Railway music in North America in the nineteenth and early twentieth century

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15 The coming of the railroads to North America: work songs, hoboes, gospel music and the blues

The railroad is a central motif in American work songs, folk music, gospel, blues and jazz. The titles, lyrics and sounds of the songs are filled with images of the railroad: it offered a promise of escape and access to employment; it transported people, culture and ideas in ways previously unknown; and travel by train altered people's perception of time. The following chapters outline some of the ways in which the railroad featured in American popular music.

Transport in the United States was slow and difficult until the coming of the railroads (the name 'railroads' was adopted early on). The roads were poor and although there were canals, these froze in the winter and the system did not cover the whole country. Baltimore was without a canal system and in 1827 the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad was incorporated, bringing locomotives and track from England. Soon, however, Americans began to build their own locomotives and in 1830 *Tom Thumb* was built for use on the Baltimore line after another early company, the South Carolina Canal and Rail Road Company, had the first locomotive built for commercial use in the United States – the *Best Friend of Charleston*. Canada, also largely dependent on canals invested in trains and founded the Champlain and Saint Lawrence Railroad in 1832.

Rapid technological advances in steam locomotive design in the late 1830s led to a huge expansion in railway building. This development accelerated in the 1840s and 1850s and the growth of the US railroad exploded. By the 1860s trains had largely replaced canals as transport. This was to have a profound effect on the USA. In 1800 a journey from New York City to Detroit took four weeks, whilst the same journey in 1860 could be completed overnight. There was still a recognised need for a transcontinental railroad to traverse from east to west. The Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroad companies were the

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first to realise this goal. In the 1860s a labour shortage threatened the railroad's completion; local people were unwilling to work on the railroad finding mining and gold-digging more lucrative. In 1864 around 15,000 Chinese workers were shipped in to help build the Central Pacific railroad. In fact, according to the American historian Peter Liebhold, all the workers on the railroad were 'other', 'On the west, there were Chinese workers, out east were Irish and Mormon workers were in the centre. All these groups are outside the classical American mainstream.'[1] The work was hard; the railroad was built entirely by manual labourers who had to face dangerous work conditions – accidental explosions, snow and rock avalanches – and hundreds died as a result. The workers lived in camps that were moved along with the railroad. These ungoverned temporary villages of tents and shacks were known as 'hells on wheels'.

1869 marked the completion of the first transcontinental railroad when the Union Pacific and Central Pacific were joined together in Utah. This event was celebrated by a ceremony known as the Golden Spike (also known as the Last Spike) where a final 7.6-carat gold spike was driven. By 1916 the USA had the biggest railway network in the world covering 250,000 miles. Partly as a result of this success, the nation thrived and the railways bound the vast country together.

This chapter outlines some of the early development of train-inspired American songs focusing on work songs and the building of the railroads, moving on to the folk songs, country music, and blues that document the wandering hobo lifestyle, its dangers and consequences.

Work songs

The coming of the railway in the States created an enormous demand for labour to construct the railroads and tunnels. Slave trading had been abolished from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards and by the middle of the century there were large numbers of free black people in the USA, however they were still denied many of the rights enjoyed by the white population. During this period black labourers predominated in the railroad building workforce working alongside white, often Scottish and Irish, manual workers. One of the earliest types of black American music, and a forerunner of the blues, was the work song. Although slaves had been discouraged from many types of music making, work songs were encouraged because they were sung

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rhythmically in time with the task being done and this actually helped the work. At the same time, worksongs helped to relieve the boredom of usually tedious jobs. Many work songs used call and response where one member of the gang would lead the song with the others coming in after him.

With their strong rhythms, work songs helped to coordinate labour on the railroad. When hammering in spikes to hold down the rails and ties for example, workers would swing their hammers in a full circle, hitting the spikes, one after the other, without missing. The most effective way to accomplish this was to set up a rhythm, traditionally provided by a work song. Scott Reynolds Nelson (2008) describes how a hammer song coordinated the movements of the workers.

