MANY SCHOLARS consider American folk music a blend of English, Scots-Irish, and African traditions. In Virginia, these influences can be heard in old-time string bands, which combine the Scots-Irish fiddle and the banjo, a descendant of the African xalam, kora, and bandore. The banjo also served as the principal instrument in blues music before the blues guitar gained widespread popularity.

Bluegrass is descended from the string-band tradition; it surfaced in Virginia and nearby areas in the mid-1940s. Unlike string band musicians, bluegrass musicians take turns “licking” (solo-leading the melody line).

Virginia’s musical legacy also includes ballad traditions, gospel, shout-bands, and rock ‘n’ roll. Square dance is the state’s “official dance” but is only one of many popular dance forms, which include contra and English country-dance, flatfoot, clogging, ballroom swing, and waltz. Recent immigrant groups from South and Central America, Africa, and Southeast Asia have contributed to Virginia’s music and dance traditions.

Listen to Virginia music at Smithsonian Folkways Recordings (www.folkways.si.edu) and Smithsonian Global Sound (www.smithsonianglobalsound.org).