



Summary of Music History in Iowa

Music History in Iowa

Music in Iowa is as old as the land itself. Nature composed and performed the first sounds of Iowa music: wind blowing gently (or howling violently) through tall grasses, rain splattering, thunder crashing, birds chirping and streams tumbling along rocky shores. When people came to this region, they brought music traditions with them. And they created new songs, sometimes inspired by the beauty and sounds already here.

About 15 American Indian tribes inhabited the area over time. The Meskwaki people arrived on the land in the early 1800s. Music was (and is) an important part of Meskwaki life. Nature provided Meskwaki musicians with materials for traditional instruments in addition to inspiration for their songs. They made flutes out of red cedar and drums of animal skin stretched over sections of hollow logs. Handmade rattles and tambourines also added rhythm to songs and dances. Today, Meskwaki drumming groups, dancers and singers perform at dances and ceremonies throughout the country.

The European-American settlers that moved West into the territory (that would become Iowa) brought music with them, too. Musical games, dance tunes and folk songs helped this new land seem more like home. Fiddles were probably the most prominent instrument in early Iowa communities. A fiddle was small and easy to transport. One fiddler could accompany many dancers, and the music could be heard above the commotion. Furniture was shoved to the side of the room for a dance in the winter, or carried outside in fair weather to make room for dancing. Iowans acquired large instruments such as pianos and organs as transportation improved. By the 1860s, it was easier to deliver pianos to Iowa homes, but the instruments presented another problem for their owners. Pianos need tuning, and piano tuners were in short supply.

Photographs provide some of the best evidence of the importance of music in Iowa homes. People gathered around a piano for photographs or held musical instruments for portraits. Music was part of parties, weddings and campouts. If an occasion were important, there was music involved!

Before automobiles and good roads connected Iowa communities, people couldn't travel far for entertainment. Instead, early Iowans relied on local talent. Almost every town had its own band. What was probably the first band in Iowa led a parade in Dubuque in 1840. That "band" consisted of one clarinet and one cornet. Bands played for holiday celebrations on the Fourth of July, Washington's Birthday, New Year's Day and Memorial Day, which became a holiday after the Civil War. They played for community and church picnics, ice cream socials and concerts in the park. They played during excursions on trains and riverboats. Band instruments were popular and plentiful in Iowa by the 1860s. But even with instruments available, learning to play could be a challenge. Vocal and instrumental music classes were not taught in school and private instructors could be hard to find.

Every new kind of popular music was soon performed in Iowa. Municipal bands played ragtime when it was new at the beginning of the 20th century. Iowans, like the rest of the country, went crazy over jazz when it was introduced around 1917. One of the greatest names in early jazz music was Iowa's own Bix Beiderbecke.

Some other notable musicians, performers, bands and composers with an Iowa connection include: Margherita Roberti, Simon Estes, Glenn Miller, Harriet Hilliard, Antonín Dvořák, Fannie Rebecca Buchanan, Mary Lourdes Conway, Meredith Willson, Slipknot, The Everly Brothers, Andy Williams, Julia Michaels, Tracie Spencer, Tionne Watkins (T-Boz), Dave Keuning and Iris DeMent.