> The hammer man swung a sledgehammer down onto the chisel. The shaker shifted the drill between blows to improve the drill's bite…The breaks between the lines of the hammer songs coordinated the complex movements of drilling. The hammer came down at the end of the line…Sometimes it was a hammer man who sang, telling his partner with his rhythm and lyrics when the next blow would come. Other times a third man would sing for hammer man and shaker. Between the blows a shaker would work his magic, either rocking or rolling.[2]

Sometimes the words of the work songs had their roots in British folk music or broadside ballads; sometimes they were improvised. They often followed an AAB form where the first and second lines were the same – a tradition which was later followed in the blues. As Ted Gioia writes in his book *Work Songs* (2006) 'No tool plays a more significant and complex role in the surviving body of work songs than the hammer'.[3] The word 'hammer' took on whole new meanings as a symbol of the worker's strength, determination or virility. Many blues singers and folk singers have recorded versions of a work song called 'Take this hammer' a defiant song in which a prisoner contemplates escape.

Take this hammer

Take this old hammer, take it to the captain,
Take this old hammer, man take it to the captain,
Tell him I'm goin', tell him I'm gone.

If he asks you, was I runnin',
If he asks you, was I runnin',
Tell him I was flyin', man tell him I was flyin'.

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Stripes but no Stars, rail road workers, Asheville, North Carolina, USA, c.1892
Buncombe County Special Collections, Pack Memorial Public Library, Asheville, North Carolina, USA

Prisons were a source of cheap labour for building and maintaining railroad tracks until the 1940s. Work songs continued to be sung, particularly by work gangs in the southern US gaols. During the 1930s the American Library of Congress sent out folklorists to collect field recordings of American folk music. John A Lomax and his son Alan toured US gaols in the southern states where many blues singers were incarcerated. 'Take this hammer' was recorded at State Prison Farm, Raiford, Florida in 1939. The prisoners included the later celebrated blues singer Huddie Ledbetter (Leadbelly) who had been jailed for assault and whose repertoire included work songs. Lomax was so impressed by Leadbelly's singing and 12-string guitar playing that on his release he hired him to travel round state penitentiaries acting as a driver, mechanic and assistant for more recording sessions. Another version, which Robert Winslow Gordon heard when collecting songs on his US gaol visits in the 1920s, makes reference to John Henry and includes the following lines.

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This ole hammer-huh!
Killed John Henry – huh!
Can't kill me, baby – huh!
Can't kill me!
My ole hammer-huh!
Shine like silver – huh!
Shina like gold!
Aint no hammer-huh!
In this whole mountain – huh!
Shina like mine, baby – huh!
Shina like mine!

Work songs were, of course, sung a cappella but some of them developed into songs accompanied by guitar. In 1928 the blues singer Mississippi John Hurt recorded 'Spike driver blues' which includes the following lines

Take this hammer and carry it to my captain
Tell him I'm gone, tell him I'm gone, tell him I'm gone

This is the hammer that killed John Henry
But it won't kill me, but it won't kill me, but it won't kill me

It a long ways to East Colorado
Honey to my home, honey to my home, that where I'm going

Ted Gioia argues that 'John Henry' stands in a class by itself' and that 'any assessment of work songs in American music and life leads inevitably to the consideration of John Henry – half historical figure and half legend – and his compelling story.[4] For this reason John Henry will be dealt with in more detail later (see pages 207 - 210).

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Hoboes

10 railway songs about hoboes

SONG TITLE	EARLY RECORDINGS AND FIRST DATE OF PUBLICATION
Because he was only a tramp	Published and performed by Hamilton 1875–1880
Hobo Bill / Hobo Bill's last ride	Published by Waldo O'Neal, 1929 Jimmie Rodgers, Gene Autry, Martha Copeland
Hobo blues	Published by Bernard Besman and John Lee Hooker Peg Leg Howell, Dr. Isaiah Ross, Cliff Carlisle
Hobo's lullabye	Published (1934) and performed by Goebel Reeves, later by Arlo Guthrie
Hobo's meditation	Published by Jimmie Rodgers Joe Glazer, Jimmie Rodgers, Hank Snow, Ernest Tubb.
Railroad tramp	Walter Morris, Dock Boggs
The dying hobo	First published in 1909 in *Railroad Man's Magazine*. First recorded by Dick Burnett and Leonard Rutherford in 1926.
The railroad boomer	Published and performed by Carson Robison, 1929 Gene Autry, Carter Family, Goebel Reeves
The Wabash Cannonball	Roy Acuff, The Carter Family, Hugh Cross (1929)
Waiting for a train (Wild and reckless hobo)	Jimmie Rodgers (1929), Gene Autry, Ernest Tubb

