

# Willie and the Wabash: Exploring the many facets and influences of American Folk Music

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**Suggested Grade Level:** 3-5 or 6-8

**Country:** United States

**Region:** Southern Mountain Region

**Culture Group:** Country Singers

**Genre:** American Folk

**Instruments:** Guitar, Banjo, Voice

**Language:** English

**Co-Curricular Areas:** Visual Arts (*VA*), Language Arts (*LA*), Civics (Government and Politics) (*C*),<sup>1</sup> Math (*M*), Business (*B*), History (*H*)

**National Standards (NS):** Will contain all areas of Create, Perform, Respond, and Connect. CA's are identified as being addressed; however, specific benchmarks to be determined through the development of the activities and assessments as they are appropriate for your own classroom.

**Prerequisites:** Students must be proficient in performance of body percussion, sing comfortably in the key of "G" (Range: d4-d5), proficiency on the recorder demonstrating mastery of all notes in the same singing range.

## **Materials:**

- Recording of *Wabash Cannonball*: Pete Seeger - [FW02320 107](#),
- Other recordings of WC:
  - Artists include:
    - Roy Acuff
    - Johnny Cash
    - Willie Nelson
- Xylophones (All ranges to flesh out sound),<sup>2</sup>
- Glockenspiels,
- Recorders,
- Ukuleles (if available)
- Guitars (if available)
- Piano
- Singing voice

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<sup>1</sup> This specific example will only apply if additional examples are used that explore the use of this tune in election paraphernalia

<sup>2</sup> Use xylophones in place of banjos and piano, glockenspiels, or ukuleles in place of guitars.

## Objectives:

- 1) The students will identify instrumentation and timbre of American Folk Music
- 2) The students will demonstrate mastery of pulse through internalization activities.
- 3) The students will arrange a performance of their own interpretation of the composition.
- 4) The students will perform and actively engage with an American folk tune.
- 5) The students will create their own lyrics to WC and perform for their peers.
- 6) The students will explore the power of folk music through performance of Wabash Cannonball and the creation of their own Broadside Ballad.
- 7) The students will establish and strengthen connections between folk music and other disciplines.

## Lesson Segments<sup>3</sup>

- 1) **The Introduction**
- 2) **The Foundation of the Arrangement**
- 3) **The Arrangement**
- 4) **The Broadside Ballad**

### LS1) *The Introduction (Objectives 1,2,4,6)*

**(NS: Perform – CA 6; Respond CA's 8-9)**

- 1) Students identify instrumentation of WC:  
T might ask: "What instruments do you hear?" **[AL]**  
"Describe the sound (timbre) of this piece" **[AL]**  
T plays: [Wabash Cannonball as performed by Pete Seeger](#)
- 2) Students Begin to make connections with the banjo part:  
T might ask: "After listening to WC, what does the banjo part remind you of?" **[AL]**
- 3) On the ensuing listening, have students maintain a steady pulse to assess what students are hearing in terms of the pulse as well as to assess readiness for the vocables and body percussion. **[EL]**
- 4) After guiding the students to discover the banjo's connection with the train, the teacher asks what sounds a train makes... **[IWM]**  
(Lead toward whistling and Chug-a-choo)
- 5) Teacher creates two chanting syllables that create this sound and students chant the two forms of Chug-a-Chug-a-Choo-Choo while listening to the recording. **[EL]**
- 6) As students vamp the ostinato, T sings the chorus of WC.
- 7) T asks students to describe what they heard that was different. **[AL]**
  - a. Students will hear that the T was singing the melody and that it sounded like the one the singer was singing.
- 8) T teaches the melody and lyrics to WC by rote.

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<sup>3</sup> AL – Active Listening; EL – Engaged Listening; EnL – Enactive Listening; IWM – Integrating World Music; CWM – Creating World Music

- 9) Ss sing along with the recording, then split into groups experience the chant and the melody.
- 10) Teacher ends this portion by sharing the lyrics and the story of the Wabash Cannonball. Connections will be made to life on the railroad and the group of people known as hobos. *(H)* (Work to make any local connections clear. Each region has its own unique connection to the song whether it be through country music, sports, etc.) **[IWM]**

**Assessment:** Here assessment will be primarily informal and monitoring responses both spoken and musically to what students hear and are able to perform. Teacher should maintain a notebook and mark readiness of each student in some way to determine when it is time to move on to the next task.

