

# America's Songs: The Lomax Collection

## Story and Song

Lesson Plan

**Grades:** 6-8

**Length:** 2-5 sessions

### Learning Targets

- I can identify, compare, and contrast expressive qualities of music in the same song interpreted by different performers;
- I can discuss how historical and cultural context inform performances;
- I can discuss the changing roles of technology and libraries in preserving musical heritage and making it accessible;
- I can collaborate with my peers to interpret a ballad using expressive qualities of music;
- I can collaborate with my peers to compose a ballad.

### Introduction

Between 1933 and 1942 Alan Lomax traveled throughout rural Kentucky to record songs for the Archive of American Folk Songs at the Library of Congress. The collection has been digitized and is now available online at <http://lomaxky.omeka.net/>

Among the many songs Lomax recorded in Kentucky were eight different versions of the traditional Scottish ballad, “Barbara Allen.” “Barbara Allen” (sometimes called “Barbry Allen,” “Barbry Ellen,” or other variants) is one of the most widely recorded and collected folk songs in the English language. Hundreds of versions have been collected in Scotland, England, Ireland, and North America, including the versions collected by Lomax. The earliest existing mention of the song is from a diary kept by Samuel Pepys in 1666. He refers to hearing the ballad sung at a New Year’s party. The themes of the ballad – unrequited love and tragic death – are timeless.

This lesson can be incorporated into history/social studies, English Language Arts, music, and/or media arts classes. You could:

- Compare and contrast various versions of “Barbara Allen;”
- Perform “Barbara Allen,” demonstrating how interpretation of the musical elements conveys intent;
- Compose and perform an original ballad using contemporary language and a contemporary interpretation of a timeless theme;
- Explore changes in technology and media arts;
- Explore the role of libraries as cultural repositories and the role of the Library of Congress.

### Activity Summary

Students will analyze and interpret field recordings of the ballad “Barbara Allen” made between 1935 and 1938 and compare and contrast them to more contemporary versions of the same ballad. They may then work in large or small groups to interpret the song in their own style for in-class performance or to compose and perform original ballads.

### Audio Resources

“Barbara Allen” sung by Lilian Napier <http://lomaxky.omeka.net/items/show/536>

“Barbry Ellen” sung by Carla Gover <http://carlagover.com/music> (Scroll down to “Birds Fly South” and click on “Barbry Ellen,” # 11)

### Teacher Preparation

Listen to several of the recordings in the chart of versions of “Barbara Allen” in the Lomax Kentucky Collection, the recording by Carla Gover, and several versions from YouTube by musicians like Joan Baez, Emmylou Harris, Glen Campbell, the Everly Brothers, Judy Collins, Rob McNurlin, the Bluehorses, and others.

You may select several of these recordings for the lesson or you may allow your students to research versions of the song and make their own selections from the Lomax Kentucky Collection and from YouTube.

# Kentucky Academic Standards

## Anchor Standards

- Music Anchor Standard Pr4: Select, analyze, and interpret artistic work for presentation
- Music Anchor Standard Pr5: Develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation.
- Music Anchor Standard Pr6: Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.
- Music Anchor Standard Re7: Perceive and analyze artistic work
- Media Arts Anchor Standard Re8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work
- Media Arts Anchor Standard Cr1: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.
- Media Arts Anchor Standard Cr2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.
- Media Arts Anchor Standard Cr3: Refine and complete artistic work.

## Instructional Strategies and Activities

### Day One

Ask students why there might be different versions of traditional folk songs. Tell them they are going to play a game called “Telephone.” Tell them you are going to whisper some song lyrics to a student, who will in turn whisper to another student, and so on until the lyrics have gone all the way through the class. Students should speak as clearly as they can, but no one can request a repetition. Each student should write down what they heard. Whisper into a student’s ear the opening verse of Lillian Napier’s version of “Barbara Allen.”

*So in the month of May,*

*When all things were a-blooming,*

*Sweet William came from the western states*

*and he courted Barbry Allen.*

Have the final student say aloud what they heard and then share what the original words were. Ask students to explain how this game is similar to the way that songs might have been heard and repeated in the days before recorded music.

Tell students you are going to play a song for them and you want them to pay attention to the lyrics, the expressive qualities of the music, and the quality of the recording. Play “Barbara Allen” sung by Lillian Napier and lead a discussion about what they heard. What was the song about? Did the song tell a story? What was the story?

Were there instruments or was this a vocal performance (timbre)? Was the tempo fast or slow? Was the music loud or soft (dynamics)? What mood did the singer’s interpretation convey?

How would they describe the quality of the recording?