The word 'hobo' is generally used to refer to impoverished American migrant workers who travelled around the country taking free train rides in search of work. The term came into use in the late nineteenth century. Some of the earliest black hoboes were freed slaves who worked at various jobs in the South. Many jobs were seasonal, others included construction jobs and railroad track maintenance, with many of the workers hopping freight trains to get to the job site. By the 1920s, hoboes, sometimes referred to as 'tramps', had become a ubiquitous presence anywhere near railroad tracks.[5] The numbers of hoboes increased dramatically during the Great Depression of the 1930s with estimates ranging from two to four million. Paul Oliver (1990) in his study of meaning in the blues writes

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> Far too many had no prospects whatsoever and toured aimlessly, with the police ready to arrest them for vagrancy or for failing to pay their fares. Living from day to day, skipping aboard the freight trains as they rattled slowly across high trestle bridges, clambering on to the passenger trains as they gathered speed on leaving the station behind, they let the great locomotives carry them to distant cities.[6]

It was a dangerous business; freight hopping involved riding under, on top of, or in the boxcars carrying the freight, risking injury, sometimes being beaten off by hostile train crews and pursued by violent security officials. The penalty could be prison or the chain gang. Riding on a freight train was dangerous in itself and there was always the possibility of arrest. Two of the earliest songs depicting this sorry life are serious pieces of social commentary. 'Because he was only a tramp' is a poignant country fiddle song by Wyzee Hamilton that dates from the 1870s.

Because he was only a tramp

I'm a broken man without credit or cash
My clothes are all tattered and torn
Not a friend have I gotten in this wide world alone
I wish I had never been born.

Now it happened right here on the AGS run
A man was all wearied and worn
Along by the tracks sat an empty boxcar
He crawled in and closed up the door.

Now he hadn't rode far in this empty boxcar
'Til the brakeman came round with his lamp
He was thrown from the car and was killed o n the bar
Because he was only a tramp.

Come now hear all my good people
Don't call every poor man a tramp
He was starin' in the face by starvation you know
That will bring down a man to a tramp.

Hoboes lived in 'jungles' set up by the side of the track. As the blues expert Paul Oliver writes, these were 'primitive shack towns made from scrap metal, wood, and cardboard and the packing cases that hoboes had tipped off the trains'.[7] Oliver goes on to write that 'The railroad held few illusions for the blues singer…As transient, as tramp, as wanderer, or worker he sang from experience rather than sentiment'.[8]

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Hobo blues

In his study of black hoboes and their songs, Paul Garon (2006) writes that in this way 'Blues singing hoboes documented their railroad experience in song' and that the lyrics themselves are 'material evidence of history'.[9] Although John Lee Hooker's 'Hobo Blues' is not identical to a 'material document like a government form…it does record a mood and an attitude, and as such, is a legitimate document'. The song was written at a time of economic disaster in the Dust Bowl and massive unemployment of farmers and labourers in the South where many of them became 'hoboes, migrant laborers or travellers to the North'.[10] Blues singer and guitarist John Lee Hooker (1917 – 2001),[11] from a sharecropping family, ran away from his home in Mississippi at the age of 14, reportedly never seeing his mother again. He travelled around working in various cities until he settled in Detroit in 1948. In 'Hobo blues' Hooker cries out to the Lord, telling of riding the freight trains a long way from home and away from his mother. Albert Murray was the first to write at length about the connection between the blues and locomotive onomatopoeia in his book *Stomping the Blues* (1976). John Lee Hooker's rhythmic boogie-blues style shows what Murray describes as the 'influence of the old smoke-chugging railroad-train engine'.[12]

Hobo blues as sung by John Lee Hooker

When I first start to hoboing, hoboing, hoboing
I took a freight train to be my friend, oh Lord
You know I hoboed, hoboed, hoboed, hoboed
Hoboed a long, long way from home, oh Lord

You know my mother, she followed me that mornin', me that mornin', boys
She followed me down to the yard, oh Lord
She said, "my son he's gone, he's gone, he's gone, he's gone
Yes, he's gone in a poor some wear, oh Lord"

Yes, I left my dear old mother, dear old mother, dear old mother
I left my honor, need a crime, oh Lord
You know I hoboed, hoboed, hoboed, hoboed
Hoboed a long, long way from home, oh Lord

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Big Rock Candy Mountain

'Big Rock Candy Mountain' is a country song that tells of a utopia for hoboes, free of the stresses and concerns of everyday life. It has a convoluted history and exists in several versions, some clean, others far less so.[13] Harry "Haywire Mac" McClintock (1882-1957), who claimed to be the song's original composer and recorded it in 1928, created two very different versions of the song. Both were superseded by later versions, notably Burl Ives's 1945 recording. Ives version is closely related to McClintock's clean version and includes the following refrain.

