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Russ Childers

Fiddles & Flatboats: Music & Stories Along the Ohio



Classroom photo by Rich Sofranko

STUDY GUIDE

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Artists on Tour

ARTIST BACKGROUND

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 fiddler 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.

BACKGROUND



Using the theme of flatboats and steamboats in Ohio River history, Russ Childers focuses on the music and stories that washed ashore with the waves of settlers using the river as highway to the frontier. The fiddle and banjo were also river passengers; they provided not only much-needed entertainment to hardworking river residents, but provided a rhythmic cadence to pace the crews' work. Audiences hear old fiddle tunes with historic river themes like "Shawneetown" and "Natchez Under the Hill"; they learn traditional work songs like "Working on a Push Boat" or "The Boatman Dance" played on an African-inspired gourd banjo. The steamboat era brings in songs like "Oh Susanna," "The Robert E. Lee," and the Delta-blues-influenced "Crawdad Song." For more than 200 years, the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers were wilderness thoroughfares that carried the songs, tunes and stories of the many cultures that traveled their lengths. Russ' tall tales and 'brag stories' reflect the bravado necessary to bolster the spirits of river dwellers. At one time, storytelling nourished souls as much as fishing fed families along the rivers. Listeners might learn Mike Fink's keelboat boast, or what early Cincinnati lawyers had in common with Ohio River catfish, or what happens when you fish with frogs as bait, or what does truth have to do with banjo players anyway? In more extended programs, Russ can teach popular frontier dances and play parties like the "Virginia Reel" or "Floating Down the River."

HISTORY OF STEAMBOATS

In the early 1700s French physicist and inventor Denis Papin experimented with ideas for steam-driven boats. However, it was not until after Scottish engineer James Watt made a number of improvements to the steam engine during the last third of the 18th century that the first functional steamboats appeared.

Early models of steamboats include the steam-driven paddle-wheel boat built by French nobleman Marquis Claude de Jouffroy d'Abbans and tested on the Saône River in 1783. American inventor John Fitch built and tested the first working steamboat in the United States in 1786. In 1790 Fitch launched the first regular passenger and freight service, from Philadelphia to New Jersey. His venture failed and decades passed before the public fully supported steamboat transport.

About 1800 Scottish inventor William Symington built the Charlotte Dundas, which worked as a tug. American engineer and inventor Robert Fulton designed the first commercially successful steamboat in the United States, the Clermont. In 1807 he traveled in it from New York City to Albany, a distance of 150 miles, in a running time of 30 hours (he made stops along the way). This was a major improvement over the tow barges and sailing vessels that had been the means of upstream transport until then. In 1809 American inventor and engineer John Stevens took a steamboat of his design, the Phoenix, down the Atlantic Coast from New Jersey to Philadelphia, the first time a steamboat was used in the ocean. Stevens subsequently launched a steam-powered ferry service. Soon steamers were sailing regularly on rivers and along coasts.

Early steamboats had relatively low power and thus proved most useful on calmer bodies of water such as lakes or wide, slow-moving rivers. Such vessels were important for transporting people and goods, especially on the southern portions of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. Romanticized in the works of American writer author Mark Twain and others, some steamboats were rough and uncomfortable, while others were luxurious and had elaborate woodwork and decorations.

Steamboats became less important for transportation when faster forms of transport appeared. Rail and eventually road transport took over as the primary means of moving people and goods to and from cities, even those with river access. Restored steamboats and motorboats built to resemble steamboats still travel many bodies of water as ferries and tourist attractions.



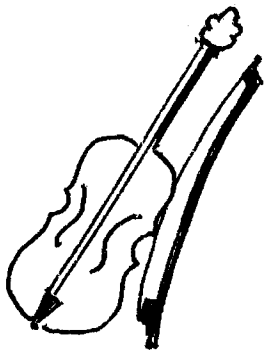
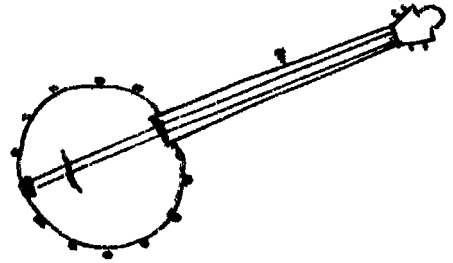
David R. Pradler/Photo Researchers, Inc.

STEAMBOAT – steam-driven vessel, in common use during the 19th and early 20th centuries to carry passengers and goods across bodies of water. Steamboats are also called paddle-wheel boats. The term steamship usually refers to larger, ocean-going, propeller-driven vessels, such as the cruise ships of the mid-20th century.

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INSTRUMENTS OF RIVER MUSIC

BANJO – stringed instrument of the lute family, with an open-backed round body consisting of a circular wood hoop over which is stretched a vellum belly. The only Western stringed instrument with a vellum belly, the banjo originated in Africa and was brought to America in the 17th century by black slaves. Early banjos had fretless necks, a varying number of strings, and, sometimes, gourd bodies. Adopted by white musicians in 19th century minstrel-show troupes, the banjo gained frets and metal strings. The five-string banjo, plucked with the fingers, is common in folk music and commercial bluegrass bands. The plectrum-plucked four-string banjo was popular about 1900 in vaudeville bands.



