

## **Jimmie Rodgers : Waitin' on a Train**

**Grades 3-5 Lesson:** Jimmie Rodgers: Hobos and the Great Depression

**Grade Band:** 3-5

**Arts Subject:** Music

**Other Subject:** History, English & Language Arts

### **SUMMARY**

In this 3-5 lesson, students are introduced to Jimmie Rodgers song "Waitin' on a Train," which tells the story of a homeless and penniless boxcar hobo riding the rails. Jimmie Rodgers used his lyrics, often written by his sister-in-law, Elsie McWilliams, to relate to his listeners who were going through the most devastating economic downturn in American history. During the Great Depression, unemployed people, mostly young men and teenagers, hopped a railroad car to travel from place to place looking for work, food, and shelter, or just escape from the gloom of The Great Depression. Students will listen to and analyze the song, and then write a third verse to Waitin' on a Train. (This lesson plan can also lead into the Jimmie Rodgers Yodeling lesson plan to develop a series.)

### **PREPARATION**

#### **Learning Objectives**

Students will:

- Analyze and interpret "Waitin' on a Train" lyrics.
- Research and analyze information on the Great Depression era and the life of Jimmie Rodgers and brainstorm ideas for a third verse to the song "Waitin' On a Train."
- Write a third verse that progresses the hobo's story during the Great Depression in the same meter and rhythm of the Jimmie Rodgers' song.
- Perform the third verse to the music of "Waitin' on a Train."

#### **Standards Met:**

##### **National Core Arts Standards**

[MU:Cr1.1.3a](#) Improvise rhythmic and melodic ideas, and describe connection to specific purpose and context (such as personal and social).

[MU:Cr1.1.4a](#) Improvise rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic ideas, and explain connection to specific purpose and context (such as social and cultural).

[MU:Cr1.1.5a](#) Improvise rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic ideas, and explain connection to specific purpose and context (such as social, cultural, and historical).

[MU:Cr3.1.3a](#) Evaluate, refine , and document revisions to personal musical ideas, applying teacher provided and collaboratively developed criteria and feedback.

[MU:Cr3.1.4a](#) Evaluate, refine, and document revisions to personal music, applying teacher-provided and collaboratively developed criteria and feedback to show improvement over time.

[MU:Cr3.1.5a](#) Evaluate, refine, and document revisions to personal music, applying teacher-provided and collaboratively developed criteria and feedback, and explain rationale for changes.

[MU:Cn11.0.3a](#) Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life.

[MU:Cn11.0.4a](#) Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life.

[MU:Cn11.0.5a](#) Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life.

### **Common Core State Standards**

[ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.5](#) Refer to parts of stories, dramas, and poems when writing or speaking about a text, using terms such as chapter, scene, and stanza; describe how each successive part builds on earlier sections.

[ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.2](#) Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.

[ELA-LITERACY.L.3.5](#) Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships and nuances in word meanings.

[ELA-LITERACY.L.4.5](#) Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

[ELA-LITERACY.L.5.5](#) Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

### **Student Materials**

- Lyrics “Waitin’ on a Train” (downloadable PDF)
- Biography of Jimmie Rodgers: <https://www.jimmierodgers.com/biography> (downloadable PDF)
- Causes of the Great Depression: <https://www.britannica.com/story/causes-of-the-great-depression>

### **Videos**

- Jimmie Rodgers “Waitin’ on a Train”: <https://youtu.be/gbzc77Tz6PA>
- Hobos of the Great Depression: <https://youtu.be/GQ0EIsEv6oc>
- Hobos in the 1930s: <https://youtu.be/E2LDJTnJMkc>
- Hobo Documentary 1920s: <https://youtu.be/YLLw35yWlxQ>
- Instrumental version “Waitin’ on a Train”: <https://youtu.be/rqXK0oB8oms>

### **Websites**

- Jimmie Rodgers: <https://www.jimmierodgers.com/biography>
- Remembering the Hobos of the 1930s: <https://www.dglobe.com/community/4091091-remembering-hobos-1930s>
- Riding the Rails: <https://www.pbs.org/wqbh/americanexperience/features/rails-introduction/>
- Causes of Great Depression: <https://www.britannica.com/story/causes-of-the-great-depression>

## Teacher Preparation

Prior to lesson introduction, teachers should review all historical information and create a list of questions to spur the students' critical analysis and interpretation of information and the lyrics.

