

# Origins of Folk Songs Used in the Music Classroom

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## INTRODUCTION

This research project is a response to the current environment in music education surrounding the history of folk music. Initially, the purpose of this project was to research the set of folk songs used in our general music methods course to determine the history of each folk song to ensure the songs used are culturally responsive rather than reinforcing negative historical images and heteronormative ideas. This research began in Spring 2020, but we have only scratched the surface in this topic. We are now taking a look at folk music from perspectives which take into account multiple facets and intersections of identities in order to eventually compile a collection of culturally responsive songs that can be used with confidence in classroom settings. For each folk song we research, we provide one of four recommendations:

1. Fine to use with context
2. Context is appropriate for classroom; use with gender-neutral modifications
3. More information needed; contradictory sources found
4. Unfit for the classroom given the current academic information provided

## RESEARCHER GOALS

### ARIANA CARLSON

This research project was the perfect opportunity to help create a positive impact in the music world by starting within my own educational experiences. I mainly focused my research on the historical backgrounds of instrumental music and singing games that were either folk songs themselves or based upon folk songs from a diverse array of cultures. This project began by examining my old piano lesson books and seeing how classroom-appropriate the songs I was exposed to as a child actually are. As my research continued, I found many songs that ran into issues of race, gender, and sexuality. The example provided is a French folk song that is recommended classroom-safe with gender neutral modifications.

### HALEY CORCORAN

When I learned about this project, I saw an opportunity to take it in a new direction by looking into issues of gender and sexuality in folk songs. This idea was inspired by the many dancing games that are taught using folk music in classrooms. Many folk songs have accompanying games with directions that involve dividing students along a gender binary or asking students to choose partners with implications of romantic relationships. I decided to look at my researched folk songs through three lenses: race, gender, and sexuality. In my example provided, I ran into issues of race, gender, and sexuality.

## EXAMPLES FROM OUR RESEARCH

### "SUR LE PONT D'AVIGNON" ("ON THE BRIDGE OF AVIGNON")

RESEARCHER: ARIANA CARLSON

Sur le Pont d'Avignon French Folk Song  
Unknown

Sur le pont d'A - vig - non, on y dan - se on y dan - se,  
5 Sur le pont d'A - vig - non, on y dan - se tout en rond.  
9 1. Les mes - siers font comme ci, et puis en - core comme ça. D.C. al fine

This score is a transcription based on the piano score from Glover, D. C., & Garrow, L. (1967). *Piano Student. Primer level.* Belwin, Inc.

#### LYRIC TRANSLATION IN ENGLISH:

"On the bridge of Avignon  
They are dancing, they are dancing,  
On the bridge of Avignon  
They are dancing all around."

1. "The handsome gentlemen go this way..."
2. "The pretty dames go this way..."
3. "The washerwomen go this way..."

#### CULTURAL CONTEXT:

This is a song written during the Renaissance about a dance on the Pont d'Avignon, which is a famous bridge in Avignon, France. The bridge was originally built in the 1100s, washed away by floods and rebuilt many times until it was abandoned in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. There are still four arches remaining of the bridge, and it is a popular tourist attraction.

#### RECOMMENDATION:

**Context is appropriate for classroom; use with gender-neutral modifications.**

#### RECOMMENDATION NOTES:

This song is best used as a movement game to engage students where they may add their own movements and input into the song. This game may be played either in a circle, lines, or whatever suits the classroom best. There are plenty of opportunities for students to add in some silly suggestions instead of following the gender specific lyrics such as using "pizza-lovers go this way" or "friends" instead of "boys" and "girls." This song can be modified to whatever best suits the classroom.

### "THERE SETS SALLY IN THE CHAIR"

RESEARCHER: HALEY CORCORAN

#### There Sets the Sally in the Chair

Informant/Performer:  
Group of children  
Frederica, GA, 1935

Source:  
Library of Congress AFS 309 B1  
Collected by Alan Lomax, Zora Neale  
Hurston and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle

There sets a \*Sal - ly Wil - liams in the chair, chair, chair.  
She lost all the true loves she had last year.  
Oh, rise up on your feet and kiss the first you meet  
(choose)  
and bring him round a - gain.  
(her)

Transcribed by Gail Needleman

This score is from Holy Names University Folk Song Collection: <https://kodaly.hnu.edu/index.cfm>

#### ALTERNATE TITLES:

"Here Sits the Sally in the Chair", "Here Sits a Monkey"

#### GAME DIRECTIONS: (from Holy Names Folk Song Collection)

"Children stand in a ring, facing child sitting in the middle on a chair. On 'rise up on your feet,' center child chooses another child and leads them to the chair, then joins ring."

#### CULTURAL CONTEXT:

There are versions of the same tune and many of the same lyrics called, "Here Sits a Monkey", which may have racist origins. Because "There Sets Sally in the Chair" originates from African American culture, the possibility of this version having racist origins is crucial in contextualizing this song and its variations.

#### RECOMMENDATION:

**Unfit for the classroom given the current academic information.**

#### RECOMMENDATION NOTES:

Although the exact origins of this song are not clear, it is evident that there are versions which replace the name "Sally" with "monkey". Other folk songs, such as "Five Little Monkeys" have anti-Black racist origins, and the same may be true for "There Sets the Sally in the Chair." In terms of gender and sexuality, the context of the song around "kissing" (or "choosing") a new "true love" would be inappropriate and possibly uncomfortable for students unless altered, since elementary students are not yet at a developmental level to be experiencing romantic love. The last student chosen may feel embarrassed, since they were not chosen as someone's "true love" – a term which is not relevant to young children and should not be imposed upon them. In addition, the pronoun options of "he" or "she" in the last line enforces a gender binary on the students as well as the pressure for students to pick a student of a specified gender when choosing their "love".