



BACKGROUND INFORMATION, USEFUL TERMS,
RELATED RESOURCES, EXTENDED LEARNING ACTIVITIES



"THE RICHNESS OF AMERICAN MUSIC COMES FROM THE MIXING OF
CULTURES AND TRADITIONS OF PEOPLE FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD."

— RHIANNON GIDDENS

BACKGROUND CONTEXT: TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD

This information can be shared to frame the American Railroad project of Silkroad and My Music with Rhiannon Giddens.



The much-lauded Transcontinental Railroad was a major train route that connected the eastern and western United States and was completed in 1869. This massive infrastructure project began during the Civil War in 1863 with support from President Abraham Lincoln, Congress, and private investors. Two major railroad companies undertook the construction: The Union Pacific Railroad, which built westward from the east, and The Central Pacific Railroad, which built eastward from the west. The two rail lines met at Promontory Summit, Utah, on May 10, 1869.

Central Pacific's workforce consisted predominantly of Chinese laborers, while Union Pacific relied heavily on Irish workers. African American workers also contributed to the railroad's construction, including formerly enslaved people who sought work in the West after emancipation.

Laborers faced harsh working conditions and unjust treatment, but the issues didn't stop there. The railroad's construction had devastating consequences for Indigenous peoples, whose lands were seized and built over without consent or compensation. The railroad also facilitated the near-extinction of buffalo herds, which were critical to many Indigenous nations' way of life.

While the Transcontinental Railroad was considered a great technological advance in the 19th century and shortened travel time across the country, the building of the railroad and the rapid expansion and development of the western United States that followed left countless people displaced, destroyed communities, and impacted labor movements for generations.

SILKROAD AND SEASON 2

MY MUSIC WITH RHIANNON GIDDENS

Season two of My Music uses the American Transcontinental Railroad as the metaphor of a route rich with cultural influences and cross-cultural conversations among workers and communities affected by the construction.



The inspiration for Silkroad arose from my interest in the movement of people and goods, and the open exchange of ideas and traditions that took place along the ancient trade routes. My friends in the Silk Road Ensemble practice an openness that encourages the exchange of ideas.

The Silk Road is a metaphor for a number of things: as the Internet of antiquity, the trade routes were used for commerce by religious people, adventurers, scientists, and storytellers. —Yo-Yo Ma

SEASON 2, EPISODE 3 - *MY MUSIC WITH RHIANNON GIDDENS*

Show host, Silkroad Artistic Director, and award-winning musician Rhiannon Giddens visits with Mazz Swift, a violinist, vocalist, and improvisational composer whose musical journey includes studying at Julliard, performing in the New York City subway, and working with goats on a commune.

Mazz Swift is a violinist, vox, and freestyle composition artist. In addition to Silkroad Ensemble, Mazz Swift has performed with William Parker, Butch Morris, Jason Lindner, James “Blood” Ulmer, Vernon Reid, Valerie June, Whitney Houston, DJ Logic, Kanye West, D’Angel, and others. Swift is a Jerome Hill Artist Fellow, continually creating orchestral compositions that involve conduction and solo works centered around protest, freedom songs, spirituals, and the Ghanaian concept of “Sankofa”—looking back to learn how to move forward.

PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITY

Give students an opportunity to reflect through pre-writing or pre-discussion about the role of music in their lives. Do they listen to music to study, relax, hang out with friends, or for special or religious occasions? Compile a list on the board capturing their various musical experiences.