## Student Preparation

Students should know basic background details to the Great Depression era.

## INSTRUCTION

### Engage

**1. Introduce the audio version of the Jimmie Rodgers song "Waitin' on a Train."** (A YouTube audio version is here <https://youtu.be/AOd4Ra3B10E>. The performance video is later in the lesson.)

**2. Introduce the lyrics, "Waitin' for a Train."** Hand out lyric sheets to the students and play the song again. Ask students to sing along. After the song, *ask students what the song is about? Who is this song about? Who is telling the story? Does the music sound happy or gloomy? What instruments do you hear in this song? Do you hear something in this song that you don't normally hear in other songs? (Here, the teacher can briefly introduce the yodel, but that is not the focus of this lesson plan.)*

### Build

**1. Introduce and review the basic history of the Great Depression to students.** *Ask the students questions developed from your review of historical information: What are some critical events that led to the Great Depression? Why did so many banks close? What prior events in Mississippi affected the severity of the Great Depression in Mississippi, where Jimmie Rodgers was from? (Great Flood of 1927, depletion of forests due to the earlier lumber industry, overuse of soil nutrients from only planting cotton and not rotating crops, etc.)*

**2. Introduce the history of Jimmie Rodgers to students.** *Ask students where Jimmie Rodgers is from? What was unique about Jimmie's childhood? What were some of the difficulties that Jimmie Rodgers experienced in his life? Why did he have to leave the railroad?*

**3. Watch the performance of Jimmie Rodgers singing "Waitin' for a Train":** *Ask students: Where is Jimmie in the video? What is he wearing? Why do you think he's wearing that? What do you hear at the beginning of the song? Why do you think Jimmie begins with that sound? What instrument is Jimmie playing? What does "waiting for a train" represent in the song? How is this performance different from the audio version?) (Teacher can replay the audio version here.)*

**4. Give students copy of the song lyrics, "Waitin' for a Train."** Listen to the audio version again. **Ask students:** *What phrase is repeated throughout the song? Why do you think the phrase repeated? What sound is repeated? (The train whistle is not repeated. It's the yodel.)* Ask students to circle repeated words and phrases on the lyric sheet. Have students count the

syllables (not words) in each line. Ask students *Is the syllable count similar in each line? In each verse? Why do you think the syllable count is similar? (to maintain the meter of the song)*

**5. Give students a copy of the lyric worksheet with third verse blank lines.** Brainstorm with classroom for a theme to “progress” the story in “Waitin’ for a Train.” List no more than four ideas on board. *(For instance, (1) missing home, (2) getting a horse, (3) hopping a boat)* Have students vote on one theme subject (by vote of hands) to use for the third verse of the song. *(For instance: (Missing home)* Brainstorm three subjects relating to “Missing Home” theme. *(For instance: family, friends, dog)*

### **Apply**

**1. Write third verse to “Waitin’ on a Train”:** Divide the class into three groups. Each group writes one stanza (a couplet) relating to their subject of the theme. *(For instance, the theme is “Missing Home.” The subjects of the theme: Stanza 1: family, Stanza 2: friends, Stanza 3: dog. One group will write couplet about family, one group will write couplet about friends and the last group will write a couplet about a dog. The teacher will point out that the last word in each of line of the couplet should rhyme.*

**2. The Teacher will write Group 1, Group 2, and Group 3 on** scraps of papers, fold them up and have a student choose one from the three. The student will read which group it is that that group will have to use the phrase “Waitin’ on a Train” in their couplet. *(For younger students or challenged students, teachers can brainstorm with students and the classroom can develop and write the third verse together.)*

**3. Writing the verse:** Students work together to write their stanza to the time limit on which the teacher has decided. The teacher should give a ten minute and a five minute warning of the approaching deadline.

