

The Soundtrack of a Nation

FOLK: "This Land Is Your Land"

SWING & BIG BAND: "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)"

ROCK & ROLL: "Listen to the Music"

R&B/SOUL: "Stuck on You"

LATIN: "Contigo en la Distancia"

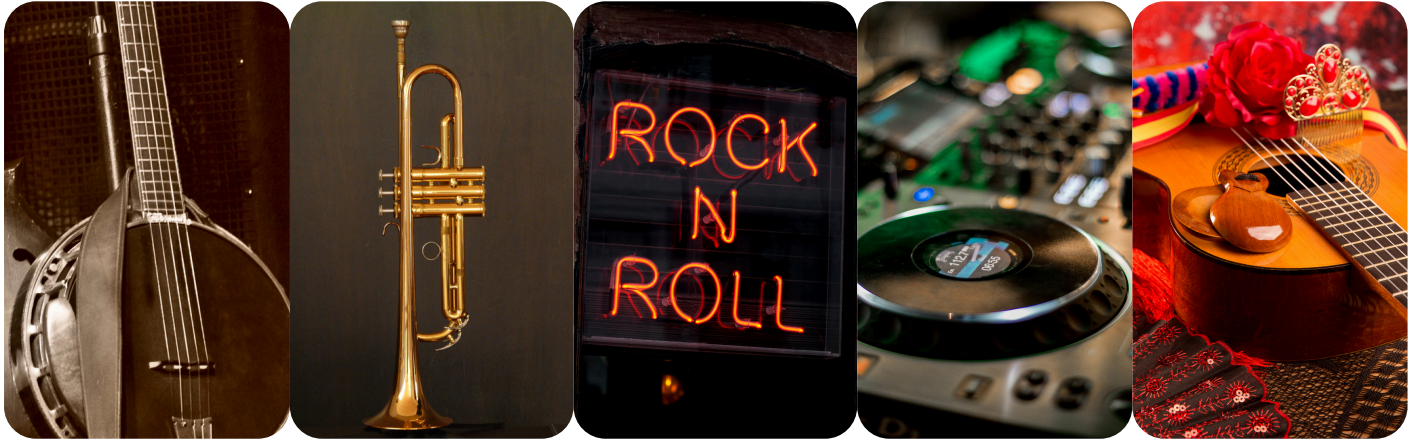
Celebrating the United States' 250th Anniversary

Music has always helped tell the story of America, reflecting its people, cultures, struggles, celebrations, and dreams. Across generations, songs have united communities, shaped movements, and captured the evolving spirit of the nation.

As the United States approaches its 250th anniversary in 2026, this month's Perfect Harmony program celebrates the rich musical traditions that have defined the American experience. From the storytelling roots of folk music to the energy of swing and big band, the revolutionary spirit of rock & roll, the heartfelt emotion of soul and R&B, and the lasting influence of Latin music, these songs represent the many voices, cultures, and communities that have shaped the country's musical identity and created the soundtrack of this nation.



Musical Genres That Shaped America



FOLK

American folk music grew from the stories and traditions of everyday people. Rooted in community, resilience, and shared experience, folk songs often reflected themes of work, family, hope, and belonging. During the 1930s and 1940s, artists like Woody Guthrie used music to tell the stories of Americans facing hardship during the Great Depression and Dust Bowl era. Folk music later became closely connected to social activism and community singing, helping shape America's musical and cultural identity.

SWING & BIG BAND

Swing music became one of America's most popular musical styles during the 1930s and 1940s. Known for energetic rhythms, brass sections, and danceable melodies, the Swing Era filled ballrooms, radios, and concert halls across the country. Legendary artists such as Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Ella Fitzgerald helped define the sound of the era. Swing music brought people together during challenging times and helped popularize jazz as a truly American art form.



Genres That Shaped a Nation

ROCK & ROLL

Born in the 1950s from the blending of rhythm & blues, gospel, country, and blues traditions, rock & roll transformed American popular music and culture. Artists like Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Elvis Presley helped define the genre with electrifying performances and youthful energy. As rock music evolved through the decades, it became a powerful symbol of individuality, creativity, and cultural change in America.

