

AMERICAN RAILROAD

A Musical Journey of Reclamation

SILKROAD



About Silkroad

SILKROAD



Yo-Yo Ma conceived **Silkroad** in 1998 as a reminder that even as rapid globalization resulted in division, it brought extraordinary possibilities for working together. Seeking to understand this dynamic, he recognized the historical Silk Road as a model for cultural collaboration – for the exchange of ideas, tradition, and innovation across borders. In a groundbreaking experiment, he brought together musicians from the lands of the Silk Road to co-create a new artistic idiom: a musical language founded in difference, a metaphor for the benefits of a more connected world.

This initial gathering of artists was rooted in a simple, initial question: "What happens when strangers meet?" And thus Silkroad was born, as both a touring ensemble comprised of world-class musicians from all over the globe, and a social impact organization working to make a positive impact across borders through the arts.

Today, under the leadership of Artistic Director Rhiannon Giddens, Silkroad creates music that engages difference, sparking cultural collaboration and passion driven learning to help build a more hopeful and inclusive world through Silkroad Ensemble performances, the creation and commissioning of new music, social impact initiatives and educational partnerships. Silkroad's initiative, *American Railroad*, illuminates the impact of the Transcontinental Railroad and westward expansion on the communities it displaced and those who labored to build it. Their contributions have been largely erased from history, and Silkroad's *American Railroad* seeks to right those past wrongs by highlighting untold stories and amplifying unheard voices from these communities, painting a more accurate picture of the global diasporic origin of the American Empire.

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Artistic Director Rhiannon Giddens Introduces American Railroad

In ***American Railroad***, we found a story that allowed us to shed light on those who have been erased or overlooked throughout mainstream American history. Silkroad has a unique ability to amplify voices from a multitude of backgrounds and cultures, and the resulting program is inspired by a tapestry of stories, traditions, and musics that have shaped our multifaceted cultural identity, and that deserve to be heard and recognized.



The story of the Transcontinental Railroad is multilayered, complicated, and years and years long; we had to summarize it in a way that would allow us to be specific. Thus, the idea of the four main pillars of people of the railroad: the African American, Irish, and Chinese workers of the east and west lines, and the Indigenous communities impacted the most by the construction of the rails through their lands (which were often confiscated by the U.S. Government for the purpose).

This doesn't mean that other communities weren't also on the pickaxe line, such as Italian and Japanese workers, and Polish and other eastern European groups etc,. – but that these four populations were among the most numerous. And then of course within those populations there are further divisions; for example, there are many different tribal affiliations of Indigenous people, and none of these groups are in any way monolithic. I believe in being led by personal connection, and our collective connections led us to working with people of the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota, and scholars and railroad organizations in San Francisco, Atlanta, Arkansas, New York, and elsewhere. Those locations also roughly cover the breadth of the railroad – from east to west and points in between.

American Railroad starts in the past but it doesn't end there; the changed world it brought about is with us today...

- **Rhiannon Giddens**, Artistic Director

ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

Welcome to the *American Railroad* project. This booklet was created to invoke a deeper understanding of the historical context of *American Railroad*, the origins of the music being performed, and the regional partnerships formed through this project. Also included is a series of essays highlighting the impact of the railroad on the diverse communities that built them, and how their legacies impacted America overall.



About American Railroad



Silkroad Ensemble members Kaoru Watanabe, Kinan Azmeh, and Maeve Gilchrist perform a Train Station Trio in Grand Central Station (New York City, NY)

Silkroad launched ***American Railroad*** in 2021 to celebrate the cultural contributions of those who built the bedrock of American society through the construction of America's railroads. An initiative aimed at resetting the narrative, Silkroad's undertaking is meant to challenge modern perceptions of the American identity by highlighting stories untold and voices unheard.

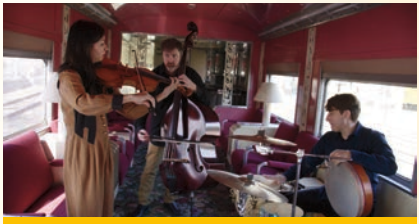
In 2022, Silkroad artists and staff journeyed to Standing Rock, ND/SD; San Francisco, CA; and New York City to engage with community leaders, culture-bearers, historians, and artists to gain a deeper understanding of how America's railroads impacted their communities.