ACTIVE VIEWING RECOMMENDATION

*Provide students with the **Listening Guide Handout** (available through Journeys in Film) or have them design their own. Have students fill in this grid for each musical piece performed in the episode.*

USEFUL TERMS

- Commune — In this usage, a small group of people living together and collectively sharing property and duties.
- Neurodiversity — A term that describes the differences in how people think, learn, and behave. As such, *neurodivergent* is a term often used as a self-identifier for a person whose learning style differs from what is expected or is a term that others use to describe a person with learning differences. (<https://www.nm.org/healthbeat/healthy-tips/Understanding-Neurodiversity>)

INSTRUMENTS & MUSICAL TERMS

- Classical music — Most often used to refer to music of or related to the educated European tradition, such as chamber music, orchestra, symphony, and/or opera. Similarly, a musician that is classically trained would be a musician trained in this musical tradition, a musician who primarily studied and played this type of music.
- Improvisational conductor — A conductor who leads an ensemble in spontaneous performance.
- Improvisation — Free performance of a musical passage or music created in a non-prescriptive manner, often based on a musical style or set of musical parameters (like a musical scale or key). Most often associated with jazz music, but also common in other musical genres and styles, especially traditional music and/or folk music.
- Jazz — This term was applied initially to music developed in New Orleans at the beginning of the 20th century. Jazz, originating in African-American communities, is a distinctly American musical style combining West African traditional and European symphonic music. Notable characteristics of jazz include improvised solo performances, call and response, and rhythms that “swing.”
- Juilliard — A prestigious school of higher education for the performing arts, located in New York.
- Meter — A recurring (repeating) pattern of stresses or accents that provide the beat or pulse of the music. Meter can also refer to the musical notation at the beginning of a composition that identifies the beats per measure in a song and which note gets the beat.
- Psychedelic rock — A style of rock music popular in the 1960s, largely inspired by desires to expand one’s mind.
- R&B — An abbreviation of rhythm and blues, a term for African American music that was popularized in the 1940s and referenced popular, secular music of that time. Today, the term most often describes music that combines pop, gospel, jazz, and blues musical elements.
- Rhythm — the arrangement of musical sounds according to duration and stress on given groupings.
- Tune — A melody or clear musical phrase that is easy to follow.
- Violin — A stringed instrument that evolved in Europe during the Renaissance from the Medieval fiddle.
- Vox — In musical terms, vox refers to the musical quality of a vocalist’s voice.

GUIDING QUESTION

What is the interplay between creative work and an individual's life? How can those two aspects of one's life be in concert or discord with each other?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- As Swift describes their life and journey as a musician, what stuck out to you? Surprised you? Inspired you? How did Swift's experiences outside of music influence them as a musician?
- Why might exposure to many types and styles of music and other art forms be important for the development and growth as a musician and creative person?
- Swift explains that their neurodivergence affected their attraction and understanding of music in profound ways. Later, after leaving Julliard, living on a commune, and then performing in the subway, Swift speaks about the quest to "get free." How does this idea of thinking outside the box and removing limiting barriers in thought affect creativity? Share examples from the interview and your own life.
- Explain your understanding of improvisation in music. How does the idea of "conducted improvisation" expand the idea of improv? How does having a "toolbox" of skills free classically trained musicians to create in new ways?
- What is the value and importance of community for Swift and for other artists? What are some of the ways Swift began and continues to build community as a student, a performer, and a leader?
- Early on, Swift explains their "personhood first" approach to life and creativity. In your own words, what does that mean? How might that apply to your life and creative pursuits?
- How does the American Railroad project seek to explore lesser-known or hidden history? How does the self-expression of the artists fit into that?

RELATED RESOURCES

(All underlined resources are hyperlinks)

- American Railroad curriculum connections (available on Journeys in Film website)
 - Lesson 1: Work Medley (songs, includes video content)
 - Lesson 2: I've Been Working on the Railroad
 - Lesson 3: Pullman Porters (includes video content)
 - Lesson 4: John Henry
- [Silk Road Home Sessions: Mazz Swift](#)
- [Greg Tate - Burnt Sugar](#)
- [The Legacy of Butch Morris](#)
- [NPR: Remembering Butch Morris](#)
- [Rhythm and Blues - Library of Congress](#)
- [Violin - Britannica](#)



EXTENDED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

These hands-on activities can be completed individually or in groups and extend learner engagement. They can be used with ANY episode from the series.

