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**Russ Childers**

# *Appalachian Culture through Music & Stories*



*Classroom photo by Rich Sofranko*

## **STUDY GUIDE**

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# **Artists on Tour**

# WHAT WILL CHILDREN LEARN

Using story and song, the artist shares memories of his family's Eastern Kentucky farm life. Children learn the trials and joys of Appalachian living over the past two hundred years. Focus is on the positive contributions of Appalachian culture as transferred through the artist's traditional music and storytelling. Appalachian survival depends on learning to use what is at hand and instills creativity and resourcefulness in its citizenry, along with a firm emphasis on family values. Children learn to celebrate their own creativity through singing and rhythm exercises with the performer. Featured instruments are the banjo, fiddle, lap dulcimore, guitar and various homemade/recycled instruments. Storytelling includes traditional Jack tales, tall tales and personal anecdotes.

## A TYPICAL PROGRAM MAY INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- Brief introduction to Appalachia
- Fiddle tune such as "Soldier's Joy" and historical explanation of tune and instrument
- Banjo tune such as "John Brown's Dream" and its historical significance
- Demonstration of homemade instruments, such as lap dulcimore, limberjack, washtub bass
- Story: tall tale, Jack tale or personal history
- Traditional Appalachian songs such as "Ground Hog" or "Baby-O" with guitar
- Typically ends with a "jam band" group participation on recycled instruments



# ARTIST

“Imagine yourself in the past — say, one hundred years ago — on the porch of a mountainside cabin after the day’s work is complete. This twilight time of day is typically when songsters and storytellers weave their magic. My imaginary setting is informal. Children gather around as songs and stories familiar to my ancestors are revisited. There is no TV or radio or even electricity to run either one. In this picture from the past, books are not plentiful, so history, both truth and fiction, is passed from generation to generation through the vehicle of songs and stories.

“Singing and storytelling are integral to the mountain life my forebears experienced, so I incorporate many songs and stories into my programs. Besides demonstrating the self-sufficiency and independent character of the Appalachian resident, the program illustrates several Appalachian instruments, e.g., banjo, fiddle, guitar and lap dulcimore. I show that sound is produced from vibrations of my strings and how the instruments function. Because process is important to children, I am able to use props, such as a groundhog skin on a stretcher frame, to illustrate how my ancestors manufactured everyday items from the resources around them. Moving by story and song through my family history, we all learn about making do with what we have and gain some valuable lessons in self-sufficiency.”

— Russ Childers

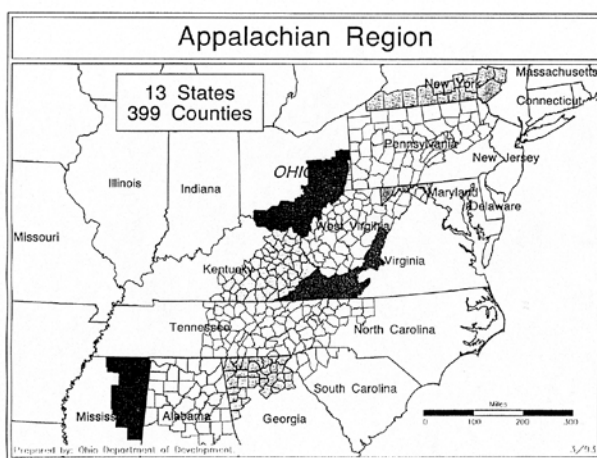
For more than 35 years, Russ Childers has been making music in the Southern Ohio/Northern Kentucky area. Whether as a banjo player with the Rabbit Hash String Band or a fiddle player with the husband-wife team Bear Foot or as a one-man-band-and-storyteller, his music defines him. His banjo playing has won many state awards, including Kentucky State Clawhammer Banjo Champion, an honor that also snagged him a Kentucky Colonelship! Mr. Childers even took his music to New York in 1983 for an off-Broadway production celebrating Appalachian poetry, music, and dance called *Close Harmonies*. In his 15 years of professional storytelling, he engages in a time-honored tradition: the oral passage of information interspersed with the songs his mother sang to him. As he once learned aspects of his Eastern Kentucky heritage from his parents and grandparents, so Mr. Childers now passes it on. But he continues to be a student of banjo player Elmer Bird of West Virginia and fiddle Tommy Taylor of Northern Kentucky. Just as Mr. Childers’ own Appalachian music and stories are recycled from an earlier time, he demonstrates instrument building to teach children how to make music on reclaimed materials. This echoes the lifestyles of his ancestors who often found it necessary to fashion useful things from reused objects.

Russ Childers regularly appears at the Cincinnati Appalachian Festival, Tall Stacks Festivals, branches of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, and most of the school systems in the Greater Cincinnati area. He has a deep commitment to the traditional arts as is shown by his affiliations with the Ohio Arts Council as an Artist-in-Education and the Advisory Committee of the Cincinnati Urban Appalachian Council.

# HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Politically, if not geographically, Appalachia consists of 13 states and 399 counties in the southern Appalachian mountains of the United States, usually agreed upon as stretching from western Maryland to Northern Georgia. Culturally, Appalachia is a “salad bowl” of diverse traditions since the influx of European settlers began in the 1700s.

Native American, African-American, Pennsylvania Dutch, Scots-Irish and Welsh influences affected the resulting “Appalachian” culture. Dance, song and music of the area reflects these interwoven influences. For instance, the mountain banjo was originally an African instrument, yet its droning fifth string derived from the ancient sound of British Isles bagpipes. Appalachian flatfoot dancing evolved from Irish and English step dancing using African rhythms as well as Native American movements. The stories carried into the region by each wave of settlers changed from their original versions to fit the New World environment of their listeners: tall tales and Jack tales acquired a local hue.



## WHAT IS A TALL TALE?

No matter whether you call them whoppers, stretchers, yarns, windies or lies, folks have been telling them for a long, long time. Such tales are entertaining, but they also serve to make the teller feel stronger. In times of hard survival, sometimes a person needs such a story more than food to give them the strength to go on.

## WHAT IS A JACK TALE?

Everyone knows Jack. Didn't he cut down the beanstalk? Didn't he have a time building a house? Didn't he and Jill go up the hill? Wasn't it Jack who jumped the candlestick? Jack has been around at least as long as lying. He lived in the stories of the early settlers of the Appalachian region, brought there by way of the British Isles. In our Southern Highlands, Jack takes on a distinctively New World persona and remains a feisty survivalist. We can all learn from Jack!

Cincinnati is composed of more than one-third Appalachian descendants. If not reconnected with their heritage, a rich culture may be lost and gone forever. Through Russ Childers' program focus, their particular history will be shown in a positive light. Russ' own story is the story of the migration of Appalachians. Like Jack, he found himself in many settings, but the journeys getting there were always interesting.

*Map prepared by the Ohio Department of Development*

# ACTIVITIES

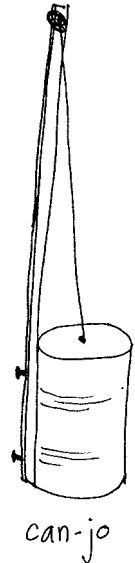
## 1. MAKE A CAN-JO

With recycled products and kitchen trash, children can create their own music on their own manufactured instruments. Appalachian musicians sometimes had to use what was at hand when store-bought musical instruments were not available or affordable. The Foxfire Books are full of examples of this type of resourcefulness. The can-jo is Russ's adaptation of the traditional washtub bass that is commonly used in Appalachian musical settings.

**Materials needed:** large coffee can, wooden yardstick, string, paperclip, two nuts and bolts.

**Directions:** Punch a hole in the center of the bottom of a tin can (lid has been removed).

Setting open end of can on a counter, drill two holes through the yardstick and the can so that stick extends up from closed end. Fasten with two nuts and bolts. Drill hole in other end of stick. Push string through the hole in the can and fasten to a paper clip inside the can so that the string cannot pop out. Stretch the string to the hole in the far end of the yardstick; tie securely and tighten as much as possible. (see picture)

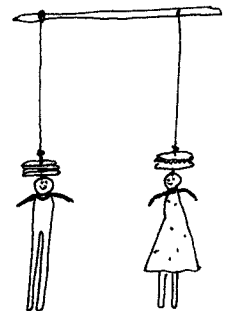


## 2. LEARN THE VIRGINIA REEL

This is one of the most popular dances of the Southern Highlands. One good source for the dance is *Traditional American Dance Book* by Rick Meyers, 1983. Another source is *Handy Play Party Book* by Lynn Rohrbough, World Around Songs, 1982. This dance is performed in long lines, up and down the hall. Imagine clearing the cabin of furniture and rolling up the carpet in order to have a dance! The fiddlers stood in the doorways to take up less space and to be heard equally well in both rooms of the cabin. "Stay all night, stay a little longer . . ."

## 3. MAKE A CLOTHESPIN DANCER OR A LIMBERJACK

Using patterns provided in *Homemade Instruments* by Dallas Cline, collect materials and create dancers for accompanying your homemade musical instruments (see number 1). Call in grandparents to help with your building projects. Have them share some of their toy memories and demonstrate their favorite homemade pastimes, as in the *Foxfire Book of Toys and Games*.



## 4. COLLECT A STORY FROM YOUR ANCESTORS

Who are your ancestors? Make a family tree to find out. Ask questions and tape the answers or write them down. A good way to jog the memories of relatives is to show them an old quilt and ask for the story of its making. Other things work well, too: a treasured piece of furniture that's been in the family a long time, an old dish lovingly stored in the corner cupboard, a faded photograph. Along the way collect the family stories you hear from your parents, your grandparents or favorite uncle or aunt. Polish one up and share it with your classmates. The class could put their family stories together in a book.

## 5. MAP YOUR MIGRATION

On a United States, North American, Western Hemisphere, or World Map, track your family's migration. Compare with others in the class. Compile a composite map of migrations. The Appalachian residents migrated from Europe, British Isles, Africa, Native America . . . and are still migrating today . . .

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