- At Standing Rock, community organization Oúŋ facilitated a retreat that engaged Silkroad artists and staff with the Standing Rock Oyáte (Nation) and wičhóuŋ (way of life), sparking discussions about Indigenous connectivity to and reliance on land and natural resources, which directly conflicted with the building of the railroads.
- In San Francisco, Silkroad artists and staff learned about California's railroad history at the California State Railroad Museum and met with representatives from the Chinese American Community Foundation and the Purple Silk Music Education Foundation to explore the sizeable role that Chinese immigrants had in building and maintaining California's railroads, including the Transcontinental Railroad.
- In New York City, the Irish Arts Center and the New York Historical Society shared the intersection between African-American and Irish immigrant communities in the mid 19th century. Music, culture, and hardships were shared while working on America's railroads; their experiences impacted labor movements for generations to come.

In the winter of 2023, Silkroad embarked on a series of Train Station Trios, allowing Silkroad artists to further explore localized railroad history that served as a catalyst for musical explorations of newly arranged and composed music. These visits culminated in public presentations in Sacramento, CA, New York City, and Springdale, AR, in partnership with the California State Railroad Museum, Grand Central Station, the Irish Arts Center, and the Shiloh Museum of Ozark History. Through these presentations, Silkroad artists and local historians shared railroad related music and stories with local communities.

In preparation for *American Railroad*, Silkroad artists gathered to share key learnings and stories from their small-group retreats and trios. Many common themes emerged: of hope, connection, strength, determination, change, and loss. These cultural intersections reveal a thread of commonality despite their varied origins, and remind us of the intricately rich American story and what brings us together. Over the course of several years, the program has featured new commissions by Cécile McLorin Salvant, Suzanne Kite, Michael Abels, Wu Man, Sandeep Das, and Layale Chaker, as well as re-envisioned arrangements by Giddens, guest artist Yazhi Guo, and Silkroad artists Haruka Fujii, Maeve Gilchrist, Mazz Swift, Pura Fé, Shane Shanahan, and Balla Kouyaté with Mike Block.

- **Morgan Beckford**, Silkroad Connect Director



Silkroad Ensemble members Mario Gotoh, Edward Pèrez, and Shane Shanahan rehearse in a historic train at the California State Railroad Museum (Sacramento, CA)

American Railroad Essay

“Pathways of Shift and Song” by Joy Harjo

A railroad is a metal and wood river, an innovation pathway carrying cars of transformation and change. For Native peoples, railroads unlawfully trespassed tribal lands and stole for right of way. As the railroad cut through, it brought waves of immigrants, from enslaved workers and convicts sent by other countries to empty their jails, to those looking to settle on what appeared to be free land. Native peoples who occupied these lands long before European discovery were soon displaced and cultures were profoundly disturbed. The railroad cut through herds and tourists were encouraged to kill the buffalo, leaving behind a mountain of skulls. To kill them meant starvation, not just bodily starvation of Native peoples who depended on their relationship with the buffalo, but starvation of the spirit of a people.

Rivers and waterways carry cultures and bring songs, stories, instruments, and other means of creativity. We make songs and can send messages, be comforted, or exact change within our relationships and our communities. We mark our presence by our trails of speaking and singing, by whatever means.

The story of American music depended on river and water ways to travel, to be refreshed, to transform. The navel cord of American music is buried at Congo Square in New Orleans. Congo Square, before it was named as such, was a Houma village, a Muscogee tribal community that was surrounded by waterways. When the enslaved peoples of the newly formed city of New Orleans were released every Sunday, this is where they found refuge, a place to eat together, share stalls of goods, and to dance and play music.

Native peoples were central to this gathering. There was cultural connection between the various African tribal peoples and the various Native peoples who lived there, including those who traveled through to trade. It became a place anyone who wanted to hear good music came to hang out. Someone brought a piano, and so it went. This was the birthplace of the American music of blues, jazz, rock, and the many other tributaries.

The music traveled out from Congo Square to the Mississippi, the Caribbean, and the Arkansas waterways. It traveled the metal and wood river to Oklahoma, north to Kansas City, then to Chicago. This trail of music was also the Trail of Tears followed by Mvskoke people, from our homelands in the southeast where we were illegally removed by the U.S. president to Indian Territory, to what became known as Oklahoma.

Now we have digital rivers that make webs through the sky. They carry cultures and have made profound cultural shifts. As before, some of them are destructive but can also be creative. Every increment of shift has a creation story given impetus by song which is the spirit raising its head to see above the chaos of becoming. Just as every shift makes a trail by any infinite number of lengths, every road traveled is an arc of resonance that feeds the next rising up, emerging through memory.



