

Think Like An Iowa Musician

Iowa's musical history is an eclectic mix of sites and sounds. From Antonín Dvořák's visit to Spillville in 1893 to Slipknot's recent concerts in Des Moines, Iowa's hills have always been alive with the sound of music. Think of Bix Beiderbecke in Davenport, Glenn Miller in Clarinda, Meredith Willson in Mason City and the Everly Brothers in Shenandoah. Think of Andy Williams in Wall Lake and Greg Brown in Fairfield. All in all, it's quite a playlist.

Use the State Historical Society of Iowa Think Like an Iowa Musician cards to explore the history of remarkable Iowans involved in the music industry and use the accompanying questions to help you think about history through multiple perspectives.

Each card (front and back) includes:

- Brief biography about the Iowan
- Questions related to that Iowan's experience



Simon Estes (1938-)

Simon Estes broke barriers by being one of the first Black men to lead opera performances around the world. Estes was born on March 2, 1938, in Centerville, Iowa, and he began singing in his local church at a young age. He attended the University of Iowa, and, after graduation, went to the Julliard School for music in New York. Like many Black artists of his day, Estes decided to go to Europe where racial prejudice was not as much of a barrier as it was in the United States. In 1965, he made his professional opera debut as Ramfis in Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida* at the Deutsche Oper Berlin to a warm reception. After making his operatic debut in Germany, he won bronze in the 1966 Tchaikovsky Competition held in Moscow. Estes is a humanitarian for many causes. At the forefront of Artists for HIV/AIDS prevention and education, Estes leads artists to break down socio-economic barriers as well as the stigma associated with the disease. He also supports musical education with the founding of the Simon Estes School of Fine Arts Des Moines Area Community College.

[View a video](#) showcasing Simon Estes' life and legacy

Think Like Simon Estes

- Have you ever been to an opera? If so, what did you think? If not, do you want to go to one? Why or why not.
- Simon Estes was inspired by music. In what ways has music impacted your life?
- Music helps define cultural identity. What type of music do you think best represents Iowa? Why?



Anna Larrabee (1869-1965)

Anna Larrabee, the daughter of Iowa Governor William and Anna Larrabee, was born on March 9, 1869, in Clermont, Iowa. Learning how to play an instrument was an important activity for a wealthy and upwardly-mobile Victorian family like the Larrabees. Early in William Larrabee's life, besides farming and chores, he found music was very meaningful. He played the cello and also taught vocal lessons. His future wife, Anna, was one of his pupils. All of the Larrabee children were taught to sing and to play instruments. Between the seven children, they could play the piano, banjo, guitar, clarinet, harp, melodeon, organ, mandolin and drums. The family would often sit in their parlor before dinner and play the piano and sing. They also often hosted concerts at their house, and invited residents of the town to come enjoy the music. Anna attended the University of Iowa and the Juilliard School for music in New York. After her return to her family's home of Montauk, she served as the superintendent for the Union Sunday School for decades. Anna would teach music lessons and play the organ for her church until her death in 1965.

Think Like Anna Larrabee

- Why do you think music played such an important role in Anna Larrabee's life?
- If you had to pick one instrument to play throughout your lifetime, what would it be and why?
- Anna Larrabee taught voice and music lessons to her local community. Why do you think it is important to learn about music?



Cherry Sisters

The Cherry Sisters – Addie (1859–1942), Effie (1867–1944), Ella (1854–1934), Lizzie (1857–1936) and Jessie (1871–1903) – were a family musical group from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in the early 1890s. The group started performing following the death of their parents, and their act consisted of singing, poetry, skits and jokes. The Cherry Sisters' performances were not well liked by audiences and they would reportedly be booed, harassed and pelted with objects by the onlookers. For example, their vaudeville act, *Something Good, Something Sad*, was infamous for its poor quality and the vehement responses it elicited by audiences, who threw vegetables and disrupted performances. The sisters toured with the act for 10 years, during which time they briefly appeared on Broadway. Their act received lots of bad press from local newspapers which eventually resulted in the legal case, [*Cherry v. Des Moines Leader*](#). The judge ruled in favor of the paper ensuring the press could review performances without fear of legal repercussion.

Think Like Cherry Sisters

- Do you think the Cherry Sisters were wrong or right to sue the newspaper that published bad reviews? Why or why not?
- If you had to do a traveling show like the sisters, what would you perform? Why?
- The Cherry Sisters kept performing even though they were disliked by the public. Speculate as to why a group would keep performing for audiences that didn't appreciate their act.



Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Born on September 8, 1841, in Prague, Antonín Dvořák would eventually be inspired during a trip to Iowa. Dvořák took organ, piano and violin lessons from his German-language teacher Anton Liehmann. Liehmann also taught the young boy music theory and introduced him to the composers of the time. Dvořák won the Austrian State Prize for Composition in 1874, 1876 and 1877. In 1892, Dvořák moved to the United States and became the director of the National Conservatory of Music of America in New York City. In 1893, Dvořák took his family on summer vacation to the Czech-speaking community of Spillville, Iowa. He would be inspired to write one of his most famous chamber works, [*String Quartet No. 12*](#), during his time in Iowa. He returned to Bohemia (Czechoslovakia) in 1895. Dvořák had an "attack of influenza" and died on May 1, 1904, of an undiagnosed cause following five weeks of illness, at the age of 62. He left many unfinished works behind.

Think Like Antonín Dvořák

- Why do you think [Spillville](#), Iowa, had such an impact on Antonín Dvořák?
- Dvořák was a world-famous composer. How do you think a town of 400 people would react to his visit and why?
- If you were to write a song about Iowa, what would you choose? Why?



Meredith Willson (1902-1984)

Born in Mason City, Iowa on May 18, 1902, Meredith Willson would go on to be a famous musician and playwright. Willson attended Frank Damrosch's Institute of Musical Art (which later became the Juilliard School) in New York City. He became a flute and piccolo virtuoso, and was accomplished enough to become a member of John Philip Sousa's band (1921–1923), and later the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. He then moved to San Francisco, California, as the concert director for radio station KFRC, and then as a musical director for the NBC radio network in Hollywood. Willson's most famous musical was called "The Music Man," which drew inspiration from his childhood in Iowa. He called it "an Iowan's attempt to pay tribute to his home state." "The Music Man" would run on Broadway from December 19, 1957, until April 15, 1961, for a total of 1,375 performances. The musical won five Tony Awards, including Best Musical, and was made into a major motion picture. Willson also wrote additional musicals, composed symphonies and many popular songs including the University of Iowa's Fight Song. He passed away in 1984.

Think Like Meredith Willson

- If you had to write a musical, what would it be about? Why?
- Why do you think Willson wanted to pay tribute to his home state?
- Have you ever seen a production of “The Music Man” musical? Do you think it represents the state of Iowa? Why or why not?