# Non‑Electronic Music Top‑Level Genres & Identification Guide

This guide summarizes the major non‑electronic music genres commonly found in music store drop‑down menus (e.g., iTunes). For each genre, the section provides a concise description and practical cues for identifying the style by listening. Genres that focus on electronic production (e.g., EDM, house, techno) are excluded.

## Classical (Art music)

Classical music, sometimes called art music, encompasses Western classical traditions from the medieval period to the present. It is highly formalized and usually written in musical notation. Works such as symphonies, concertos, and sonatas use complex structures, dynamic contrasts, and a wide range of timbres. You can identify classical music by its orchestral instrumentation (strings, woodwinds, brass, percussion), formal structures, and lack of improvisation compared to folk or jazz.

## Blues

Blues originated among African Americans in the Deep South during the 19th century. It is characterized by call‑and‑response patterns, expressive “blue” notes, and a distinctive twelve‑bar chord progression. Songs often follow an AAB verse pattern and include lyrics reflecting hardship, resilience, and storytelling. Common instruments include guitar, harmonica, piano, and vocals with a raw, emotive tone.

## Country

Country music developed in the southern United States in the early 20th century from European folk ballads combined with African‑American blues and spirituals. It typically uses acoustic guitar, banjo, fiddle, mandolin, and pedal steel guitar. Expect straightforward melodies, storytelling lyrics about love, work, and everyday life, and a vocal twang.

## Funk

Funk emerged in the mid‑1960s as a danceable form of soul music mixed with jazz and rhythm and blues. Its signature is a strong, syncopated groove driven by electric bass, drums, and rhythm guitar, often accompanied by horn sections. Vocals are secondary to the groove, and songs emphasize repetitive riffs and interlocking rhythms.

## Hip‑Hop / Rap

Hip‑hop is a cultural movement that began in the South Bronx in the 1970s. The music consists of rhythmic beats (often sampled from funk or soul records) paired with rapped lyrics. DJing, MCing, break‑dancing, and graffiti are elements of the culture. Identify hip‑hop by its looped drum patterns, vocal flow over a beat, and lyrical emphasis on rhythm and rhyme.

## Jazz

Jazz originated in New Orleans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, blending elements of blues and ragtime. It features improvisation, swing rhythms, and distinctive harmonic progressions. Instruments like saxophone, trumpet, piano, double bass, and drums interplay, with solos often taking center stage. The swing feel and spontaneous improvisation distinguish jazz from other genres.

## Latin

Latin music is a broad category of styles from Latin America and the Caribbean, influenced by Spanish, Portuguese, and African traditions. Genres such as salsa, merengue, tango, and reggaetón fall under this umbrella. Common features include syncopated rhythms (often based on the clave), percussion instruments like congas and bongos, string or horn sections, and lyrics in Spanish or Portuguese.

## Pop

Pop music refers to mass‑appeal songs that emerged in the mid‑1950s. It prioritizes memorable melodies, catchy choruses, and verse–chorus structures. Songs are typically short to medium length with repetitive hooks and dance‑friendly tempos. Production often borrows elements from rock, hip‑hop, dance, Latin, and country but remains accessible and radio‑friendly.

## Alternative (Alt‑Rock / Indie)

Alternative rock (or indie) rose from underground and college‑radio scenes in the 1980s and gained mainstream popularity in the early 1990s. The style is built on distorted guitars and expresses generational discontent, drawing inspiration from punk’s DIY ethos. Identify alternative music by its guitar‑driven sound, introspective or angst‑laden lyrics, and a deliberate departure from mainstream rock gloss.

## Punk

Punk rock is known for its raw, aggressive approach and simple song structures. Originating in the mid‑1970s, it reinforces a rebellious, provocative attitude. Songs are typically short with fast tempos, three‑chord progressions, and shouted vocals. The overall sound is intentionally unpolished.

## Reggae

Reggae developed in Jamaica in the late 1960s. It features a laid‑back, off‑beat rhythm (skank), prominent bass lines, and socially conscious lyrics addressing love, faith, and freedom. Vocals are often delivered in Jamaican Patois. Instruments include electric guitar, bass, drums, keyboards, and horns, with emphasis on the “one‑drop” drum pattern.

## Rock

Rock music evolved from rock and roll in the 1950s and encompasses a wide range of subgenres. It typically employs electric guitar, bass, drums, and vocals with a strong backbeat. Songs often use verse–chorus structures and focus on powerful riffs, energetic rhythms, and sometimes rebellious themes. Substyles like hard rock, progressive rock, and soft rock vary in heaviness and complexity.

## Heavy Metal

Heavy metal arose from hard rock, psychedelic rock, and blues rock in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It features heavily amplified guitars, aggressive drumming, and often high‑pitched or growled vocals. Subgenres include thrash, glam, and death metal. Songs emphasize powerful riffs, rapid tempos, and darker lyrical themes.

## Soul / R&B

Soul music merges gospel’s call‑and‑response singing with blues’ emotional depth and rhythm‑and‑blues instrumentation. It is marked by searing vocal intensity, melismatic singing, and a groove‑based rhythm section (bass, drums, keyboards, horns). R&B (rhythm and blues) encompasses Motown hits and other styles emphasizing smooth vocals and sophisticated arrangements.

## Gospel / Christian

Gospel music (a form of Christian sacred music) features dominant vocals, rich harmonies, and lyrics focused on faith and spiritual themes. Performances often use call‑and‑response, hand‑clapping, and foot‑stomping. While choirs sometimes sing a cappella, modern gospel may include organ, piano, or band accompaniment.

## Folk / Traditional

Folk music refers to traditional songs transmitted orally through generations, often with unknown composers. It reflects cultural or national identity and typically uses acoustic instruments like guitar, fiddle, accordion, and banjo. Songs tell stories of historical events, work, love, or local lore. Contemporary folk retains these storytelling traditions while incorporating modern influences.

## Polka

Polka is a lively dance and music style originating in 19th‑century Bohemia (now part of the Czech Republic). It is set in 2/4 time with an upbeat tempo. Instruments such as accordion, concertina, and brass create a bouncy rhythm ideal for dancing. Polka tunes are prevalent in Central Europe and have spread throughout the Americas.

## World Music

World music is an umbrella term for traditional and contemporary music from diverse cultures, often outside the Western mainstream. It features distinctive scales, modes, and rhythms and frequently uses traditional instruments such as the kora (West African harp), sitar (Indian lute), and didgeridoo (Australian wind instrument). World music recordings gained popularity as a marketing label in the 1980s and include indigenous folk traditions and non‑Western popular styles.

## Film/TV & Stage (Film Score)

Film scores are original compositions created to accompany films or television programs. A score consists of orchestral, instrumental, or choral pieces—called cues—timed to match specific moments on screen and to heighten the drama. Scores are written by composers and performed by ensembles (often a symphony orchestra) under the guidance of the director. Although rooted in classical music, film scores may incorporate jazz, rock, pop, and world‑music influences and generally lack sung lyrics.