JOY HARJO

Joy Harjo, the 23rd Poet Laureate of the United States, is a member of the Mvskoke Nation. Harjo is the author of ten books of poetry and has published three award-winning children’s books. Harjo performs with her saxophone and flutes, solo and with her band, the *Arrow Dynamics Band*, and previously with *Joy Harjo and Poetic Justice*. She is the inaugural Artist-in-Residence of the Bob Dylan Center.

American Railroad: Beyond the Tour

Silkroad is hard at work ensuring that this multi-year landmark project lives beyond the tour through artist residencies, community outreach programs, commissions of new music, visual art installations, curriculum development, and more.

RESIDENCIES & COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Through residency and outreach programs at universities and carceral communities, Silkroad artists, in partnership with local artists and historians, illuminate the history and culture of the railroad and the local communities impacted by it. Partnerships across California, North and South Dakota, North Carolina, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, New York, and Massachusetts served as foundational opportunities for participating artists to engage directly with communities that were impacted by the development of the Transcontinental Railroad and connecting railroads, while promoting these communities' self-determination through financial support, community events, and resource allocation.

SILKROAD CONNECT

A partnership between Silkroad, the Kennedy Center's Turnaround Arts program, and middle school classrooms in under-resourced communities across the country, Silkroad Connect invited participants to engage in a culturally-responsive, inquiry-based exploration of *American Railroad*, along with curricular resources and professional development opportunities for educators.



Silkroad artist Mario Gotoh with students from the Fremont/ Lopez Elementary School (Stockton, CA)

ENTERTAINMENT & PUBLIC PROGRAMMING

We are excited to share a wealth of *American Railroad* entertainment, programming, and resources with the public. In 2023, we announced a series of billboard installations near Union Station in Los Angeles, CA, designed in partnership with For Freedoms, an artist-led organization that centers art as a catalyst for creative civic engagement. In 2025, Silkroad's *American Railroad* curriculum will be available to educators and students allowing for a deeper dive into the music and stories of the communities that built America's railroads. Additionally, audiences are able to bring *American Railroad* from the stage to home through a new album and podcast of the same name, releasing in November 2024. *American Railroad* is also featured in the second season of Silkroad Artistic Director Rhiannon Giddens' PBS series "My Music with Rhiannon Giddens," now available at pbs.org.



Silkroad Artistic Director Rhiannon Giddens, Silkroad artists and staff, and representatives from the Standing Rock Reservation (Standing Rock ND/SD)

American Railroad Essay

"The American Railroad and the Experience of Those who Built It" by Anna Eng

The building of the Transcontinental Railroad began on the eve of the Civil War, lasting through major social changes brought on by Emancipation, Reconstruction, Jim Crow segregation and the Great Migration. For the racialized workers who worked on the American Railroad, the experience of living between worlds was an everyday reality. From the African American porters who serviced the passengers of the trains to the Chinese Railroad workers who maintained and repaired the lines in desolate remote locations, segregation was still a reality. It was the realization of contributing to the building and sustaining of this technological marvel yet remaining excluded from enjoying the fruits of their labor.

The building of the railroad is a story of tremendous hardship, long workdays, harsh work conditions, extremely dangerous and physical labor, and racially discriminatory and exploitative labor practices by labor barons. It is a story of the 1867 labor strike by Chinese Railroad workers who fought for equitable wages, safer and better work conditions on par with European American workers only to have the strike crushed by railroad magnate, Charles Crocker who cut off food and supplies to the Chinese workers, high in the Sierra mountains, until they returned to work.

The story of the railroad is a story of longing and separation; it is the story of families separated for generations by racialized immigration exclusion laws that prevented Chinese laborers from bringing their wives and children or settling in this country even after the completion of the railroad. I am the 4th & 5th generation great and great great granddaughter of Chinese American miners & railroad workers, a descendant of 3 generations of paper sons denied the rights of citizenship and thus unable to bring their families with them. Consequently, I am a first-generation immigrant, descended from female ascendants who for 5 generations have all been left behind, impacted by Chinese Exclusion laws firmly put in place for nearly 90 years after the completion of the railroad.