I'll show you the bees in the cigarette trees,
And the soda water fountain
And the lemonade springs where the blue bird sings.
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains.

McClintock's other version relates to the pre-Depression hobo culture where older, experienced hoboes would recruit young runaway boys. These relationships often began with the older hobo, the 'jocker' describing the wonders of life on the road. In exchange for the promise of safety and the promised joys, the younger hobo, the 'punk' would agree to perform various tasks ranging from menial labour and begging to sexual acts.[14] This version makes several references to life on the rails for hoboes.

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains all the jails are made of tin,
And you can walk right out again as soon as you are in,
Why, the brakemen have to tip their hats
And the railroad bulls are blind,

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains there's a land that's fair and bright
Where the handouts grow on bushes and you sleep out every night,
Where the boxcars all are empty and the sun shines every day.

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Hobo Bill's last ride

Riding on the eastbound freight train speeding through the night
Hobo Bill the railroad bum was fighting for his life
The sadness of his eyes revealed the torture of his soul
He raised a weak and weary hand to brush away the coal

No warm lights flickered round him no blankets there to fold
Nothing but the howling wind the driving rain so cold
When he heard a whistle blowing in a dreamy kind of way
The hobo seemed contented for he smile there where he lay

Outside the rain was falling on that lonely boxcar door
But the little form of Hobo Bill lay still upon the floor
As the train sped through the darkness and the raging storm outside
No one knew that Hobo Bill was taking his last ride

Riding on the eastbound freight train speeding through the night
Hobo Bill the railroad bum was fighting for his life
The sadness of his eyes revealed the torture of his soul
He raised a weak and weary hand to brush away the coal

No warm lights flickered round him no blankets there to fold
Nothing but the howling wind the driving rain so cold
When he heard a whistle blowing in a dreamy kind of way
The hobo seemed contented for he smile there where he lay

It was early in the morning when they raised the hobo's head
The smile still lingered on his face but Hobo Bill was dead
There was no mother's longing to soothe his weary soul
For he was just a railroad bum who died out in the cold.

It is ironic that one of the best-known hobo songs was written by a professional songwriter, Waldo O'Neal, rather than a homeless tramp. However, 'Hobo Bill's last ride' was written for a one-time hobo, Jimmie Rodgers (1897-1933), the Singing Brakeman, who had spent many years on the railroads both hoboing and working. Born in Mississippi, the son of a railroad gang foreman on the Mobile and Ohio line, he worked in various capacities on the railroads until tuberculosis forced him from that work. He had always longed for a career as a musician, having learned to play guitar and banjo, and from 1925 this became his focus, although he still had stints or railroad work all over the Southern States. He picked up musical ideas from fellow railroad men and from listening to his vast collection of phonograph records. He evolved his own country music style which had elements of the blues he had learnt from black musicians. Norm Cohen (2010) in his landmark study of American railroad folksong *Long Steel Rail: The Railroad in American Folksong* describes Rodgers'

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style as 'a form of white blues – a pale imitation of the classic city blues'.[15] Rodgers was also a yodeller sometimes interspersing yodelling between the verses of his songs. The lyrics often welded together 'the images of cowboy and railroad wanderer'.[16] In 1927 he made a trial recording and its success showed record companies that there was a large audience for this type of music which they referred to as 'hillbilly'; his musical style did much to set the pattern for country music. Not surprisingly the Singing Brakeman made much use of railroad imagery in songs such as 'Waiting for a train', 'Train whistle blues', 'The brakeman's blues', 'Southern Cannonball' and 'The hobo's meditation'. Rodgers' recording of 'Hobo Bill's last ride' is a finger picking country song interspersed with yodelling, whereas another of his big hits, 'Waiting for a train' is performed in a more bluesy, swing vein. Both songs describe the unemployment and hardship of a hobo's lonely life.

