Family, Roy Acuff, Hank Thompson, and Kitty Wells. Students will conclude by writing their own lyrics to a melody which will have become familiar.

### Time Allotment

2-3 class periods.

### Supplies

- Lyrics sheet
- The Carter Family: Song-Catching and the “Carter Scratch”
- Roy Acuff’s “Great Speckled Bird”
- Kitty Wells’ “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels”

### Introductory Activity

The Carter Family is widely regarded as one of the foundational acts in country music’s history. A.P. Carter was called a “songcatcher,” a musician who collected melodies and lyrics and repurposed them. Carter worked and traveled with African American musician Lesley Riddle to collect music from towns throughout the U.S. Riddle acted as a human tape recorder, memorizing melodies while A.P gathered lyrics. Once songs were “caught,” the Carters made them their own, notably through their use of an innovative guitar style called the Carter scratch.

As you watch the following clips, consider how the Carter Family collaborated with their fellow musicians and community members to bring a new musical style to the wider world. Consider, also, how we might think of subsequent musicians as “collaborating” with the Carter Family in similar ways.

**Watch:** [The Carter Family: Song-Catching and the “Carter Scratch”](#)

### **Listening Exercise [Optional]**

Listen to the three versions of the melody referenced in the clip we just watched, taking notes about differences between them. The Carters took this melody from the traditional African American hymn “When the World’s on Fire” to write their own “Little Darling, Pal of Mine,” which became Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land.”

Consider: How does the message change in each new version?

- [“When the World’s on Fire” \(Carter Family version\)](#) *Originally a baptist hymn* (Listen)
- [“Little Darling, Pal of Mine” by the Carter Family](#) (Listen)
- [“This Land is Your Land” by Woody Guthrie](#) (Listen)

### **Discuss**

1. What was “old” about the Carter family’s music? In what ways do the the Carters represent tradition? What was new about their music? In what ways do they represent innovation?
2. Artistically speaking, what is the difference between collecting (and then adapting) existing music versus creating something completely original? Is one approach more valuable or authentic than the other?
3. Who deserves “credit” for the enduring popularity of this melody? Explain.
4. What does Rhiannon Giddens mean when she says this kind of collaboration is the beautiful part of American music? In what ways is this a particularly “American” phenomenon?

### **Learning Activities**

In 1936 Roy Acuff recorded his hit song “The Great Speckled Bird” to the same tune as “I’m Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes,” a song written by the Carter Family. Acuff changed the lyrics, inspired by a Bible passage from the Old Testament book of Jeremiah.

**Watch:** [Roy Acuff’s “Great Speckled Bird”](#)

### **Listen**

Point students to the [lyrics sheet](#); have them follow along as they listen to the following two songs.

- [“I’m Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes” by the Carter Family](#) (*Note: the Carter Family's version is not included in a documentary clip*)
- [“Great Speckled Bird” by Roy Acuff](#)

## Discuss

1. Consider and compare the lyrics of “I’m Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes” and “Great Speckled Bird.” What is the message of each song? Does the melody work better for one song than the other? Or is it flexible enough to support both a heartbreaking message of unrequited love and an uplifting message of religious devotion? Explain your reasoning.
2. Given A.P. Carter’s role of “songcatcher” throughout his career, how do you think he would feel about other artists borrowing the tune from “I’m Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes” to make their own songs?
3. What is the difference between plagiarism (taking someone else’s work or ideas and passing them off as one’s own) and homage (a public display of respect and admiration that sometimes takes the form of imitation)? Where is the line between artistic theft and collaboration?
4. Copyright law is complex and strictly enforced in the US and around the world. Do you think it makes sense for artists to guard their intellectual and creative work so closely as “property”? Explain your reasoning.

## Culminating Activity

In 1952, nearly 20 years later, this same the tune was recorded again by Hank Thompson with lyrics very different from Acuff’s in “Great Speckled Bird.” Thompson’s “Wild Side of Life” is written from the perspective of a man condemning his wife’s preference for the nightlife of the honky-tonk over domestic activities. Kitty Wells’ “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels,” is an “answer song” that uses the same melody, and references Thompson’s song directly in its lyrics to share a female perspective on the same issue.

**Watch:** [Kitty Wells’ “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels”](#)

## Listen

Point students back to the [lyrics sheet](#), asking them to follow along as you play two more adaptations of the Carter Family’s “I’m Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes” (which had already been repurposed, with great success, by Roy Acuff in “Great Speckled Bird”).

- [“The Wild Side of Life” by Hank Thompson](#) (Listen)
- [“It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels” by Kitty Wells](#) (Listen)

## Analyze

Divide the class into four groups; assign each group a prompt, asking them to provide answers for both songs. Students may mark words or phrases on the lyrics sheet to support their claims. Each group will report back to the larger class.

1. Who is “speaking” in each of these songs? How do you know? Point to specific lines from the text to back up your claim.
2. Who is the intended audience for each of these songs? How do you know? Point to specific lines from the text to back up your claim.

3. What is the argument of each song? What is each song's purpose? How do you know? Point to specific lines from the text to back up your claim.
4. How would you describe the mood or attitude of each song? What gives you this impression? Point to specific lines from the text to back up your claim.

### **Broaden the Discussion**

1. What difference would it have made if Kitty Wells had recorded "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels" using a different tune? Would her critique of Thompson's message in "The Wild Side of Life" have been as powerful? Explain your answer.
2. How was Kitty Wells' adaptation of Hank Thompson's "The Wild Side of Life" different from Roy Acuff's adaptation of the Carter Family's "I'm Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes?" Explain.
3. As we seen, there has been a significant amount of borrowing in country music since its beginnings. Can you think of examples from other musical genres (e.g. the practice of "sampling" in rap and hip hop)? Can you think of examples in other art forms (e.g. painting, poetry, fiction)? Describe some of these examples.

### **Song-Writing Exercise**

It's been a long-standing tradition in country music to adapt an existing melody to new subject matter by changing its lyrics. Now you can try your hand at doing the same. Using the Carter Family's [borrowed] tune in "I'm Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes," rewrite the lyrics to fit a new message. Maybe you just want to start by rewriting one or two words ("I'm thinking tonight of my new car"? "I'm thinking today of my guitar"?). Or maybe you want to do a complete re-write, as in "Great Speckled Bird." The melody and rhyme scheme are simple enough that you can work in just about any content you want.

Similarly, think about how you might use another existing melody (from any genre) to write an "answer song" in the style of Kitty Wells. Is there a song with whose message you totally disagree? Name it and provide the lyrics. Use the same melody and rewrite the song to refute the original version.

Reprinted from *PBS LearningMedia: Collaboration and Innovation in Country Music: Analyzing Lyrics*

<https://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/collaboration-innovation-lesson-plan/ken-burns-country-music/>

© 2019-09-13 14:57:40 WETA. All Rights Reserved. For personal or classroom use only. Not for redistribution.