The story of the railroad is a story about persistence, resilience, and perseverance in the face of tremendous adversity of classes of workers who resisted exclusion and fought for inclusion. Despite tremendous hardship, over the years the Chinese filed over 10,000 lawsuits that went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Many of the civil liberties Americans enjoy today were fought for in court by the Chinese, guaranteeing us the fundamental rights of Birthright Citizenship, Equal Protection Under the Law, Political Asylum, Miranda Rights, School De-segregation, and the right to Bilingual Education.

This story of the railroad is one told through music. Music that resembles work songs that allowed teams to work in unison to sustain the long, physically arduous and backbreaking work, while breaking the monotony and passing the time. Music that would've reminded laborers of home and soothed them of their longings. Music that captures the hopes and aspirations, as well as the frustrations and despair of the countless railroad workers who gave life and limb to bring this nation closer together. Music that helps us better understand the American railroad experience and its role in the formation of American culture.



ANNA ENG

Anna Eng is a scholar of 19th & 20th C Chinese American Studies, Asian American/ Comparative Race and Ethnic Studies, Women and Gender Studies, and a lecturer at University of California, Berkeley and San Francisco State University.

For Freedoms and the American Railroad

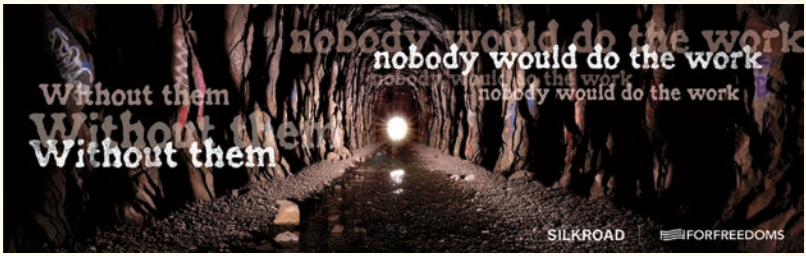
In partnership with For Freedoms, an artist-led organization that centers art as a catalyst for creative civic engagement, discourse, and direct action, Silkroad launched four compelling billboards in Los Angeles that tell the story—from a visual perspective—of the fraught legacy of American Imperialism and the quiet histories of those who toiled to build this country.



Ross McDonnell



Nekisha Durrett



Kenneth Tam



Jeffrey Gibson

FROM OUR PARTNERS AT

THE CALIFOR RAILROAD M

INTRODUCTION TO THE CALIFORNIA STATE RAILROAD MUSEUM

American Railroad is born, like the railroads and America itself, from the hearts, hands, and voices of many people. We are especially grateful to the culture bearers, historians, activists, civic leaders, community members, and fellow artists who have collaborated with us on this journey. One such keeper and teller of stories is the California State Railroad Museum, located in Sacramento, which through its exhibitions, archives, and surrounding community, has served as an important partner, providing inspiration for Silkroad to create *American Railroad*.

THE CHINESE RAILROAD WORKERS' EXPERIENCE

The Chinese rail workers were vital to the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad. The Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR) hired more than 10,000 Chinese men to build a railroad over the difficult terrain of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. By 1868, over 90% of the CPRR's labor force consisted of Chinese immigrants.



Courtesy California State Railroad Museum



Miners at the Head of Auburn Ravine, 1852. Joseph B. Starkweather. Courtesy of the California State Library

Initially, CPPR management was reluctant to employ Chinese workers, but there was a severe shortage of laborers. The discovery of The Comstock Silver Load enticed fortune seekers to the Nevada-California Border. Chinese people, however, could not try their luck in silver mining. In 1852, the California State Legislature passed the Foreign Miners Tax. The law targeted Asian and Latin American immigrants. Until 1870, Chinese miners had to pay a monthly tax of $3. From 1853 to 1862, the California legislature passed numerous laws to limit Chinese rights.

RNIA STATE USEUM



Civil Rights Activist Rosina Tucker
Photo Courtesy of the California State Railroad Museum

Despite performing some of the most difficult and dangerous work of building railroads, levies, and other infrastructure projects, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which put forth a 10-year ban on Chinese immigrants. It was the first exclusionary law enacted in U. S. History. This law was not lifted until 1943.

Scholarly research can reveal only so much about the past, but history also lives within people. The Descendant Stories section of the exhibit, preserves the memory of Chinese railroad workers that were passed down over many generations. In cases like the Chinese railroad workers, the stories from their descendants bring unique perspectives and experiences to light that were not preserved in official documents.