Waiting for a train

All around the water tanks
Waiting for a train
A thousand miles away from home
Sleeping in the rain
I walked up to a brakeman
To give him a line of talk
He says if you've got money
I'll see that you don't walk
I haven't got a nickel
Not a penny can I show
Get off, get off, you railroad bum
He slammed the boxcar door
He put me off in Texas
A state I dearly love
The wide open spaces all around me
The moon and the stars up above
Nobody seems to want me
Or lend me a helping hand
I'm on my way from Frisco
I'm going back to Dixieland
Oh, my pocketbook is empty
And my heart is full of pain
I'm a thousand miles away from home
Just waiting for a train.

Rodgers continued to be hugely successful with subsequent records, but tuberculosis led to his premature death in 1933. Many country stars followed in his footsteps including Gene Autry, Cliff Carlisle, Hank Snow and Wilf Carter. For the next 20 years after Rodgers' death most major country singers had one or more hits in his railroad-inspired vein. These included Boxcar Willie. One might be forgiven for thinking that Boxcar Willie had been a hobo given his stage name, his unkempt stage persona (wearing train driver's overalls and a battered hat), his repertoire of railroad songs and his train whistle impressions. In fact he had actually spent 22 years of his working life as a flight engineer in the US Air Force.

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Robert Johnson

The Mississippi blues singer Robert Johnson is often referred to as a hobo. He certainly spent much of his short life travelling from place to place, an inveterate wanderer he moved from town to town across North America playing on street corners and in juke joints to raise money, often picking up women along the way. He is believed to have been born in 1911 and died a violent death in 1938, allegedly after being poisoned by a jealous husband. In this short but turbulent life he had little commercial success and recorded only 29 songs, accompanying himself on slide guitar. However his work has since been hugely influential and many of his songs have become blues classics such as 'Rambling on my mind', 'Love in vain' and 'Walking blues', all of which refer to trains.

Rambling on my mind

I got ramblin', I got ramblin' on my mind (twice)
Hate to leave my baby but you treat me so unkind
I got mean things, I got mean things all on my mind (twice)
Hate to leave you here, babe, but you treat me so unkind
Runnin' down to the station, catch the first mail train I see (twice)
I got the blues about Miss So-and-So and the child got the blues about me.
And I'm leavin' this mornin' with my arm' fold' up and cryin' (twice)
I hate to leave my baby but she treats me so unkind.
I got mean things, I've got mean things on my mind (twice)
I got to leave my baby, well, she treats me so unkind.

For Johnson the train was often a means of escape. As the musicologist Dick Weissman writes '…examining Robert Johnson's lyrics brings to life a person who was a restless dissatisfied wanderer, always seeking out the next woman, and seemingly never, or rarely, believing that she would offer anything more than temporary companionship and an outlet for the singer's sexual needs of the moment'. Like several of his other songs, 'Rambling on my mind' focuses on his distrust of women and his need to get away.[17] The slide guitar work is typical of the Delta blues, there is a walking bass rhythm and short instrumental breaks (solos) after each line of the lyrics, a sort of call and response, almost as though the guitarist is in conversation with the singer.

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Walking blues

I woke up this mornin', feelin' round for my shoes
Know 'bout it I got these, old walkin' blues
Woke up this mornin', feelin' round for my shoes
But you know 'bout 'it I, got these old walkin' blues.

Well I leave this morn' I have to ride the blind,
I feel mistreated and I don't mind dyin'
Leavin' this morn', I have to ride a blind
Babe, I been mistreated, baby, and I don't mind dyin'.

'Walking blues' reflects the hobo lifestyle; itinerant musicians were sometimes known as 'walking musicians'. It was originally written and recorded in 1930 by another itinerant musician, the Delta blues singer Son House. Both Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters later recorded their own versions. Johnson's recording uses various slide guitar techniques, thumbed strumming on the lower strings and fingerpicking on the treble strings as well as featuring some well-placed falsetto. Riding the blinds was the dangerous hobo practice of riding between cars on a moving train, out of sight of the train crew or police. On a passenger train this area between the cars was usually covered with canvas or leather. On freight cars, hoboes sometimes rode holding onto the ladder running up to the top of the car, this equally dangerous act was also referred to as riding the blinds.

Love in vain

'Love in vain', is a sad romantic song of unrequited love that uses a departing train as a metaphor for a lost love. The singer follows his love to the station and cries as she leaves. The acoustic guitar accompaniment is sparse with the longing vocal line very much in the forefront. In the last wordless verse the lyrics disappear and are replaced by a lonesome cry.