FIDDLE – any instrument from a widespread family of bowed lutes consisting of one or more strings stretched the full length of a fingerboard terminating in a soundbox. Fiddle is also the colloquial name given to instruments of the violin family. Most fiddles are flat-backed. The 13th century rebec, however, is tear-shaped and has a convex back like a lute. Many fiddles incorporate sympathetic strings that vibrate when the string next to them is sounded, enriching the overall effect. Medieval and Renaissance fiddles held at the shoulder are the immediate predecessors of the violin. In folk fiddle traditions, from the gypsy music of Eastern Europe to American country music, the violin was widely adopted as the successor to the fiddle.

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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.

ACTIVITIES

1. **Make a homemade fiddle.** In the manner of earlier fiddle players, old-time fiddler Tom Taylor of the Ohio River community of Rabbit Hash, Kentucky, remembers as a boy making his first fiddle from a cigar box strung up with wire he pulled out of the screen door. He fashioned a fiddle bow from a willow stick and horsehairs he scavenged from fence posts and the bark of trees. See Tom at <http://home.fuse.net/russchilders/rhsb.html>. Make a plucking fiddle from a bleach bottle or plastic milk jug, a yardstick, two screw eyes, a pencil, and fishing line. Find the directions in *Making Musical Things: Improvised Instruments* by Ann Sayre Wiseman.
2. **Making a flatboat model.** Use craft sticks and glue to make your flatboat model. Float it in the bathtub. Try this experiment. Begin loading pennies on the model. How many pennies can be added before it starts to sink? How is the best way to load the pennies – spread out or in a pile? Experiment. Think about how the settlers had to load their flatboats with animals and people and furniture and food so that the weight would be evenly distributed.
3. **Make a paddlewheel model.** Recycle cardboard for this experiment. Cut the cardboard into a flatboat shape with a pointed bow and a squared-off stern with a notch cut out for another cardboard strip that will become the paddlewheel as it spins around on the attached rubber band. For the paddle, cut a cardboard strip to fit into the notch you cut in the back of the boat. Extend a rubber band across the paddle to the boat shape. Tape then paddle shape to the rubber band. Tape the ends of the rubber band to the boat. Wind up the paddle on the rubber band. Put your boat in a tub full of water and sing, “We’re floating down the river, we’re floating down below, we’re floating down the river to the O-hi-o!” How can you make the boat go backward as well as forward?
4. **Dance to a frontier play-party.** “Floating Down the River” is one of these old-time games danced to the rhythm of the singing participants (“play party”). Find the verses, tune, and directions to the Tennessee play-party in *Sally Go Round the Moon* compiled by Nancy & John Langstaff. Look also in *The Handy Play Party Book* by Lynn Rohrbough.
5. **Chart your path.** The Inland Rivers Collection of the Rare Books Department of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County has many examples of old maps used on the Ohio River by seasoned steamboat pilots. See <http://www.cincinnati.library.org/info/main/rb.asp>. Make a trip to the downtown library to see them. Like early riverboat pilots who charted the Ohio in navigation logs, commit to memory every snag and landmark along your journey. Whatever form of transportation you use, whether on foot or in a car or bus, carefully observe your surroundings to draw them into a map to find the library again. *Three Days on a River in a Red Canoe* by Vera Williams might help you with your map drawing skills.
6. **Brag on yourself.** Find the rest of keelboat captain Mike Fink’s brag that begins: “I’m a Salt River roarer! I’m a ring-tailed squealer! I’m a reg’lar screamer from the old Massassip! WHOOP! I’m half wild horse and half alligator and put together with red hot snappin’ turtle!” Mike Fink’s bold talk can be found in many sources, but this came from Edith McCall’s *Pioneers on Early Waterways* (Children’s Press, 1980). Create a fitting Mike Fink “brag” for yourself. What do you want people to know? Tell it loud, tell it proud! Hold a “Brag Slam” competition.

RESOURCES

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain

Buckeye Heritage: Ohio's History in Song by Elizabeth Anne Salt

Cincinnati: An Urban History by Karen Regina

Floating House by Scott Sanders

Higgins Bend Song and Dance by Jacqueline B. Martin

Mike Fink: A Tall Tale by Steven Kellogg

Steamboat: The Story of Captain Blanche Leathers by Judith Heide Gilliland.

Steamboat Annie and the Thousand-Pound Catfish by Catherine Wright

Steamboat in a Cornfield by John Hartford

Three Days on a River in a Red Canoe by Vera B. Williams

A Treasury of Mississippi River Folklore edited by B.A. Botkin

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WEB SITES TO EXPLORE

Visit Sawyertown for kids on the official web site for Cincinnati's Tall Stacks. <http://www.tallstacks.com/>

Explore the treasures of The Arabian, a steamboat that sank on the Missouri river in 1856.
<http://glswrk-auction.com/102.htm>

Take a virtual tour of the Delta Queen, the Mississippi Queen and the American Queen.
<http://www.deltaqueen.com/>

Investigate the inventor Robert Fulton and the history of steamboats.
<http://inventors.about.com/library/inventors/blsteamship.htm>