CROSSING LINES: WOMEN OF THE AMERICAN RAILROAD

The highest calling of the California State Railroad Museum is to serve as a laboratory of learning. *Crossing Lines* is the product of a graduate student's internship and thesis. The resulting exhibit demonstrates how Women of the American railroad crossed lines and blazed trails for future generations. They championed change and improvements, not only for the railroad industry, but also for society as a whole. Enslaved African American women helped build the tracks in the South. Women explored the rugged landscape to chart routes for travel. They cleaned railroad stations and served food in restaurants. As telegraph operators, they kept trains running safely and on time. Women designed railroad stations, trains, and safer ways to travel. When men fought wars, women built and maintained the mighty locomotives that moved a nation.



Modesta Avila stood against the Railroad to protect her home and culture. Photograph of Modesta Avila courtesy of California State Archives

CALIFORNIA STATE RAILROAD MUSEUM FOUNDATION

SHARE YOUR STORY

The California State Railroad Museum is the keeper of stories. Together, we collect them, we preserve them, and we tell them. Do you have a Railroad story? Share it with the California State Railroad Museum at Californiarailroad.museum/my-story.

American Railroad Essay

"Two Roads Diverge: The Main Line Project and the Pennsylvania Underground Railroad" by Lenwood Sloan

Pennsylvania established the Gradual Abolition Act in 1780, which emancipated enslaved people over time without making slavery immediately illegal. Enslaved people in Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky, and Ohio immediately practiced self-emancipation by escaping across the Mason Dixon Line and into the Keystone State. But where did they go and how did they get there once they crossed into freedom? That's where the Pennsylvania Underground Railroad came in.

No matter which way freedom seekers traveled, they walked a great deal of the way. Even if they rode on horseback or journeyed in a coach, the horses could only progress about twelve miles a day. Thus, there was a town every 12 miles from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh before 1834. It took 13 days by coach to cross the state until the 1834 development of the Pennsylvania Mainline of Public Works made it possible to travel the same distance in just three days. One traveled 82 miles from Philadelphia to Columbia via train, then 172 miles from Columbia to the Juniata River in rail cars on canal boats. Next, the railcars were loaded on the portage railroad for the 26 miles from Juniata to Johnstown. The last 104 miles from Johnstown to Pittsburgh were crossed by coach, horseback, or foot. Along the way, small freight lines zig-zagged through the countryside connecting to the Mainline. That is where the Pennsylvania Underground Railroad and the above ground railroad met.

Affluent African American Abolitionists William Whipper, Stephen Smith and William Goodridge were major Southeastern and Central Pennsylvania Underground Railroad stationmasters. Whipper and Smith owned freight cars on The Philadelphia and Columbia Railroad and Goodridge owned the Reliance Rail Line headquartered in York, PA, both lines connecting to the Main line. They built false walls in their freight cars to hide and transport freedom seekers.

In 1846, rail companies faced a challenging obstacle when railroad construction reached Hollidaysburg. Western advancement required blasting and chiseling through the Allegheny Mountains, a treacherous task primarily taken on by Irish laborers. Famine immigrant workers arrived from all parts of Ireland between 1848-1852. Their work camps and shanty towns ribboned the rail line. This presented an additional obstacle for abolitionists who intended to settle freedom seekers in the mountain ridges to find jobs with the railroad. Instead, they encountered the presence of railroad camps and makeshift towns occupied by Irish rail workers. The result was a violent clash of politics and culture, including riots and resistance throughout the mountain range. The struggle for co-existence is well documented.

Still, an Afro-Gaelic transformation and assimilation emerged along the Mainline rails and trails of Pennsylvania. Shuffles, jigs and jump dances were swapped; the tambourine and bones drove the meter of emerging Afro-Gaelic folk songs. Their music, movement, and storytelling captured the passion and emotions of their experiences during their transformation and assimilation along the Mainline rails and trails.

Freedom seekers grabbed the fiddle to stamp their feet and call the dance; Irish immigrants grabbed the banjo and held Africa in their hands. ***Up and down the tracks all day, both did the Gandy Dance!***



LENWOOD SLOAN

Lenwood Sloan is currently an International Consultant collaborating with the U.S. Embassy in Brussels and the multi nation "Liberation Route" on a new international WWII heritage trail. He participated on the artistic team for five national public television documentaries, Treme- Untold Story, Emmy award winning Ethnic Notions, Stephen Foster, the internationally acclaimed Re-imaging Ireland, and the Emmy award winning Dance Black America."