Love in vain

And I followed her to the station, with a suitcase in my hand (twice)
Well, it's hard to tell, it's hard to tell
When all your love's in vain
All my love's in vain

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When the train rolled up to the station, I looked her in the eye (twice)
Well, I was lonesome, I felt so lonesome
And I could not help but cry
All my love's in vain

When the train, it left the station, with two lights on behind (twice)
Well, the blue light was my blues
And the red light was my mind
All my love's in vain

Johnson recorded his songs in the 1930s, and since then hundreds of versions have been made by blues and rock bands across the world. He has had a great influence on the rock musicians of today notably Eric Clapton and the Rolling Stones whose version of 'Love in vain' has sold over a million copies.

Women with the train blues

The 1930s was a time of massive unemployment in the Southern states of the USA. Many of those who lived there travelled north in search of work. Most travelled by train, a means of transport which began to take on a new symbolism in a migration that took them far away from home and split their families apart. The following three blues songs were all recorded in the 1930s and they are all sung by women, the singer/guitarist Memphis Minnie and the classic blues singers Bessie Smith and Lucille Bogan. Two of the songs, 'I hate that train called the M&O' and 'Chickasaw train blues', blame the train for taking their man away and the third, 'Dixie Flyer blues', welcomes the train as a means of getting back home to Dixieland, the nickname for the Southern United States.

I hate that train called the M&O as sung by Lucille Bogan

I hate that train that they all call the M&O (twice)
It took my baby away and he ain't comin' back to me no more.

When he was leavin', could not hear nothin' but that whistle blow (twice)
And the man at the throttle swore: "He ain't comin' back no more".

He had his head in the window, that man was watchin' those drive wheels roll (twice)
Said, "I'm goin' away baby and I ain't comin' back no more"

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The M&O refers to the Mobile and Ohio Railroad which ran from Alabama to Ohio. Like most other female blues singers, Alabama born Lucille Bogan (1897-1948), sometimes known as Bessie Jackson, wrote most of her songs herself. She was known for her bawdy lyrics which were often about adultery, prostitution and lesbianism; her songs were often so outspoken and dirty that they had to be censored by the record companies. Not in this song however, instead in 'I hate that train…' Bogan directs her venom at the train that is taking her man away. Paul Oliver writes of the way in which the train was often personified in the blues with the singer addressing complaints to it and the train becoming a 'scapegoat for faults that might well have been laid at the door of the singer' or the 'subject for the blameworthy when events could not be explained'.[18]

Chickasaw Train blues (low down dirty thing) by Memphis Minnie

I'm goin' tell everybody, what that Chickasaw has done done for me (twice)
She done stole my man away, and blow that doggone smoke on me
She's a low down dirty dog.

I ain't no woman, like to ride that Chickasaw (twice)
Because everywhere she stop, she's stealing some woman's good man, oh
She's a low down dirty dog.

I told the depot this mornin', I don't think he treats me right (twice)
He done sold my man a ticket, and I know that Chickasaw leavin' town tonight
He's a low down dirty dog.

I walk down a railroad track, that Chickasaw even wouldn't let me ride the blind (twice)
She's a low down dirty dog.

Mmm-mmm, Chickasaw don't pay no woman no mind (twice)
And she stop pickin' up men, all up and down the line.

Memphis Minnie (1897-1973) was an accomplished blues guitarist, vocalist, and songwriter. So skilled was she as a guitarist that she is reputed to have played in a contest against Big Bill Broonzy and won.[19] A common theme in the blues as sung by women puts the focus on cheating men at the same time as asserting the woman's strength and independence in seeking revenge. In this song Memphis Minnie personifies the Chickasaw train as a 'low down dirty train', 'picking up men, all up and down the line'. The lyrics are full of sexual imagery. As Oliver points out, in many blues songs, sexual intercourse

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is figuratively known as 'riding'.[20] This is the way that Memphis Minnie uses it in the phrase 'like to ride that Chickasaw'. Her prowess as a guitarist is evident in this song, not least in the intricate finger picking.

Dixie Flyer blues as sung by Bessie Smith

Hold that engine, catch me mama, get on board
Hold that engine, catch me mama, get on board
'Cause my home ain't here, it's a long way down the road.

On that choo-choo, mama gonna find a berth
On that choo-choo, mama gonna find a berth
Home into Dixieland, it's the grandest place on earth.

Dixie Flyer, come on and let your driver roam
Dixie Flyer, come on and let your driver roam
Wouldn't say enough to save nobody's doggone soul.

