

The Florida Music Train: Moving to the Sunshine State

by Laurie Kay Sommers, PhD

ALTHOUGH MANY PEOPLE think of New York, California, and the Mexican border states as entry points for most new immigrants, Florida presents a unique portrait of settlement history. Geography, a gracious climate, and economic booms from turpentine to orange groves, tourism to rocket science have lured thousands of migrants and immigrants alike to the Sunshine State. Even during the Great Migration, when thousands of African Americans left the Deep South to find work and better living conditions up North, Florida attracted a fair share of these migrants. Today caravans of motor homes and flotillas of small boats transport new residents from other parts of the U.S. and the world, especially the Caribbean. Snowbirds from Canada and the upper Midwest winter over. Desperate refugees seek asylum. Florida's demographics change in fascinating ways.

A new classroom resource from the Florida Heritage Education Program of the state folk-life office employs traditional music as a window to the state's diversity and migration patterns. *The Florida Music Train* unit is an imaginary train ride around Florida, with each "train stop" corresponding to one of 23 music tracks on the accompanying CD. The unit includes five lessons geared toward the middle grades; extensive liner notes; a map; and graphics on migration, linguistic, and ethnic diversity.

Why music? Music is a crucial marker of cultural change, or acculturation. Often we can tell that a group "passed by" because of the musical clues left behind: the German polka in music genres of Louisiana, Texas, and Mexico, for example, or the African American banjo's popularity in oldtime mountain music. By traveling *The Florida Music Train*, students will hear many people who have moved to Florida and study why, when, and how they came.

The introductory lesson uses a traditional children's dance song to explain characteristics of folk music. The remaining lessons focus on four music cultures: British American (based on the fiddle dance song "I Want to Go Back to Georgia"), African American (based on the blues "Rolling and Tumbling"), Seminole (based on "Big Alligator" by James Billie and three traditional Alligator Dance songs), and Cuban American (based on Willy Chirino's salsa hit "Nuestro Dia Ya Viene Llegando" ("Our Day is Coming"). Other cultural groups on the CD (but not in lesson plans) include Mexican, Eastern European, Haitian, Bahamian, and Greek.

A major theme of the unit is migration and immigration: from Georgia to North Florida, from the Mississippi Delta to the Polk County citrus groves, from Cuba to Miami. Throughout the unit, students are encouraged to explore the ways people transfer and adapt culture during movement from place to place. The activity below can be used to set the stage for more specific discussion of folk arts related to migration.

Lead writer for The Florida Music Train, Laurie Kay Sommers has worked and published extensively in folklore and education. She currently directs the South Georgia Folklife Project at Valdosta State University.

For an activity see next page

Activity: Create a Migration Timeline

The Florida Music Train Migration Timeline lists the approximate arrival dates of major population groups throughout Florida's history. Social studies texts or a state atlas already may contain the raw materials for creating your own timeline. If your school does not have an atlas, the class can consult the latest census for the major ethnic groups found in your state, county, or community. Relevant data is available online at www.census.gov and in print. Research some of these groups. What brought them to the area? What traditions such as music did they bring?

Use the timeline concept to personalize the migration or immigration histories of students in your class. Add to the timeline the period when students' families first came to the state and from where. Have students find out more about local migration or immigration experiences by interviewing their parents or grandparents, or those of a friend or neighbor. Be sure to use permission forms for any interviews. For sample permission forms and preparation techniques for student interviewing, see the online guide *Louisiana Voices* at www.crt.state.la.us/folklife/edu_home.html. Decide with students how to present their migration stories—oral or written reports, a radio program, or Web page.

For an interesting activity using online oral histories and photos of migrants to Florida during the Depression, see "Transplants: Stories of Individuals Who Migrated to Central Florida," an American Memory lesson from the Library of Congress at memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lesson97/florida/plant.html.

Adapt this Activity

To adapt this activity, folklorists at arts agencies, universities, and museums can help you identify recordings of music traditional to your state or region. They will know about emerging traditions from groups new to the state as well as older traditions. Find a national list of folklorists in *The Folklife Sourcebook* of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, free online at lcweb.loc.gov/folklife/source or call 202/707-5510 to order, \$10 per copy.

The Florida Music Train is available from the Florida Bureau of Historic Preservation, 800/847-PAST. For more information on the Florida Heritage Education Program, which provides teaching tools, resources, inservices, and an annual summer workshop at the Florida Folklife Festival, see dhr.dos.state.fl.uf/bhp/fhpep/index.html.

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