**LS2) *The Foundation of the Arrangement*<sup>4</sup> (Objectives 2,3,4,6)**  
**(NS: Create – CA 3; Perform – CA 6; Respond CA’s 7-8)**

- 1) Review the song from last time.
  - a. Pulse
  - b. Chanting while listening.
  - c. Melody and lyrics
- 2) Add Body Percussion (BP) to the chanting w/o recording.
- 3) Perform BP and chanting along with the recording. **[EL]**
- 4) Listen now for the whistle.
  - a. T asks: “How is it portrayed?” “How do you know he is singing the whistle?” “Why is this important” What makes this layer unique to this piece? Why did he make this decision? (The last three will be written down in the students’ listening journals)**[AL]**
  - b. T guides responses toward a better understanding of text painting and the importance of the voice and delivery of the story in folk music.
- 5) Ss listen again to the recording, this time singing along with the whistle to solidify their connection of the voice with the object (whistle). **[EL]**
  - a. Sing along with the whistle. Try to match Pete Seeger’s tone. **[EL]**
- 6) T introduces the importance of the whistle and connect back to the story of the hobos revealed in the first segment. **[IWM]**
- 7) Try making whistle sounds of your own. **[EnL]**
- 8) Ss add their designed whistle sounds along with the recording. **[EL]**
  - a. First with everyone, then volunteers to share their interpretation of the whistle!
- 9) Close with importance of imagery and sound in American Folk Music providing several examples for students to hear and explore their own voices. Students will also respond to prompts provided by the teacher on the various recordings. Pay special attention to asking questions that

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<sup>4</sup> All eighth notes should be swung to maintain the authenticity of the arrangement.

direct their listening solely on the singer's voice and how they capture the life of the object they are trying to portray. Look for rich descriptors!

**[IWM]**

**Assessment:** Here assessment will be both formal and informal. Responses will be recorded in listening journals when responding to the prompts provided by the teacher. Teacher should maintain a notebook and mark readiness of each student in some way to determine when it is time to move on to the next task as well as respond directly to students responses in their listening journals.

**LS 3) *The Arrangement (Objectives 2,3,4,6)***

**(NS: Perform – CA 4-6; Respond CA's 8)**

- 1) Review the BP and whistles along with the recording.
- 2) Transfer the BP to xylophones mimicking the sound created by the banjos.
- 3) Add a glockenspiel or piano on the guitar part to ensure the completeness of the chord.
  - a. Be sure to address the bass as well. This will allow for more participation in the performance.
- 4) Perform with the recording then alone. **[EL and EnL]**
- 5) Sing and perform the entire 16-bar chorus. **[EnL]**
- 6) Play recording and have the students perform with the recording on the choruses. **[EL]**
- 7) Introduce to the students how folk music was learned, shared, and recorded (Have students develop their own way of documenting their arrangement.) then have them begin designing their own arrangement of the tune as a class (with guidance from the teacher). **[IWM]**

**Assessment:** Here assessment will be primarily informal and monitoring the musical development of the students provided the tasks at hand. Teacher should maintain a notebook and mark readiness of each student in some way to determine when it is time to move on to the next task. Thresholds of acceptability should be set, e.g. fewer than 2 mistakes in rhythm, or fewer than 2 mistakes in pitches. This will provide clear substantiation of readiness.

**LS4) *The Broadside Ballad (Objectives 1,2,3,4,5,6,7)***

**(NS: Create – CA's 1-3; Perform – CA 4-6; Respond – CA's 8-9;**

**Connect CA's**

**10-11)**

- 1) Review the arrangement and make a recording. **[EnL]**
- 2) Have students reflect on what went well and what we can continue to improve upon as a class. **[AL]**
- 3) Introduce the Broadside Ballads to the students. Share how stories of the day and products were pushed through song. Newspapers would hire

Balladiers to sell newspapers and companies have maintained the use of “jingles” to sell product. **[IWM]**

