

*Destination: America* Activity 5  
**William Grant Still, an American Composer**



**Biography**

William Grant Still was born in Woodville, Mississippi in 1895. He was the son of two teachers, Carrie Lena Fabro Still and William Grant Still, who was also a partner in a grocery store. Young William was only three months old when his father died. His mother then took him to Little Rock, Arkansas, where they lived with her mother. She taught high school English there for 33 years. During William's childhood, his mother married again, this time to a postal clerk. He bought many 78 rpm records of opera which William greatly enjoyed. The two attended a number of performances by musicians on tour.

William started violin lessons at age 14 and showed great interest in music. He taught himself how to play the clarinet, saxophone, oboe, double bass, cello and viola. His maternal grandmother introduced him to African America spirituals by singing them to him. At age 16, he graduated from high school in Little Rock, Arkansas.

His mother wanted him to go to medical school, so Still pursued a Bachelor of Science degree program at Wilberforce University in Ohio from 1911 to 1915. He then dropped out of school and married an acquaintance from Wilberforce. He became unhappy at Wilberforce, where he directed the band from 1911 to 1915, and created music arrangements because there was no music in the curriculum. He moved to Oberlin in 1917, following two years of work in Columbus where in 1914 he began playing the oboe and cello professionally at the Athletic Club. Also, he played oboe and violin in the tours for the National Guard Band, 1915-1916.

William Still's studies at Oberlin were interrupted by service in the U.S. Navy. He played in the student string quartet and wrote arrangements for band instruments. The lure of making music was strong. Further study, made possible by an inheritance from his father, was undertaken in 1917 and 1919 at Oberlin (where he first heard an orchestra). His stay at Oberlin was interrupted when he enlisted service in the Navy (1918-1919). Black sailors were restricted to aspects of food service but, when it became known that Still was a trained musician, he was engaged to play the violin for the meals of officers on the naval ship.

Still was released from the Navy at the end of the war and returned briefly to Oberlin and then in 1919 moved to New York, resuming his work with W.C. Handy as performer, arranger, and road manager. He earned his living playing the oboe in the pit band for the musical 'Shuffle Along' that ran for 504 performances in New York City before going on tour. Still's studies with the composer George Chadwick were without charge. They took place at the New England Conservatory of Music, where Chadwick was Director, beginning in 1921. A scholarship enabled him to study composition.

The "Harlem Renaissance", also called the "New Negro Movement", began about the time of Still's arrival in New York City and continued into the early 1930s. It proved that African Americans had a rich and vibrant culture which was fast becoming a prominent cultural feature of the United States and the world. Still was a firm believer and an active participant in the "Harlem Renaissance", and his music showed its influence for the rest of his life.

## *Destination: America* Activity 5 **William Grant Still, an American Composer**

William Grant Still is characterized as an American composer whose musical works included African American themes and spanned jazz, popular, opera, and classical genres. He created over 150 musical works including a series of five symphonies, four ballets, and nine operas. His musical training was two-fold, embracing the European tradition at Oberlin College, and the African-American in his work with W. C. Handy in New York. He also performed classical music as an oboist with the Harlem Orchestra.

William Grant Still based his first symphony, the Afro-American Symphony (1930), on the blues and his experience as a jazz arranger. "I knew I wanted to write a symphony; I knew that it had to be an American work; and I wanted to demonstrate how the blues, so often considered a lowly expression, could be elevated to the highest musical level." The first performances of the Afro-American Symphony were given by the Rochester Philharmonic, on October 28 and 29, 1931. Once he had paved the way, others moved quickly to take up Still's cause: the New York Philharmonic gave the New York premiere of the symphony in 1935 at Carnegie Hall. Afro-American Symphony, his most well-known composition was recorded by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra in 1933. Other noteworthy recordings include one by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Karl Krueger, in 1999. William Grant Still's music was being heard and appreciated in a growing number of venues.

In 1932, his wife, Grace Bundy Still moved to Canada with their son and three daughters as well as her mother: Around this time (1932) Still's wife, obviously as discontented as he, took her four children and her mother and went to live in Canada. She was going there, she said, to write for a magazine, though the job never materialized. Still never saw her again, but he did continue to see the children.