R&B / SOUL

Rooted in Black musical traditions and gospel expression, R&B and soul music became known for heartfelt vocals, emotional storytelling, and deeply personal performances. During the 1950s and 1960s, artists such as Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, and Marvin Gaye helped bring soul music into the mainstream through powerful performances and timeless songs. These genres became an important voice for joy, love, perseverance, and identity while shaping the sound of modern American popular music.

LATIN

Latin music has long been woven into the fabric of American music, bringing together influences from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latino and Hispanic communities across the United States. From the romantic storytelling of the bolero to the vibrant rhythms of salsa, mambo, and Latin jazz, these traditions have shaped jazz, popular music, dance culture, and even the Great American Songbook itself. Artists such as Tito Puente, Celia Cruz, and Luis Miguel helped introduce generations of audiences to Latin music while celebrating cultural identity, storytelling, and connection through song.



Song: "This Land Is Your Land" (1940)

Songwriter: Woody Guthrie

Brief Context:

Written in 1940 by Woody Guthrie, "This Land Is Your Land" became one of the most recognizable songs in American folk music history. Originally written as a response to Irving Berlin's "God Bless America," Guthrie's song reflected both pride in the American landscape and a belief that the nation belonged to everyone. Rooted in the folk tradition of storytelling and community singing, the song has been performed by generations of artists and continues to serve as a powerful expression of unity, resilience, and shared identity in American music.

Activity: Singing and Discussion

What do you need?

- Perfect Harmony "This Land Is Your Land" video ([YOUTUBE](#))
- Perfect Harmony "This Land Is Your Land" lyrics

Suggested Discussion:

This song is about places, belonging, and feeling at home. I feel most at home when I am _____.

Tell someone about a place that feels special or meaningful to you.

Image Credit: Woody Guthrie portrait, New York World-Telegram and the Sun staff photographer: Al Aumuller, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons



This Land is Your Land

**This land is your land, this land is my land
From California to the New York island,
From the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream
waters;**

This land was made for you and me.

As I went walking that ribbon of highway

I saw above me an endless skyway;

I saw below me that golden valley;

This land was made for you and me.

This land is your land, this land is my land

From California to the New York island,

**From the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream
waters;**

This land was made for you and me.

This land was made for you and me.

Song: "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)" (1931)

Songwriters: Duke Ellington and Irving Mills

Brief Context:

Composed in 1931 by Duke Ellington with lyrics by Irving Mills, "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)" became one of the defining songs of the Swing Era. First recorded by Ellington and his orchestra in 1932 featuring vocalist Ivie Anderson, the song helped popularize the term "swing" in American music. With its energetic rhythm, improvisation, and unmistakable groove, the song captured the spirit of big band jazz and helped establish swing as one of America's most influential musical styles.

Activity: Movement

What do you need?

- Perfect Harmony "It Don't Mean a Thing" video ([YOUTUBE](#))

Suggested Seated Movement

Follow Perfect Harmony leader Deb or create your own seated movement!

Use movements like . . .

- Tap your toes out to one side and back in
- Sway from right to left (add snaps, jazz hands, or other expressive movements)
- Pretend to play an imaginary trumpet



Song: "Listen to the Music" (1972)

Songwriter: Tom Johnston

Brief Context:

Released in 1972 by The Doobie Brothers, "Listen to the Music" became the band's first major hit and remains one of the most recognizable songs of the rock era. Written by Tom Johnston, the song reflected the optimism and idealism of the early 1970s, carrying a message of peace, connection, and bringing people together through music. Blending rock, folk, and country influences with its upbeat rhythm and singalong chorus, the song captures the spirit of American rock & roll as both entertainment and cultural expression.

Activity: Singing and Discussion

What do you need?

- Perfect Harmony "Listen to the Music" video ([YOUTUBE](#))
- Perfect Harmony "Listen to the Music" lyrics

Suggested Discussion

Music has a way of lifting our spirits.

Tell someone about a song that always makes you feel good.