- 4) Review the story of the WC. Begin making a connection to songs that they know that deliver similar stories. **[IWM]**
- 5) Have the students brainstorm ideas of stories that they know and enjoy sharing.
- 6) Using the arrangement created in the previous lessons, select one of the ideas and begin designing and creating lyrics (*LA*) to fit and tell their specific story. (This might be a local legend... it might be a nursery rhyme they remember, it could be about a product...) **[CWM]**
- 7) Have students then create posters (*VA*) (*LA*) and a marketing campaign (*B*) (*M*) for sharing this information. **[CWM and IWM]**
- 8) Begin compiling and organizing all of the information for the final “informance”. **[CWM]**

**Assessment:** Here the assessment is formal. A rubric should be generated to measure your intended outcomes. Review the objectives and ensure you have accurately measured their development along the way and that they have successfully completed this project. While the informance and the satisfaction of the performance is part of the equation, be sure to emphasize the connection to the American culture that has been established and work to measure its impact as well. A sample rubric is provided on the next page.

## Scoring Rubric

	<b>Exceeds Expectation</b> 4	<b>Meets Expectations</b> 3	<b>Developing</b> 2	<b>Unsatisfactory</b> 1
Pulse	No mistakes in pulse	<2 Mistakes	2-4 Mistakes	>4 Mistakes
Body Percussion	<2 Mistakes in Execution	2-3 Mistakes in execution	4-6 Mistakes in execution	>6 Mistakes in execution
Notes/Rhythms	No mistakes	<2 Mistakes	2-4 Mistakes	>4 Mistakes
Musicality	Connection to the music demonstrates a deep knowledge of the American Folk Tradition through musical decisions during the performance	Employ and execute a minimum of 5 musical elements that are appropriate for American Folk Music	Employ and execute 2-4 musical elements that are appropriate for American Folk Music	Little effort is made to employ or execute any musical elements beyond notes and rhythms.
Arrangement	Students researched and designed a musically appropriate arrangement of the American Folk Tune and provided research to support all decisions and shared that research throughout the informance.	Students researched and designed a musically appropriate arrangement of the American folk tune.	The arrangement was completed, but had errors in implementation or consistency with the practices of the American Folk Tradition.	The arrangement did not meet any of the guidelines as set forth in the assignment.
Content	Content is appropriate for the assignment and demonstrates a high level of connection and identification within the culture. Evidence of critical thinking and connections beyond what was delivered and experienced in class is present.	Content is appropriate for the assignment and demonstrates a working knowledge of the impact of the American Folk Tradition.	Content was present, but did not always connect with the intended outcome of the project.	Content was inappropriate for the given task.
Journal Entries	Student responses demonstrate a high level of the impact of the American Folk Culture through their ability to synthesize their experiences and connect them to possible future experiences or how this knowledge might help them in some way moving forward.	Student reflections demonstrate a full understanding of the American Folk vernacular and its impact on their lives as well as their peers lives.	Students respond to all reflective prompts, but only provide surface-level information with little to no attempt at critical thought.	Students do not complete all assigned journal prompts and provide little insight into how these experiences have impacted their musical lives as well as their peers.
Informance			Attended	Did not attend

**TOTAL: /30**

# Wabash Cannonball

J.A. Roff

**Allegro** ♩ = 200

Xylophone

Banjo

Banjo

Treble Solo

Bass

4

Xyl.

Ban.

Ban.

Tr. Solo

Bs.

8

Xyl.

Ban.

Ban.

Tr. Solo

Bs.

Oh

11

Xyl.

Ban.

Ban.

Tr. Solo

Bs.

*lis - ten to the jin - gle the rum - ble and the*



14

Xyl.

Ban.

Ban.

Tr. Solo

Bs.

*roar. As she glides a - long the wood-land o'er hills and by the*

18

Xyl.

Ban.

Ban.

Tr. Solo

Bs.

*shore. She climbs the flow - ry mount-tain hear the mer - ry ho-bos*

22

Xyl.

Ban.

Ban.

Tr. Solo

Bs.

*squall.*      *She glides a - long the wood - land,      The*

25

Xyl.

Ban.

Ban.

Tr. Solo

Bs.

*Wa - bash Cann-non      BALL!      (Oh)*