Still moved to Los Angeles in 1934, soon after sound was introduced to the cinema, and was engaged in writing music for such early films as Lost Horizon (1935), Pennies from Heaven (1936), and Stormy Weather (1943). Later he served as composer for television, writing music for Gunsmoke and the original Perry Mason Show (1954). All the while, however, he gave serious attention to his symphonic, chamber, and operatic interests.

Still's work with Columbia Pictures was short-lived. Publicity in the Los Angeles papers brought Still a contract with Columbia Pictures for six months, and an option which was never picked up, for understandable reasons. Time and time again during the six months, the new studio music director would ignore Still and call in outside composers to do the work.

When Still completed his first opera, Blue Steel, he set it aside. His second was Troubled Island, set in Haiti, with text mainly by the poet, Langston Hughes. It was also the only one of Still's operas to have the honor of being staged by a major opera company, the New York City Opera.

One of the proudest and most historic moments of Still's career took place on July 23, 1936, when he conducted the Los Angeles Philharmonic in a performance of his own compositions at the Hollywood Bowl. That was the first time an African American conductor led a major symphony orchestra in concert in the United States. A new kind of music was requested for Still's next composition when CBS decided to commission six leading American composers to write compositions especially for radio. It was a relatively new medium for serious music, so the project was considered experimental. Still composed a series of pieces for orchestra, piano soloist, chorus and narrator, inspired by street scenes in Harlem.

William Grant Still was so much more successful than other African American classical composers of his time that he was often referred to as the Dean of African American Composers. He left a rich legacy of instrumental and vocal works of classical music, jazz, blues, and popular music. His works are available on a huge number of recordings. His materials are held by his daughter, Judith Anne Still, manager of William Grant Still Music, which moved to Flagstaff, Arizona.

The website of William Grant Still Music can be found at: <http://www.williamgrantstill.com>.

## *Destination: America* Activity 6 6/8 Lesson “On the Trail”

### Teaching Objective

Students will experience 6/8 time rhythms through tapping, speaking, and listening.

### Resources

- 5 large pieces of paper or cardboard with rhythms written on them from “On the Trail”
- 5 hula hoops, if available.
- Accompanying Youth Concert CD, Track 4

### Pre-Assessment

- Display words to “Oats, Peas and Barley Grow” on the board. Recite the chant while tapping the beat on the knees. Ask students to chant and tap also.
- Put preferred names to rhythm—tikiti or dudade. Write the notation under the words and say the rhythm with rhythm duration syllables.

### Teaching Sequence

1. In order to have students thinking in 6/8 meter, echo clap 1 measure patterns while saying rhythm duration syllables. If students are successful, echo clap 2 measure patterns.
2. Without telling students what you are clapping, clap the rhythms on the cards and ask the students to write them on the board.
3. Show students cards with the “On the Trail” rhythm. Ask them to say the rhythms silently in the correct order and decide if they have seen them before.
4. Listen to the recording of “On the Trail”, track 4, on the accompanying Youth Concert CD.
5. Listen again, while pointing to the rhythm on the cards. Students may quietly tap the rhythm with their fingers.
6. Place the cards on the floor, in the middle of the hula hoops, if available.
7. Demonstrate first by playing the recording and jumping into each hoop on the first beat of the rhythm when it is played. After the patterns are performed, there is an accelerando section during which the student should run back to their seat.
8. These patterns are played 3 times. Depending on the size of your room, have 2-3 students jump into each pattern. Repeat the recording until all students have had an opportunity to jump.

### Culminating Activity

Discuss with students why they think Grofé chose these rhythms for this piece. Typically the “quarter note, eighth note” rhythm suggests skipping or galloping. What animal was being portrayed?

### Evaluation

Did the students participate in the tapping and speaking the correct rhythms of “On the Trail?”



### TEKS Connections

Music: 117.12b(1,2,4,5); 117.15b(1-3,5); 117.18b(1-3,5); 117.33b(1-3,5)