

Wabash Cannonball: The Mythical American Train

Introduction

While students may be familiar with “Wabash Cannonball” as a marching band song, the folk song about a fictional train that traveled across America arose in the late 19th century. Most versions begin with the “mighty” train traveling from the Atlantic to the Pacific, or vice versa, with various stops along the way. Many include references to California, New York, Chicago, Saint Louis, and Kansas City. One might almost wonder if this song inspired Woody Guthrie when he wrote “This Land is Your Land,” with its evocation of the vast lands of America – “from California to the New York Islands; from the Redwood Forest to the Gulf Stream Waters.”

The song has been traced to the 1890’s but became popular during the Great Depression in the 1930s, when huge numbers of men lost their jobs and began riding the rails, looking for work. As migrant workers, these men were known as hobos, or “bos,” as they called themselves. In the final line of the chorus, “You’re going through the jungles on the Wabash Cannonball, “jungles” refers to the hobo camps that arose at the edge of rail towns, often near railroad yards. Railroad detectives guarded the yards, but they rarely arrested hobos, most often telling the men to leave “on the next train.”

The last verse makes reference to “Daddy Claxton,” who has died and is being carried to ‘victory’ on the Wabash Cannonball. No one is sure if this was a real person; one conjecture is that he was a farmer in Alabama who was impacted by the railroad monopoly and wasn’t able to get his crops to market. He allegedly stole a train, was charged with theft and brought to trial. (from <https://www.historynewsnetwork.org/blog/152354>) This unverified story creates a fitting final verse to this song about an apocryphal train and its journey across America.

Activity

Here is a folk song called “Wabash Cannonball.” It’s not about a cannonball; can you tell what it’s about? Listen to the recording. <https://kodalycollection.org/song.cfm?id=1332>

- What is the Wabash Cannonball? (a train)
- What leads you to that conclusion? (mighty rush of engine, rumble and roar)

Look at the score and notice when and where the song was recorded. (Wisconsin, 1941)

- What was happening in the United States in the 1930s? (Great Depression)
- Why might this song have become popular at this time? (Men out of work, riding trains to find towns where they might find employment, were called hobos.)

The teacher shares information from the introduction:

Migrant workers who traveled trains were known as hobos or “bos,” as they called themselves. In the final line of the chorus, “You’re going through the jungles on the Wabash Cannonball,” “jungles” refers to the hobo camps that arose at the edge of rail towns, often near railroad yards. Railroad detectives guarded the yards, but they rarely arrested hobos, most often telling the men to leave “on the next train.”

Project an undated photo of two hobos walking along railroad tracks, after being put off a train.

<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3a50795/>

- What do you notice about their clothing? What is one of the men carrying?

Listen again to the recording to notice the places that are mentioned in the song. Invite students to sing along on the chorus.

- What are some locations mentioned in the song? (Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, New York, St. Louis, Chicago, Minnesota, Birmingham (near Detroit, MI))

Explore *Railroad Maps, 1828-1900* in the Library of Congress archives.

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/railroad-maps-1828-to-1900/>. Enter “railway lines” in the search bar to return 54 maps of various lines. Notice how many different railroad lines were built and explain that trains could only travel on the lines of the companies to which they belonged. Of particular interest is an 1873 map of the continental railway:

<https://www.loc.gov/item/98688643/>. It was common knowledge that one train could not travel to all the places in this song, and that the Wabash Cannonball was therefore an imaginary train.

- Has anyone heard this song before? If so, where?

Share that this is the oldest song to make the *500 Songs that Shaped Rock and Roll* list in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and is played by many marching bands.

Extension:

Listen to another variant of the folk song, “Wabash Cannonball #2”

<https://kodalycollection.org/song.cfm?id=2388>.

- Which recording do you feel best represents the folk song, #1 or #2? Why?

Notes:

If students ask about Daddy Claxton, share the (unverified) theory about who he was (see Introduction) and the idea that this verse refers to a mythical train that carries one away at death, like other train songs such as “This Train is Bound for Glory,” “The Gospel Train,” “Train Is a-Coming,” and “When the Train Comes Along.”

In *Folk Songs of North America*, Alan Lomax creates a tall tale about the origin of this legendary train. It involves Cal S. Bunyan, brother of Paul Bunyan, who builds “the most wondrous

railroad in the world.” See the Background Information at the bottom of the score for the entire tale.

Additional resources:

<https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/rise-of-industrial-america-1876-1900/railroads-in-late-19th-century/>

For an extensive list of expressions used by hobos during the 1940s and their meaning, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hobo>

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