Explain that this song was recorded in 1937 by Alan Lomax for the Archive of American Folk Songs at the Library of Congress. Explain that this recording is a “primary source.” Lead a discussion about primary sources or explain that primary sources can include written materials, photographs, artifacts, or recordings that were created at the time you are studying. This recording allows us to hear the voice of a person singing a song in 1937. The original recording of this song, and many others, is kept at the Library of Congress. Digital versions are now available through Berea College and other special collections. Lead a discussion about the purpose of recording music as a means of preserving the past. Does it matter to hear an actual person singing or would the sheet music provide the same experience? What is the role of the Library of Congress in preserving history?

*An optional or extra credit assignment would be to have students research the Library of Congress and prepare a presentation on its purpose and collections.*

Project this image of a 1937 advertisement for a Presto Stationary Recorder.



This is the kind of recording device that Lomax took into the field with him. It weighed about 300 pounds and was powered by batteries, which weighed about 15 pounds. The recording was cut directly into a disc that was made of aluminum and coated with lacquer. Lomax had to brush away the little pieces of lacquer as the recording was made. The musician had only one chance to make the recording. It could not be redone or edited.

Ask students what kind of technology we have for making recordings today. Have they made recordings – audio or video – of their own? How? Have they heard their parents or grandparents talk about records and record players or eight-track tapes? If possible, bring some in to demonstrate for the class.

*An optional or extra credit assignment would be to have students research and prepare a presentation on the development of audio recording technology,*

*beginning with <http://www.recording-history.org/> and <http://lomaxky.omeka.net/lomaxtech> and <http://the78project.com/watch/>*

Project the web page from the Kentucky Lomax collection that shows side-by-side photos of Lomax using his recording equipment and an engineer 80 years later using state-of-the-art technology to make a digital recording from the original record. <http://lomaxky.omeka.net/lomaxtech>

What is the importance of converting these recordings to digital format? Answers could include:

- preserving the recordings since the original records are almost worn out;
- making the recordings accessible to people who are not at the Library of Congress.

Alan Lomax made his field recordings for the purpose of documenting and preserving the music of different cultures and different time periods over his life, but he also made the recordings because he thought it was important that people should hear the music of everyday people. He warned that “folk songs should not be buried in libraries as they are in Washington and in universities over the country.”

Play Carla Gover Interview Clip #1 <http://digital.berea.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15131coll4/id/6861>. Explain that Carla Gover is a musician who records traditional and original Appalachian folk music. Why does she think that it is important that collections like the Lomax Kentucky Collection be made accessible?

*An optional or extra credit activity would be to have students research the life and collections of Alan Lomax, beginning with the Cultural Equity website at Lomax <http://www.culturalequity.org/>*

Distribute copies of the lyrics. Ask students if they recognize the genre of the song. What other songs do they know that tell a story? Explain that a ballad is a narrative poem set to music with a simple meter and rhyme scheme. Ballads usually consist of a series of four-line stanzas (quatrain), sometimes with a repetitive refrain. Lead students in analyzing the meter and rhyme scheme.

Ballads relate a story, often focused on a single, dramatic event. What other songs do they know that tell a story of unrequited love? Of tragic death? Are there any books, plays, or movies that have similar themes? Ballads usually tell specific stories that illuminate timeless themes (such as love or tragedy) or that recount a specific event from history.

Ask students if the lyrics include any judgment or comment on the events. The story of a ballad is usually told impersonally, recounting the events without comment, but the musician’s interpretation (use of expressive qualities) conveys a mood or feeling. What seems to be the mood of this interpretation?

## Day Two

Share other musicians' recordings of "Barbara Allen," selecting at least one from the Lomax Kentucky recordings and one that is more contemporary (but not the Carla Gover recording). You may pre-select the recordings or allow students to research and select the recordings they wish to consider. Working in small groups, have students analyze, compare, and contrast the lyrics and expressive qualities of three recordings and create a presentation of their findings using a PowerPoint, **PBS Learningmedia storyboard** or other media.

You can stop at this point or decide whether to focus on creative interpretation of the ballad or allowing students to compose an original ballad. In either case, work with students to develop criteria for evaluating their work.

## Day Three and Beyond

Listen to Carla Gover Interview Clip # 2 <http://digital.berea.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15131coll4/id/6862>. Tell students that they are going to listen to Gover's recording of "Barbry Ellen." Ask them to listen for the expressive qualities that Carla and her collaborators used to create the haunting quality of her interpretation. Go to <http://carlagover.com/music> and scroll down to "Birds Fly South" and click on "Barbry Ellen," # 11.