Be An Instrument of Change

Support Silkroad

As a not-for-profit organization, donor support propels all that we do, from creating incredible music that unites us across cultures, to providing educational programs in under-resourced middle schools, to organizing training programs that feature the master musicians of Silkroad, and so much more.



While no small task, we believe in this crucial, exciting work – and we need your support:

- $100 Supports artists working to create incredible cross-cultural music and educational programs
- $250 Helps fund the artistry and community engagement of *American Railroad*
- $500 Supports outreach work in carceral communities.
- $1,000 Sponsors an artist visit to a middle school in an under-resourced community
- $2,500 Helps make Silkroad's incredible training program, Global Musician Workshop, tuition-free for talented students
- $5,000 Supports Silkroad's work to commission innovative new music that draws on global traditions.

Your gift today will help us build a more equitable, hopeful, and just world through the power of the arts.

www.silkroad.org/donate

MAKE AN IMPACT TODAY

American Railroad Essay

"'Bind the Republic Together': Immigrant Labor and American Progress" by Ryan Dearinger

Railroad construction labor has historical ties to the worst types of "common" or "unskilled" wage labor and to the labor of enslaved peoples and convicts. It is linked, as well, to canal construction labor. Charles Dickens, writing to a U.S. audience in 1842, noted that without Irish immigrants, "It would be hard to keep your model republics going . . . for who else would dig, delve, and drudge . . . and make canals and railroads, and execute great lines of internal improvement!" Railroad officials and contractors enlisted a moving army of "wild" Irish immigrants and Famine-era refugees, luring them from County Cork and County Longford in Ireland, from Canada, and from neighboring canal and railroad projects in America. Augmented by indigenous peoples, African Americans, and Asian immigrants, the results of this movable construction labor force were impressive. Immigrants and outcasts were responsible for the dramatic growth in U.S. railroad track from 10,000 miles in 1850 to 45,000 miles by 1871 and 215,000 miles by 1900 when four additional "transcontinental" lines joined the Union and Central Pacific in connecting the eastern states with the Pacific Coast.

Progress demanded hard labor that was filthy, dangerous, disease-ridden, unfair, degrading, and underpaid. Workers moved earth but were also subject to its unrelenting forces. They were exposed to cycles of blistering hot and bone-chilling cold weather as they toiled in knee-deep muck, braved water-borne illnesses, chipped away at solid granite, and endured hard rock blasts and cave-ins. Workers also faced the constant pressure of their section bosses to finish the job—in an occupation where blunt force, rapidity, and technology didn't always harmonize. Railroads were praised as a novel technology that would annihilate the space and civilize the wilderness of the West, but they too often annihilated the men building them instead.

The culture of railroad work highlights what historians have called the "Greater Reconstruction": as the nation's geographic and political boundaries expanded, the definition of "American" curiously contracted. According to native-born citizens, railroads indeed marked a triumph and were solely attributable to the independent, civilized, entrepreneurial, and hard-working character of *Americans*. Opinion makers spun this dominant narrative, identifying destitute, transient and immigrant laborers as necessary but uncivilized, unmanly, drunken, violent, and unproductive. In the process, "true" Americans laid claim to national progress while distancing foreign-born and working-class men from the fruits of their labor. On more than one occasion, Irish immigrants violently disrupted railroad celebrations. In the days leading up to the May 10, 1869, Golden Spike ceremony in Utah, a group of Irish tracklayers near Piedmont, Wyoming kidnapped Dr. Thomas Durant, vice president of the Union Pacific Railroad, over back wages.

What railroad proponents imagined as inevitable, perpetual progress that embodied American greatness, workers—whose gritty fingerprints marked these accomplishments—confronted and complicated in their daily exploits. The process of progress, of building and celebrating, of remembering and forgetting, required hard work. It's our obligation to challenge these old stories and embrace fuller, truer stories that function as both a window into the past and a mirror for the present.



RYAN DEARINGER

Ryan Dearinger is on the history faculty at George Fox University. His areas of research and teaching expertise include the American West and Pacific Northwest, immigration, labor and working-class history, environmental history, and violence in American history.

