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Busy Kids Love
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Hi everyone, and welcome back to Busy Kids Love Music, the podcast that helps families explore the wonderful world of music together. I'm Carly Seifert, creator of Busy Kids Do Piano, and I am so glad you're here with me today — because today is a special one.

We have made it to the final stop on this summer's Around the World with Busy Kids Love Music tour, and I have to take just a moment to appreciate how much ground we have covered together this summer. We started in Puerto Rico, where we heard the deep rhythmic roots of bomba and plena and traced them all the way back to West Africa and the indigenous Taíno people. We crossed the Atlantic to Norway, where the Hardanger fiddle filled the air with its haunting, humming resonance. We flew south to Nigeria, where a drum held a conversation with us in tonal language. And two weeks ago we landed in the Czech Republic, where polka rhythms that started in Bohemian village dance halls eventually made their way to dance floors all over the world.

What a summer it has been.

And now, for our fifth and final passport stamp, we are leaving Europe behind and heading all the way to Southeast Asia — to an archipelago of more than 7,000 islands scattered across the western Pacific Ocean, a place where indigenous traditions thousands of years old sit alongside the legacy of Spanish colonial rule and a musical culture so rich and so layered that it takes your breath away.

We are landing in the Philippines.

The Philippines is an island nation in Southeast Asia, sitting between the South China Sea to the west and the Pacific Ocean to the east. It's made up of more than 7,000 islands, though most of the population lives on the larger ones. It's a tropical country of volcanic mountains, rice terraces, coral reefs, and dense rainforests, and it is home to more than 110 million people speaking over 180 distinct languages and dialects.

transcript.

That diversity is important to keep in mind as we explore their music today, because the Philippines is not one musical culture — it is many, layered on top of each other and woven together over thousands of years of history.

Before we get into the music, let's spend a moment with that history, because it shapes everything we're going to hear.

People have lived in the Philippine islands for thousands of years. The earliest inhabitants were the ancestors of the Aeta people, (eye-tuh) who are still present in the Philippines today and are considered one of the oldest indigenous populations in Southeast Asia. Over many centuries, Austronesian-speaking peoples migrated to the islands from Taiwan and the Asian mainland, bringing with them sophisticated traditions of agriculture, seafaring, weaving, and music.

By the time European contact arrived in the 16th century, the Philippine islands were home to hundreds of distinct ethnic groups, each with their own languages, spiritual traditions, and musical practices. Some communities had developed elaborate bronze gong traditions with roots stretching back through trade networks to mainland Southeast Asia. Others had rich vocal traditions, stringed instruments carved from bamboo and wood, and ceremonial music tied to the rhythms of the rice farming calendar.

In 1565, Spanish colonizers arrived and established control over much of the archipelago, naming it after King Philip II of Spain. Spanish colonial rule would last for more than 300 years, until 1898 — and its impact on Filipino culture was profound and far-reaching. The Spanish introduced Catholicism, which became and remains the dominant religion for most Filipinos. They introduced European musical instruments and traditions. And they fundamentally reshaped the social and cultural life of the lowland communities they governed most directly.

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But — and this is so important — they could not reach everywhere. The indigenous peoples of the highlands of northern Luzon, the communities of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago in the south, and many other groups maintained their own traditions largely intact. The story of Philippine folk music is really the story of two worlds existing side by side: the indigenous traditions that survived colonization, and the hybrid traditions that grew from the meeting of Filipino and Spanish culture.

Let's start with the indigenous side of that story, because it is extraordinary.

What you're hearing is the kulintang (koo-lynn-tahng) — a beautiful and visually striking folk instrument.

The kulintang is a row of small, knobbed bronze gongs arranged in a horizontal line on a wooden rack, graduated in size from largest to smallest. The player sits behind the rack and strikes the gongs with two padded mallets, playing melodies across the row of gongs the way a pianist might play across keys. But the kulintang doesn't play alone — it's part of an ensemble that typically includes larger suspended gongs, a large flat gong called an agung,(a-goong) and drums, all playing interlocking rhythmic parts that weave together into something deeply layered and hypnotic.

The kulintang tradition is most highly developed among the Maranao (mah-rah-now) and Maguindanao (ma-gin-da-now) peoples of Mindanao, and among the peoples of the Sulu Archipelago in the far south. These are Muslim communities whose ancestors converted to Islam in the 14th century — long before the Spanish arrived — and whose cultural traditions were never as thoroughly disrupted by Spanish colonization as those of the lowland Catholic communities further north. The kulintang has been played continuously in these communities for centuries.

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Moving north to the Cordillera (kor-dee-eh-ruh) mountains of Luzon (loo-zahn) — the rugged highland region in the northern part of the largest Philippine island — we find another ancient and remarkable indigenous musical tradition. The peoples of the Cordillera, including the Ifugao, Kalinga, Bontoc, and other groups, are famous for the extraordinary rice terraces they carved into the mountain slopes — many of which are believed to be centuries old.

