

Allan Harris: *Cross That River*

Thursday, October 23, 2008

Grades 7-12

11 a.m.-12 p.m. ET

Curriculum Connections: American History, Language Arts
National Standards for Music: 4, 6, 8 

Meet Allan Harris

As a child, Allan loved horses as much as he loved music. "I learned to ride when I was a kid on my grandfather's farm in Western Pennsylvania," he says. "I spent my childhood riding all day, every day. I also loved Western movies, and I kept looking for a person of color in them. I knew they existed, but Hollywood hardly ever portrayed them." He wrote *Cross That River* to tell the history of the African American West and to celebrate the accomplishments of the black cowboys. "I believe that many African Americans feel disenfranchised in this nation partly because of the negative portrayal of our culture in America's history. I want the music I'm writing to be a source of pride for all Americans because for far too long the true story has been hidden."

Allan Harris wrote his own original music for *Cross That River*. Why didn't he simply use existing folk music and cowboy songs? "That type of music did not truly represent the characters I created," he says. "Country western music represents only a certain segment of our society. In a way, using only that style would be repeating what the history books have done — omitting large groups of people to please a smaller group. This story encompasses all Americans, so my music had to reflect that." Harris came up with the idea of combining different styles of traditional and popular American music: blues, folk, bluegrass, country, gospel, rock-and-roll, rhythm-and-blues, and jazz, which he calls "America's classical music."

The Multicultural Frontier

The American cowboy is portrayed as the brave hero of countless books, movies, and television shows. But this image rarely reflects that more than one-third of America's cowboys were people of color — African Americans, Mexicans, and Native Americans.

In 1865, when the Confederate States surrendered to the Union at the end of the Civil War, four million African American slaves suddenly became free, able to choose where they wanted to live and what kind of work they wanted to do. Looking for a better life, more than 20,000 African Americans headed west. Many became farmers, some went to large cities, others pushed further west — to the silver mines of Colorado or all the way to the Pacific Coast.



Between 1866 and 1896, as many as eight thousand black cowboys (about one-fourth of all cowboys) worked as trail drivers, moving herds of cattle from ranches in Texas, New Mexico, and Oklahoma to rail yards in Colorado and Kansas. On the trail, cowboys of all colors shared the same hardships, battling storms, stampedes, rattlesnakes, and outlaws. Black and white cowboys often ate the same food, received the same salary, and even shared sleeping quarters — perhaps the only place in the U.S. at that time where such an arrangement would have been permitted.



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About the Program

Cross That River is a song cycle that tells the story of the African American cowboy. Combining fiction with historical fact, the songs tell the story of an escaped slave named Blue, from Louisiana who makes his way to Texas, where he becomes a cowboy. With every song, the audience moves further along on Blue's journey as he crosses paths with compelling characters, each with moving stories of their own to tell.

During the program, you'll hear Harris perform the songs with his band. Between songs, he'll provide historical context by speaking as the character of Blue, while projected images will help illustrate the world of the black cowboy.

The music and lyrics of *Cross That River* were written by musician Allan Harris, who is best known as a jazz singer, having performed all over the world and recorded several albums.

Instructional Activities

Cross That River is the first part of a musical trilogy depicting the story of African Americans living in the west. Based on your study of African American history, what other chapters from this story do you think should be included?

Working with a partner, choose a subject for a song that could be added to *Cross That River* and begin doing research. Your song should be based on a character, either one already in the story or a character you create, or a significant event in the history of African Americans.

Write the lyrics for your song, making sure to include the information you have found in your research. Then write the melody, or use an existing melody that fits the mood of your subject. Perform your song for the rest of the class.

Resources

Internet

For more information, connect to:

allanharris.com

artsedge.kennedy-center.org

Books

Slatta, Richard W. *The Cowboy Encyclopedia*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1996.

Slatta, Richard W. *Cowboy: The Illustrated History*. Sterling, 2008.

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