Ask students to identify the expressive qualities used by Gover. Of the other recordings that they listened to, which has similar qualities? What are they?

Listen to Gover Interview Clip #3 <http://digital.berea.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15131coll4/id/6863>.

In small groups, have students determine how they would interpret the ballad. What expressive qualities would they emphasize?

If time permits, have small groups make interpretive decisions and rehearse their interpretation of the ballad, culminating in an in-class performance.

Alternatively, have students work in small groups of four to compose an original ballad and refine it for in-class performance. Each group should brainstorm an idea for a song that tells a contemporary story in modern language that relates to the timeless themes identified earlier. They should develop a plot line for their story and share it with the class before creating an outline of the story. Back in their group, they should agree on a meter and rhyme scheme and a simple melody. (The teacher can assign these elements or provide some models and choices.) Each member should take responsibility for writing the lyrics for one or more verses for a portion of the story, either in class or as homework. Then the group should reconvene and edit the lyrics as needed and decide on the expressive qualities. Will the ballad be presented as purely vocal or will some instrumentation be added? What will be the tempo? How will dynamics be used?

## Additional Recordings of "Barbara Allen" in the Lomax Kentucky Collection

Performer	County	Date	Instrument	Title & Link
Atkins, Bill	Bell	1938-09	vocal, guitar	"Barbara Allen"
Bailey, Virgie	Leslie	1937-09-29	vocal	"Barbara Allen"
Boggs, Abner	Harlan	1937-09-07	vocal	"Barbara Allen"
Collins, Howard	Knott	1937-10-19	vocal, dulcimer	"Barbara Allen"
Davis, Mary Davis, Cora	Clay	1937-10-09	vocal, guitar	"Barbara Allen" (Part 1)
Davis, Mary Davis, Cora	Clay	1937-10-09	vocal, guitar	"Barbara Allen" (Part 2)
Gevedon, Monroe	Morgan	1937-10-23	vocal, fiddle	"Barbara Allen"
Jackson, Aunt Molly	Recorded in New York. From Harlan County	1935-09	vocal	"Barbara Allen"
Napier, Lilian	Harlan	1937-09-07	vocal	"Barbara Allen"

# “Barbara Allen”

Sung by Lilian Napier in 1937

So in the month of May,  
When all things were a-blooming,  
Sweet William came from the western states  
and he courted Barbry Allen.

So in the month of June,  
When all things were a-bearing,  
Sweet William took sick on his death bed,  
And he said for the love of Barbry Allen

He sent his servant to the town,  
Where Barbry was a-dwelling,  
Saying Master’s sick and he sent for you  
If your name be Barbry Allen.

Slowly, slowly she got up,  
and slowly she went to him,  
and all she said when she got there,  
Young man I see you’re dying.

Oh, yes, I’m sick and I’m very low,  
And much I feel like dying,  
No better, no better shall I ever get,  
Till I get Barbry Allen.

Do you remember the other day,  
when we were at the table?  
You drank up to the ladies all around,  
but you slighted Barbry Allen.

Yes, I remember the other day,  
when we were at the table,  
We drank up to the ladies all around,  
But my love was for Barbry Allen.

He turned his pale face toward the wall,  
And bursted out to crying,  
Adieu, adieu to the ladies all around,  
Be kind to Barbry Allen.

As Barbry walked the highway home,  
She heard some birds a-singing,  
And every bird appeared to say,  
Hard-hearted Barbry Allen.

She looked to the east, she looked to the west,  
She saw some pale corpse coming,  
Oh, hand me down the lovely corpse  
And let me look upon him.

The more she looked, the more she mourned,  
Till she bursted out to crying,  
Adieu adieu to the ladies all around,  
Be kind to Barbry Allen

Oh Father, oh father, go dig my grave  
Go dig it long and narrow,  
Sweet William died of pure sake love,  
And I shall die for sorrow

Sweet William was buried in the old church yard  
And Barbry in the garden,  
And out of Barbry’s breast grew a red rose  
And out of William’s, a green briar

They grew to the top of the old church yard  
They could not grow any higher  
They twist (indistinct) in a knot  
And they could not grow any higher

## Interview

*This song, this ballad, “Barbara Allen,” was sung in Pine Mountain Settlement School on September the 23rd, nineteen thirty seven by – and what is your name?*

*Lilian Napier*

*Lilian Napier. And where are you from?*

*Leslie County*

*What part of Leslie County?*

*The creek is called Coon Creek.*

*And from whom did you learn the song?*

*From my father.*

*From your father? Do you know where he learned it?*

*No (indistinct word)*

*Is he a Kentuckian or does he come from some other state?*

*He comes, he’s from Kentucky.*