



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 6 - *MY MUSIC WITH RHIANNON GIDDENS*

Silkroad Artistic Director and award-winning musician Rhiannon Giddens visits with Indigenous vocalist and lap steel guitarist Pura Fé. Pura Fé has both Tuscarora and Taino blood in her veins and generations of ancestors in her voice. She shares her personal background and musical journey in an episode that culminates in a Silkroad Ensemble performance of her song “Mahk Jchi.”

Context for the Episode: Pura Fé is an Indigenous activist and musician. As a singer-songwriter, she is known for her storytelling prowess and distinct, soulful vocal skills. She founded the renowned Native women’s acapella group Ulali, and is part of the Silkroad Ensemble touring as part of the American Railroad project.

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

- Ancestor — One from whom a person is descended, usually further back than grandparents.
- Elder — Of earlier birth or greater age. Also used to mean someone of a former time. Can also be used to refer to an older person who is revered or given reverence in a community.
- Indian Country — Often used as a term for homeland by Native American individuals. Also used to describe land that is located within the boundaries of an Indian reservation.
- Powwow — The noun powwow, from the Narragansett Eastern Algonquian language, is defined as any gathering of Native people. However, in Indian Country, it is defined as a cultural event that features group singing and dancing by men, women, and children. Through these gatherings, cultural traditions are passed from generation to generation.
(<https://www.nanticokeindians.org/powwow/what-is-a-powwow/>)
- Regalia — This term has traditionally been used to describe traditional dress worn during Native American ceremonies, but today it can involve dress that blends modern and traditional garb in a powerful form of self-expression. It is important to note that this is the appropriate term, and thus the best term, to use when describing traditional cultural dress. The term costume should not be used.
- Reclamation — The act or process of reclaiming or taking back something, or the return of something, that was previously yours but taken from you.

INSTRUMENTS & MUSICAL TERMS

- Acapella — Singing without instruments/accompaniment.
- Blues — A secular African American musical genre with broad influence on popular music. Blues music often addresses a range of emotions, even though many mistakenly think it is exclusively music containing sadness or sorrow. Blues music emphasizes and includes “blue notes,” meaning the third, fifth, or seventh note in a scale often bent upward or downward. Blues chords include the seventh note in addition to the standard first, third, and fifth.
- Gospel — In this case, African American gospel music, a euphoric, rhythmic, spiritual music rooted in church music of the South, especially the Southeast, of the United States.
- 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.”
- Lap steel guitar — An electric steel guitar that is held and played in a horizontal position across the lap, usually with six or eight strings, and played by plucking the strings while the strings are pressed with a metal steel bar or tube.
- Punk — In this case, the term is used to describe an aggressive form of rock music that became an international movement, primarily between 1975 and 1980.
- Stomp dance — A shared social dance form of many Native American nations.



GUIDING QUESTION

How can creative work be an act of reclamation?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is the importance of a curious mind in the world of music? In life? How is curiosity reflected in Pura Fé's musical work and life?
- What has been the role of community and communal support for Pura Fé as a child, and then as a young artist, and also as she continues to grow as a musician and collaborator?
- Pura Fé is an innovative musician, but also deeply committed to cultural preservation, not only in her music, but in how she expresses herself through regalia and performance style. How do visual art, music, and fashion intersect for Pura Fé with respect to her goals regarding cultural preservation and in her desire to honor those who came before? How is this connected to the act of reclamation?
- Pura Fé says, "We are made of memory." What does this statement mean to you? How does this connect to scientific understandings of DNA?
- What various cultural influences were present in Pura Fé's life? How did these cultural influences intersect with musical influences and with Pura Fé's musical creations and performances?
- If you are not fluent in the language of a song, can you still connect with it? How does that connection happen? How are you able to follow what the song might be communicating? What did the song "Great Grampah's Banjo" communicate to you? (13:30 - 16:07)



RELATED RESOURCES

(All underlined resources are hyperlinks)

- American Railroad curriculum: Lesson 5: Native Americans, the Buffalo, and the Transcontinental Railroad (available through Journeys in Film)
- ["Mahk Jchi" from 'American Railroad featuring Pura Fé \(YouTube Video\)](#)
- [Pura Fé Website](#)
- [Duke Ellington - Britannica](#)
- [Jazz Empowers - Duke Ellington Orchestra](#)
- [Jazz History Online - Sacred Concert Series](#)
- [Miles Davis](#)
- [PBS - American Masters - Lena Horne](#)
- [Library of Congress - Charly Lowry](#)
- [Robbie Robertson's Red Road Ensemble](#)
- [Blues Music - Library of Congress](#)
- [Gospel Music - Library of Congress](#)
- [Hawaiian Steel Guitar - Smithsonian](#)
- [Chickasaw TV - Traditional Stomp Dancing](#)
- [Chickasaw Cultural Center - Traditional Stomp Dancing](#)
- [Seminole Stomp Dance - Smithsonian](#)
- [Powwows - Smithsonian](#)
- [Nanticoke Indians - What is a Powwow](#)
- [Tribal Regalia - Know Your Rights - ACLU](#)
- [Powwow Dances and Regalia - Indian Youth](#)
- [Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation](#)
- [Haliwa-Saponi](#)
- [Indigenous People of Saskatchewan](#)
- [United Confederation of Taino](#)
- [Taino Gallery Guide - Smithsonian](#)
- [Tuscarora Nation](#)



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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