Blow your whistle, tell them mama's comin' too
Blow your whistle, tell them mama's comin' too
Take it up a little bit, 'cause I'm feelin' mighty blue.

Here's my ticket, take it please, conductor man
Here's my ticket, take it please, conductor man
Homin' to my mammy, way down into Dixieland.

The widely renowned Bessie Smith (1894-1937) was the most popular female blues, vaudeville and jazz singer of the 1920s and 1930s and became the highest-paid black entertainer of the day. She had a long and successful recording career. The Empress of the Blues was an influential performer, as Paul Oliver writes 'Her broad phrasing, fine intonation, blue-note inflections and wide expressive range made hers the measure of jazz-blues singing in the 1920s.'[21] All of these can be heard in 'Dixie Flyer blues'. The *Dixie Flyer* was a passenger train that operated from 1892 to 1965 via the 'Dixie Route' from Chicago and St. Louis via Evansville, Nashville, and Atlanta to Florida. In Smith's song, recorded in New York in 1925, the train is personified as a friend that is taking the singer home 'to my mammy' in Dixieland the 'greatest place on earth', and a cure for the blues. Bessie Smith is accompanied by Buster Bailey on clarinet, Charlie Green on trombone and Fred Longshaw piano. Unlike the previous blues songs described here, 'Dixie Flyer blues' imitates the train in the accompaniment. The song opens with the sound of a train whistle and bell as Smith intones

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the words 'Hold that train'. The train sets off with rhythmic engine imitations provided by James T Wilson shuffling gradually accelerating sandpaper blocks. At the words 'Dixie Flyer, come on and let your driver roam', the clarinet plays descending slides and the words 'Blow your whistle' are answered by toots on the train whistle. Above all this, Bessie Smith sings a heartfelt blues.

The development of blues music overlapped with the evolution of gospel music. Although gospel music was short on train sounds, its lyrics were permeated with railroad imagery. Part of the reason for this was that in the days of slavery, railroads and trains began to symbolise the road to freedom.

Spirituals and gospel music

Before emancipation, slaves needed a written bond from their owner if they were to take a train journey. Such a journey would, for most slaves be only a dream, hence its allure found its way into spirituals and gospel music which often used train metaphors using such phrases as 'Getting on board the Gospel Train'. The early to mid-nineteenth century saw the formation of the clandestine Underground Railroad, a loosely knit organisation whose purpose was to help slaves in the South escape to the North, often Canada. It used a network of secret routes and safe houses and was assisted by abolitionists and others sympathetic to the cause. The Underground Railroad was often referred to as the 'freedom train' or 'Gospel train', which headed towards 'Heaven' or the 'Promised Land'. Religion offered the slaves hope, the hope that one day they would be led to freedom in the 'promised land'. During the early nineteenth century massive Protestant 'camp meetings' attracted thousands of people, both white and black. These were extended religious services, taking place over several days and including a great deal of singing. It was during this period that the spiritual emerged as a distinct type of religious song.[22] These were sung by groups of people, often using call and response; a call by a lead singer would be answered by the congregation. In the places where blacks worshipped separately they would adopt their preferred musical styles.

African vocal style included slides and slurs, whistles, yodels, and changes in rhythm and types of sound, and these were incorporated. Singers would be encouraged to improvise, and foot-stamping and clapping with up-beat tempos were often used. In this way the impassioned style known as gospel music evolved.[23]

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'This train'

This train is bound for glory, this train.
This train is bound for glory, this train.
This train is bound for glory,
Don't carry nothing but the righteous and the holy.
This train is bound for glory, this train.
This train don't carry no gamblers, this train (twice)
This train don't carry no gamblers,
Liars, thieves, nor big shot ramblers,
This train is bound for glory, this train.
This train don't carry no liars, this train; (twice)
This train don't carry no liars,
She's streamlined and a midnight flyer,
This train don't carry no liars, this train.
This train don't carry no smokers, this train (twice);
This train don't carry no smokers,
Two bit liars, small time jokers,
This train don't carry no smokers, this train.

The origins of the spiritual 'This train' are unknown, but it started to become popular in the 1920s and first became a hit in the 1930s when it was recorded by Sister Rosetta Tharpe. Since then it has remained in the repertoire with many recordings and different versions of the lyrics. In 1934 it was included in John and Alan Lomax's anthology *American Ballads and Folk Songs* and later became popular during the folk revival in the 1950s and 1960s. The most successful versions include those by Woody Guthrie, Peter, Paul and Mary and more recently Mumford and Sons.