- Explore world instruments as a class <https://www.youtube.com/globalmusicianworkshop>
- Silkroad – Make a Pipa (YouTube video)
- In groups, learners research various stringed instruments from around the world and map their evolution and journey. Consider making a bulletin board or display of the class's research. (Create a group Google Slides presentation of musical instruments. Assign students (or pairs of students) instruments to research. Their slide could include a clear image of the instrument, a historic image (from a tapestry, stone carving, painting, etc.), a brief history of the instrument, and a clip of the instrument being played.)
- Have learners complete the **Music Listening handout** from the Journeys in Film website for one of the songs from one of the episodes.
- Have learners analyze one of the songs in an episode using the **Analyze a Song handout** from the Journeys in Film website. They can share their analysis with the class or use the handout as a starting point for a presentation on the song they selected.
- Lead learners through a collaborative music session using only their voices and bodies (for percussive elements, which was seen in Pura Fé's performance). This works best if learners sit in a circle, facing out. In creating the music, learners can hum, whistle, clap, stomp, snap, sing, click, etc. Have the "performance" start with one student making a sound and then have others add on to that with an emphasis on using their best listening skills. After this activity is complete, learners can do a journal response related to the activity, reflecting on how the music changed, what they contributed, and what the collaborative process was like.
- Lead students through an active listening/slow looking experience. Have learners re-watch one of the musical performances from one of these episodes. This time, as they listen and watch, ask learners to take notes about what they hear in the performance and encourage them to pay close attention to the body language of the musicians. An alternative is to have learners draw, sketch, and color as they listen to the music and share their creations with the class.
- Replay the section in episode 2 where Maeve Gilchrist speaks about the "thin place." Have learners brainstorm "thin places" they have visited, know about, or can imagine. Write a journal entry, letter, poem, song lyrics, or short story (flash fiction) inspired by "the thin place."

EXTENDED LEARNING ACTIVITIES CONT.

These hands-on activities can be completed individually or in groups and extend learner engagement. They can be used with ANY episode from the series.

- Have learners write a music review of one of the songs or create a podcast about one of the songs. The **Music Analysis handout** or **Music Listening handout** can be used as a prewriting activity for the music review. Stress that their review should mention musical style, techniques, performance qualities, as well as the historical and/or cultural relevance of the song. (Both handouts are available on the Journeys in Film website.)
- Explore rhythm as a class. Listen to Wynton Marsalis playing The Flight of the Bumblebee, which predominantly uses short rhythms. Then, listen to this B.B. King guitar solo, which contains many long rhythms.
- If you have learners in your classroom who are part of any musical performance groups (orchestra, jazz band, marching band, chorus, church choir, a rock band, etc.), organize them into groups of four. (Try to arrange each group with musicians from various types of musical experiences.) Conduct a panel discussion and Q&A session with each group of four, fielding questions about their music experiences from their peers.
- If your learners watched all four episodes, have them (in discussion or journal writing) reflect on the influence of family and environment on the musicians. Encourage them to compare and contrast the different upbringings and backgrounds of the featured musicians from each episode.
- Invite local traditional musicians to share their instruments and music with the class.
- Create a class playlist of traditional music to listen to during focused work time.
- Collaborate with the music department at your school, if possible, so that students can engage in an exploratory experience of different instruments.

ADD MORE IDEAS IN THE BOX ABOVE!

ABOUT JOURNEYS IN FILM

Journeys in Film is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to the use of film to promote a richer understanding of our diverse and complex world.

JOURNEYS IN FILM RESOURCES AND SERVICES

We create educational resources that spark community discussions and/or promote proactive learning for youth, parents, educators in K-12 and higher education, homeschoolers, and other learning communities. We also **create impact materials for libraries and community organizations**.

We leverage our established educational relationships to **promote materials in active outreach** to these audiences. We **extend the reach of a film and its lifespan** in the educational marketplace and beyond.

We work with a wide array of partners (non-profit organizations, educational institutions, educators, museums, teacher training institutes) to **develop resources tailored to the individuals and communities we work with and the audiences they seek to reach**.

Our resources focus on cultivating human empathy and compassion, developing a deeper knowledge of global issues and current challenges, and encouraging civic engagement.



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