Behind the Music of American Railroad

“O BABE - SWANNANOA TUNNEL”

Asheville Junction
Swannanoa Tunnel
All caved in, babe
All caved in

Last december
I remember
Wind blow cold, babe
Wind blow cold

I’m going back to
Swannanoa Tunnel
That’s my home, babe
That’s my home

Hammer falling
From my shoulders
All day long, Babe
All day long

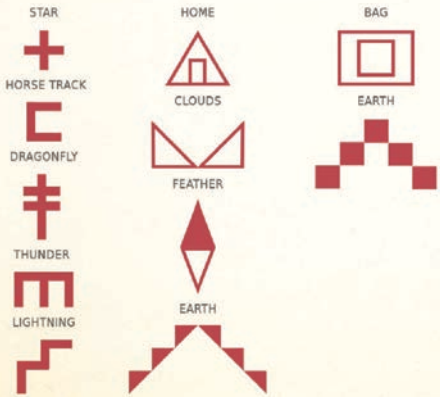
‘Swannanoa Tunnel,’ also known as ‘Asheville Junction,’ began as a ‘hammer song’ — a genre of work song that is rhythmically driven to help laborers time the strike of their hammers. Though the timing and the poetic pace of the song always stayed the same, the lyrics of the song were often changed and elaborated, sometimes in a completely improvised manner. This tune was not only practical, but it also became a form of creative resistance sung by Black laborers.

The history of how this song was appropriated by white culture is exemplary of many stories of American music. Residents from the neighboring towns heard the prisoners’ singing, and the song started catching on, lyrics changing with time. However, there was sparse mention of the African American people that created the song or the concept of “convict labor” by the time it was first recorded in 1935 by Bascom Lamar Lunsford, and thus was at that point regarded as a Southern, white, working-class anthem. It would continue to change hands and narratives for years to come, its Black origin erased from memory.

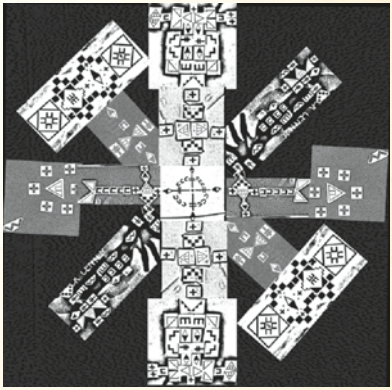
You’ll hear new versions of this tune performed throughout *American Railroad*. It is Silkroad’s homage to the history of this song and its true origin; the Ensemble’s reclamation of the forgotten voices who inspired its creation through our current lens.

“WÍHAŊBLAPI MÁZAČHAŊKU”

During an *American Railroad* Commissioning Retreat, composer Susan Kite directed the artists in creating artistic renderings of dreams based on the Lakota Visual Language. Each symbol represents a function or aspect of tribal life. The final score is a visual representation of all of the dreams of the Ensemble in the Lakota language and is the basis of the piece featured on the *American Railroad* album and during the 2023 tour.



Courtesy of Sadie Redwing



Suzanne Kite’s graphic score comprised of the dreams of the Silkroad Ensemble

Behind the Music of American Railroad

“RELA”

Composed by Silkroad artist Sandeep Das, ‘Rela’ is an homage to the railroad workers of the Indian subcontinent who toiled to develop the country’s massive network of railways in the 19th and 20th century during the British Raj (the era in which India was under British colonial rule). Many parallels can be drawn between the American Transcontinental Railroad and the British development of railroads in India, with both undeniably marked by a complex web of history, modernization, and exploitation in the name of industrial progress.

This piece was inspired by chants attributed to the railroad workers of that era and incorporates a traditional tabla rela, which is a type of improvisatory composition renowned for its high speeds, virtuosity, and cascades of complex notes and rhythms. The Hindi term ‘rela’ comes from the word “rail” or “train”, and it is believed that modern tabla relas were created to mimic the sounds of the first Indian railways.

‘Rela’ begins by evoking the sound of railroad crossings through a layer of complex rhythms on metallic instruments such as the triangle, gradually unveiling the sounds of deeper drums as the “train” embarks. Primarily a percussion ensemble piece, it is accompanied by a nagma (a looping melody that traditionally accompanies percussion performances in North Indian Classical music) composed in Raga Bhairavi, and features a variety of Indian percussion instruments such as the tabla (a set of two hand drums from North India), morshung (a South Indian metal percussion instrument played with the mouth, also called a “jaw harp” or “mouth harp”), and kanjira (a small frame drum prevalent in South Indian music) and incorporates instruments like the Piano Accordion, Marimba and Japanese Taiko Drums. The piece concludes with an exciting tukda (genre of fixed tabla composition) that dances between multiple instruments in a fiery finale.

“A WIN FOR YOU”

Composed by 2023 Pulitzer Prize-winning and Emmy- and Grammy-nominated composer Michael Abels, ‘A Win For You’ had its world premiere during Silkroad’s second *American Railroad* tour in November 2024.