**3. Each group will read** their couplet in order (Group 1, Group 2, Group 3). Teacher and students will critique and discuss revision to smooth out the stanzas into one cohesive verse. Students will revise accordingly in the allotted timeframe given by the teacher. Students will reach in order again and progress to the next step.

**4. Each group will sing** their couplet in order (Group 1, Group 2, Group 3). An instrumental version of “Waitin’ on a Train” is in the video resource for background music. *It’s best to go over the music beforehand so teacher and students will be accustomed to the music and know when to come in.)*

**5. Teacher records the performance** for record and evaluation.

### **Reflect**

**1. Ask students:** *What are some things you now know about the Great Depression that you didn’t know before this lesson? What most surprised you about hobos? What surprised you most about Jimmie Rodgers? What was the greatest challenge of this lesson? What did you*

*enjoy most about this lesson? What did you like least about this lesson? How could this lesson be improved?*

### **Expand**

- 1. Write an original story from the hobo's point-of-view. Does he feel excited? Lonely? Fearful? Hopeless? Hopeful? What is he leaving? Where is he going? What are his dreams?** Have students read their stories to another class.
- 2. Create a collage of the scenes a hobo might see from the train.** (*The teacher can create a route on a map for the students. This will help students also visualize geography and terrain.*) As students are creating collages, have Jimmie Rodgers music playing in the background.

### **New Lesson ideas:**

- 3. Explore the Jazz elements that musically embellish "Waitin' for a Train" and expand on how Jazz influenced the music of Jimmie Rodgers.**
- 4. Explore the origins of yodeling in "Waitin' for a Train," and expand on the evolution of yodeling and its many adaptations according to the culture using it, why they are using it, and how (technique) they are using it.**

Creator:

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All around the water tank, waiting for a train (12)  
A thousand miles away from home, sleeping in the rain (13)  
I walked up to a brakeman to give him a line of talk (14)  
He says "If you got money, I'll see that you don't walk (13)  
I haven't got a nickel, not a penny can I show (14)  
"Get off, get off, you railroad bum." He slammed the boxcar door (14)

Yodel and musical break

He put me off in Texas, a state I dearly love (13)  
The wide-open spaces all around me, the moon and stars up above (17)  
Nobody seems to want me, or lend me a helping hand (14)  
I'm on my way from Frisco, I'm going back to Dixieland (15)  
Though my pocket book is empty and my heart is full of pain (15)  
I'm a thousand miles away from home just waiting for a train (15)

Yodel

(Without the syllable counts)

All around the water tank, 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 got money, I'll see that you don't walk  
I haven't got a nickel, not a penny can I show  
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# WORKSHEET

## Waitin' For a Train

All around the water tank, waiting for a train (12)  
A thousand miles away from home, sleeping in the rain (13)

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He says "If you got money, I'll see that you don't walk (13)

I haven't got a nickel, not a penny can I show (14)  
"Get off, get off, you railroad bum." He slammed the boxcar door (14)

Yodel and musical break

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Nobody seems to want me, or lend me a helping hand (14)  
I'm on my way from Frisco, I'm going back to Dixieland (15)

Though my pocketbook is empty and my heart is full of pain (15)  
I'm a thousand miles away from home just waiting for a train (15)

Yodel

(Third Verse Theme: \_\_\_\_\_)

First couplet subject \_\_\_\_\_ relating to Theme:

\_\_\_\_\_ (13)

\_\_\_\_\_ (17)

Second couplet subject \_\_\_\_\_ relating to Theme:

\_\_\_\_\_ (14)

\_\_\_\_\_ (15)

Third couplet subject \_\_\_\_\_ relating to Theme:

\_\_\_\_\_ (15)

\_\_\_\_\_ (15)