Image Credit: Photo of The Doobie Brothers (1977), Warner/Reprise Records, Public domain, via Wikimedia Common



Listen to the Music

**Don't you feel it growing, day by day?
People getting ready for the new
Some are happy, some are sad
Woah-oh, we gotta let the music play
What the people need is a way to make 'em smile
Ain't so hard to do if you know how
Gotta get a message, get it on through
Oh now mama's goin' to after awhile.
Whoa-oh-whoa, listen to the music
Whoa-oh-whoa, listen to the music
Whoa-oh-whoa, listen to the music
All the time
Well, I know you know better
Everything I say
Meet me in the country for a day
We'll be happy and we'll dance
Oh-oh, mama dance your blues away
And if I'm feeling good to you
And you're feeling good to me**

Listen to the Music

There ain't nothing we can't do or say

Feeling good, feeling fine

Oh-oh, baby, let the music play

Whoa-oh-whoa, listen to the music

Whoa-oh-whoa, listen to the music

Whoa-oh-whoa, listen to the music

All the time

Like a lazy flowing river

Surrounding castles in the sky

And the crowd is growing bigger

Listening for the happy sounds

And I got to let them fly

Whoa-oh-whoa, listen to the music

Whoa-oh-whoa, listen to the music

Whoa-oh-whoa, listen to the music

All the time

Whoa-oh-whoa, listen to the music

Whoa-oh-whoa, listen to the music

Whoa-oh-whoa, listen to the music

All the time

Song: "Stuck on You" (1984)

Songwriter: Lionel Richie

Brief Context:

Written and recorded by Lionel Richie in 1984, "Stuck on You" showcased Richie's ability to blend R&B, soul, and country influences into a smooth and heartfelt ballad. Released on his album *Can't Slow Down*, the song became a major hit on pop, adult contemporary, and country charts, reflecting the growing crossover appeal of American popular music during the 1980s. Known for its warmth and emotional sincerity, "Stuck on You" highlights the storytelling and vocal expression that define soul and R&B traditions.

Activity: Listening

What do you need?

- Perfect Harmony "Stuck on You" video ([YOUTUBE](#))

Listen Closely

As you listen to "Stuck on You," notice how the song blends smooth R&B vocals with country-inspired guitar and storytelling.

Songs that combine multiple genres are often called "crossover hits" because they connect with audiences across different musical styles.



Lionel Richie, 2022, Shawn Miller/Library of Congress, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons



Song: "Contigo en la Distancia" (1946)

Songwriter: César Portillo de la Luz

Brief Context:

Written in 1946 by Cuban songwriter César Portillo de la Luz, "Contigo en la Distancia" became one of the most beloved boleros in Latin music history. Influenced by the filin movement, which blended traditional bolero with jazz harmonies and intimate expression, the song has been interpreted by generations of artists including Luis Miguel, Christina Aguilera, and Plácido Domingo. Its timeless melody and poetic lyrics helped introduce audiences around the world to the romantic storytelling tradition of bolero and the lasting influence of Latin music on American and global popular song.

Activity: Singing and Discussion

What do you need?

- Perfect Harmony "Contigo en la Distancia" video ([YOUTUBE](#))
- Perfect Harmony "Contigo en la Distancia" lyrics (English/español)

Suggested Discussion

Sometimes music can express feelings that words can't. This song is about loving a person who is not physically near you.

Tell someone about a person in your life who means a lot to you, even if they're far away.



Contigo en la Distancia

letras

No existe un momento del día
En que pueda apartarte de mí
El mundo parece distinto
Cuando no estás junto a mí
No hay bella melodía
En que no surjas tú
Ni yo quiero escucharla
Si no la escuchas tú
Es que te has convertido
En parte de mi alma
Ya nada me consuela
Si no estás tú también
Más allá de tus labios
Del sol y las estrellas
Contigo a la distancia
Amado mío, estoy
Es que te has convertido
En parte de mi alma
Ya nada me consuela
Si no estás tú también
Más allá de tus labios
Del sol y las estrellas
Contigo a la distancia
Amado mío, estoy

lyrics

There's no such moment of the day
That could drift you apart from me
The world seems different
When you're not by my side
There's no beautiful song
In which you don't appear
I don't want to listen it
If you don't
You have become
Part of my heart
Nothing comforts me anymore
If you're not by my side
Far beyond your lips
Of the sun and of the stars
With you at a distance
My beloved, I am
You have become
Part of my heart
Nothing comforts me anymore
If you're not by my side
Far beyond your lips
Of the sun and of the stars
With you at a distance
My beloved, I am