

Iowa & Music History

Activity Overview: Music has always been important to Iowans – from classical piano recitals to rock and roll concerts held across the state over the years. This activity focuses on the musical lives of the Larabee family and their home of Montauk and the famous Surf Ballroom. Learn about these historic places while creating your own paper plate banjo.

Connection to Iowa History

This activity focuses on two very different historic sites, a private home and concert venue, that both shared an appreciation for music.

Montauk Historic Site

Located in the small town of Clermont, Iowa, the large family home of former Iowa Governor William Larabee and his family was named Montauk. The family, which included seven children, appreciated and supported the arts from painting to music. Members of the family knew how to play many instruments including the banjo, guitar, piano, trumpet, drums, mandolin and others. Their daughter, Anna (1869-1965), played the organ, violin and piano. She studied music in Chicago and New York, taught voice and violin lessons and played the organ at the Union Sunday School in Clermont for over 60 years.



Surf Ballroom

Opening in Clear Lake, Iowa on April 17, 1934, the original location of the Surf Ballroom burned down in 1947. It was quickly rebuilt across the street and re-opened on July 1, 1948. Although a place for fun and dancing, the Surf Ballroom denied entry to people of color which resulted in lawsuits during the early 1950s. The Winter Dance Party in 1959 cemented the Surf Ballroom in rock and roll history. Following the concert, Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and J.P. "the Big Bopper" Richardson, along with pilot Roger Peterson, died in a plane crash. This was called "the day the music died". The U.S. Department of the Interior designated the Surf Ballroom a National Historic Landmark, recognizing its enduring role in the history of American music. The Surf is Iowa's 27th National Historic Landmark.

Instructions ([Video Instructions Available](#))

- 1 **Stack.** Take two paper plates and stack them on top of each other.
- 2 **Staple.** Staple around the edges of the paper plates to seal them together.
- 3 **Decorate.** Using colored pencils or markers, decorate the paper plates and stick with your creative designs.
- 4 **String.** Wrap rubber bands around the paper plates equidistant apart. This will serve as your strings.
- 5 **Attach.** Using glue, attach a paint stick to the back of the plates. It should stick out of one side of the plates as the guitar neck. Let this dry.

Instructions continued on next page

Materials

- Two paper plates
- Stapler
- Glue
- Paint stick or ruler
- Colored pencils or markers
- Three rubber bands

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Instructions continued

- 6 **Play.** Pluck the rubber bands to make sound.
- 7 **Share!** If you would like to share your findings with the State Historical Museum of Iowa, please email your guitar to museum.education@iowa.gov. We want to share your creation with other young historians!
- 8 **Questions to Spark Learning**
 - Why do you think music has been important to Iowans over the years?
 - What is your favorite musical instrument to play or listen to? What aspects of that instrument make it so appealing to you?
 - If you organized a band, what instruments would you choose and what type of music would you play?
 - What is your favorite type of music? What do you like about it?
- 9 **Additional Resources**

Explore these resources below to learn more about Iowa's music history at Montauk Historic Site and the Surf Ballroom.

 - [Surf Ballroom History](#)
 - [Montauk Historic Site](#)
 - [Iowa Heritage Illustrated: The Larrabees of Montauk](#)
 - [The Annals of Iowa: The Surf Ballroom: Rock & Roll, 1950s Nostalgia, and Cultural Memory in Clear Lake](#)
 - [Amos v. Prom, Inc.](#)