'Life's railway to Heaven' as sung by Johnny Cash

Life is like a mountain railway
With an engineer that's brave
We must make the run successful
From the cradle to the grave
Heed the curves and watch the tunnels
Never falter, never fail
Keep your hand upon the throttle
And your eye upon the rail.
Blessed Saviour, Thou will guide us
Till we reach that blissful shore
Where the angels wait to join us
In that train forevermore
Oh, Blessed Saviour, Thou will guide us
Till we reach that blissful shore
Where the angels wait to join us
In God's grace forevermore.

'Life's railway to Heaven' has been a popular hymn for many years and has been recorded in several different styles, not just gospel but bluegrass, country and western and folk. It was first published in 1890 with the copyright going to M E Abbey (lyrics) and Charles D Tillman (music). However, Norm Cohen believes that it was modelled on an older poem by the songwriter William Shakespeare Hays in 1886.[24] As Cohen observes

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> The theme of the spiritual railway – the allegorical representation of our earthly sojourn as a railroad trip, the ultimate destination of which is heaven - was exploited in many nineteenth-century poems and songs. In extended metaphors such songs designated the path of piety, with the implicit warning that to stray from the route delineated by the steel rails of righteousness would lead elsewhere but heaven.[25]

In some religious songs the train was headed very much in the opposite direction if the passengers had not lived a virtuous life. The lyrics to 'Little black train' as recorded by the Carter Family and Woody Guthrie, for example, act as a warning.

'Little black train'

There's a little black train a-comin'
Comin' down the track
You gotta ride that little black train,
But it ain't a gonna bring you back.
You may be a bar-room gambler
And cheat your way through life
You can't cheat that little black train
Or beat this final ride.

You silken bar-room ladies,
Dressed in your worldly pride
You've gotta ride that little black train
That's comin' in the night.
Your million dollar fortune,
Your mansion glittering white
You can't take it with you
When the train moves in the night.

The songs in this chapter all provide some kind of social commentary. The railroads offered the way out of a desperate situation, as symbolised in the Underground Railroad, and in the railroad imagery of spirituals and gospel music. Work songs helped to provide a record of the hardship in building the American railroads and other songs described here tell of the dangerous hobo lifestyle. Many songs of this period are about travelling home to the Southern States, documenting a time when, because of massive employment, thousands had to emigrate far away from home. In this way, the popular and religious music documented here makes an important contribution to American social history.

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Endnotes

1 *The Guardian*, 18 July, 2019.
2 Scott Reynolds Nelson. *Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry, the Untold Story of an American Legend*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
3 Ted Gioia. *Work Songs*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006): 152.
4 Gioia, *Work Songs*, 160.
5 Graham Raulerson. 'Hoboes, Rubbish, and "The Big Rock Candy Mountain"', (American Music , Vol. 31, No. 4, 2013: 420-449): 424.
6 Paul Oliver. *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960): 62.
7 Ibid.
8 Oliver, *Blues Fell*, 68.
9 Paul Garon. *What's the Use of Walking If There's a Freight Train Going Your Way?: Black Hoboes & Their Songs*. (Chicago: Charles H Kerr Publishing Company, 2006):7.
10 Ibid.
11 Different birth dates can be found for John Lee Hooker.
12 Albert Murray. Stomping the Blues. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976.
13 For a full account and discussion read Graham Raulerson. 'Hoboes, Rubbish, and "The Big Rock Candy Mountain"', American Music , Vol. 31, No. 4, 2013: 420-449.
14 Raulerson, "The Big Rock Candy Mountain", 427.
15 Cohen, *Long steel rail*, 30.
16 Ibid.
17 Dick Weissman. *Blues. The Basics*. (London: Routledge, 2005): 68.
18 Oliver, *Blues Fell*, 66.
19 Weissman, *Blues*, 80.
20 Oliver, *Blues Fell*, 107.
21 Paul Oliver, 'Bessie Smith' in *Grove Music Online*. https://www-oxfordmusiconline
22 J Winterson, P Nickol, & T Bricheno. *Pop Music: The Text Book* (London: Edition Peters, 2013): 15.
23 Ibid.
24 Cohen, *Long steel rail*, 612.
25 Cohen, *Long steel rail*, 597.

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