Their music is equally remarkable. The Kalinga people in particular are known for their gangsa tradition — flat bronze gongs played in ensemble, with each player holding a single gong and contributing one part to the collective sound. Gangsa music accompanies festivals, celebrations, and the rituals of the rice farming calendar, and it is inseparable from the communal life of the Cordillera communities.

The Ifugao (uh-foo-gaw) people have a beautiful tradition of hudhud(hood-hood) — a form of epic chanted poetry sung by women during rice harvests and at funerals. A hudhud performance can last for days, with singers taking turns chanting the ancient stories of Ifugao heroes and ancestors. UNESCO has also recognized the hudhud as an Intangible Cultural Heritage, and efforts to preserve and teach it to younger generations have been ongoing for decades. It is a moving example of a community deciding that a tradition is worth fighting to keep alive.

Now let's turn to the other great thread of Philippine folk music — the traditions that grew from the encounter between indigenous Filipino culture and Spanish colonial influence.

What you're hearing is a rondalla ensemble, and if it sounds vaguely familiar, that's because its roots go directly back to Spain. The rondalla is an ensemble of plucked string instruments — including instruments called the bandurria, the laud, the octavina, the guitarra, and the bajo de uñas (a large bass instrument) — all descended from Spanish and Moorish string instrument traditions that Spanish colonizers brought with them to the Philippines in the 16th century.

transcript.

But here's what makes the Philippine rondalla its own distinct thing rather than just an imitation of a Spanish tradition: Filipino musicians took these instruments, adapted them to local tastes and sensibilities, and developed a repertoire that blended Spanish musical forms with Filipino melodic character and feeling. The rondalla became the ensemble of Filipino fiestas, of town celebrations, of courtship serenades — woven deeply into the fabric of lowland Filipino community life.

The harana is one of the most beloved folk music traditions that developed in this context. A traditional harana often involved a suitor, sometimes accompanied by friends, serenading outside a woman's home. It's a tradition with deep Spanish roots, but the Filipino harana developed its own songs, its own repertoire, and its own emotional character over the centuries. Today the harana is recognized as a disappearing tradition, and there are active efforts in the Philippines to document and preserve it before it fades entirely.

One more Philippine folk tradition I want to mention before we collect our final passport stamp — and it connects beautifully to something we talked about at our very first stop this summer.

The kundiman is a form of Filipino love song that developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, at a time when the Philippines was first under Spanish and then under American colonial rule. On the surface, kundiman songs are tender, romantic ballads — slow, deeply emotional songs about longing and love. But many of them carried a hidden second meaning. Composers and singers used the language of romantic love as a coded way of expressing love for the Philippines itself — longing not just for a person, but for freedom and independence. Colonial authorities who censored overtly patriotic music couldn't easily suppress a love song, so the love song became a vehicle for resistance.

We heard that same pattern this summer in Norway, where folk music

transcript.

was held onto as a form of cultural identity under foreign rule, and in Nigeria, where centuries of tradition survived colonization and enslavement. Folk music keeps finding ways to carry what people are not always free to say out loud. Across every stop on this summer's tour, that theme has kept returning — and I don't think that's a coincidence. I think it's one of the most fundamental things music does for human beings.

Philippine folk music is alive and growing today. Contemporary Filipino musicians and cultural organizations continue to reinterpret kundiman and and cultural groups dedicated to preserving kulintang traditions, are keeping these musical worlds vibrant and relevant for younger generations in annual festivals throughout the islands. And Filipino-American communities across the United States have carried these traditions with them — you can find rondalla ensembles, kulintang workshops, and harana performances in cities from Los Angeles to New York, a reminder that folk music travels with people and takes root wherever they go.

Today we stamped our final passport of the summer — the Philippines, with its ancient bronze gong traditions, the rice harvest songs of the Cordillera highlands, the Spanish-rooted rondalla and harana, and the quietly defiant love songs of the kundiman. Be sure to grab your passport stamp at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/181.

And with that, our Around the World with Busy Kids Love Music summer tour is complete. Five destinations, five passport stamps, five completely different musical worlds — and one thread running through all of them: music is how people remember who they are, hold onto what they love, and reach across time to hand something precious to the next generation.

Thank you so much for traveling with us this summer. I've put together a curated listening playlist for the Philippines in the show notes at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/181, and all five of this summer's world

transcript.

tour episodes are linked there as well if you want to go back and revisit any of our stops.

If you've enjoyed the summer tour, the very best thing you can do to help us reach more families is to leave a rating and review wherever you listen to podcasts. It genuinely makes a difference, and I am so grateful for every single one.

I'll be back in two weeks with a brand new episode. Until then — keep listening, keep learning, and keep making music. Thanks so much for being here!