To find my way into composing for Silkroad, I began by learning some of the history of the Transcontinental Railroad. Despite the incredible engineering and nation-building achievement the railroad represented, the suffering and abuse of the laborers is a crucial part of the story. Many other historic events have this kind of dual narrative: inspiration on one hand, exploitation on the other. And yet, the most significant issues facing us today — regional wars, climate change — can only be solved through cooperation, by including everyone in the solution. A resolution that works for the powerful also has to work for those most affected by it.

‘A Win For You’ is a study on that idea. It’s a song about achievement through cooperation (“A victory for me doesn’t come at your cost… a win for me doesn’t mean that you lost”) with verses, a bridge, and a chorus. In between these sections are instrumental interludes — meditations which also showcase some of the glorious sonorities possible through this wonderful array of Silkroad musicians and cultures.

The piece is hopeful, optimistic, and very rhythmic. The final section is a “game” of rhythmic diminution: with every repeat of the chorus, one eighth note is removed from the time signature, which creates a sense of the music getting faster without actually speeding up. This is meant to evoke the feeling one gets as an epic project nears completion. But also it is a fun challenge for the performers, especially the percussionists.

- **Michael Abels**, Composer

Learn more about the music behind *American Railroad* by visiting silkroad.org/american-railroad.

AMERICAN RAILROAD: THE ALBUM

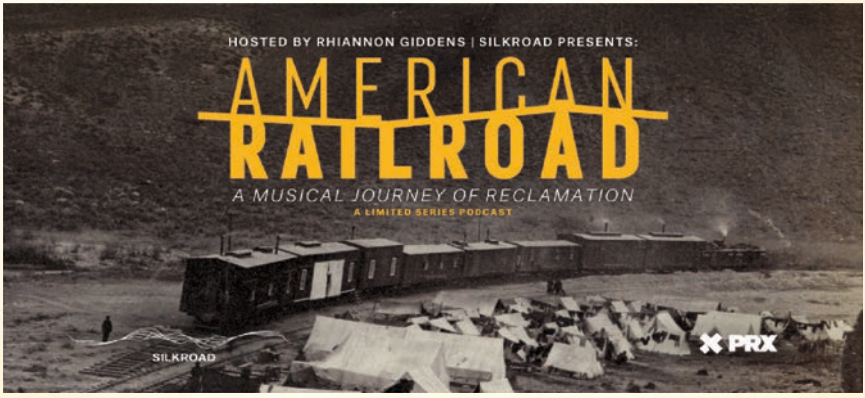
The *American Railroad* album reflects the program from Silkroad's inaugural *American Railroad* tour in Fall 2023. Its 13 tracks include commissioned pieces by Cécile McLorin Salvant, Suzanne Kite, and Silkroad artist Wu Man, as well as new arrangements of songs by Rhiannon Giddens and fellow Silkroad artists Haruka Fujii, Maeve Gilchrist, and Mazz Swift. Rounding out the album are original compositions and arrangements by Silkroad artists Pura Fé, Sandeep Das, Niwel Tsumbu, and Kaoru Watanabe. *American Railroad* was recorded live during tour stops at the Green Music Center in Sonoma, CA and Zellerbach Hall in Berkeley, CA; it is co-produced by Giddens, Watanabe, and Jody Elff. The album releases November 15, 2024 on Nonesuch Records.



AMERICAN RAILROAD: THE PODCAST

To shed even more light on the untold stories of the Transcontinental Railroad, Silkroad partnered with Peabody Award-winning public media organization PRX for a five-episode podcast series hosted by Rhiannon Giddens. Episodes release beginning November 14, 2024, free on-demand across all major podcast platforms, including Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Amazon Music, Pocket Casts, Overcast, and NPR One.

The *American Railroad* podcast weaves together music and story, centering different regions of the country while delving into ties to the railroad and how they resonate today. Guests include historians, musicians, descendants of railroad workers, members of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe, and Silkroad artists. From Chinese laborers' crucial role in California's railroad to the tragic tale of convict laborers in North Carolina, the series helps paint a more accurate and inclusive picture of America's railroad history.





THANK YOU

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We send a standing ovation to Playbill CEO Philip S. Birsh for his generous support in producing these booklets. The music and programs of Silkroad are made possible thanks to friends like you.

Join us today: **www.silkroad.org/donate**.

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