



SILKROAD

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Silkroad Announces Debut Concert Tour of *American Railroad*



Photo by Adam Gurczak

The next phase in its multi-year landmark initiative, spearheaded by Artistic Director Rhiannon Giddens, begins November 2023

Boston, MA — Today, **Silkroad** announced details for the next phase of its multi-year ***American Railroad*** initiative—the organization’s most ambitious project to date, conceived by Artistic Director **Rhiannon Giddens**. Beginning on November 5, 2023, Grammy Award- and Pulitzer Prize-winning Giddens and the Grammy Award-winning **Silkroad Ensemble** will embark on a **multi-city U.S. tour**, with performances and corresponding educational activities focused in areas with notable railroad-related cultural history. The tour program includes three **new commissions** by **Cécile McLorin Salvant**, **Suzanne Kite**, and Silkroad artist **Wu Man**, as well as **re-envisioned arrangements** by **Giddens** and fellow Silkroad artists **Haruka Fujii**, **Maeve Gilchrist**, and **Mazz Swift**. Tickets to all concert dates are [on sale now](#).

“The *American Railroad* project has been years in the making, and the program we've created for our first tour is only the beginning. In it, we shed light on those who have been erased or overlooked throughout American history and merge with it Silkroad's unique ability to amplify voices from a multitude of backgrounds and cultures. The result is a tapestry of stories, traditions, and musics that have shaped our multifaceted cultural identity, and that must be heard and recognized. I hope audiences in the D.C. area and across California will leave these

performances with a clearer sense of where we come from, how we got here, what it cost us—and that we collectively reflect on where we're headed,” said Giddens.

After the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, a trip from coast to coast that used to take months was shortened to just under a week, allowing for the transport of goods and ideas across the continent in ways previously inconceivable. Profit-seeking corporations and the American government financed it, but the people who actually built it and who were most affected by it are the focus of this program—Indigenous and African Americans as well Irish, Chinese, Japanese, and other immigrant laborers whose contributions have been largely erased from history. Silkroad’s *American Railroad* seeks to right these past wrongs by highlighting untold stories and amplifying unheard voices from these communities, painting a more accurate picture of the global diasporic origin of the American Empire.

The project—three years in the making—represents Giddens’s vision for Silkroad, having first raised the idea early in her tenure as Artistic Director. In addition to the upcoming tour, *American Railroad* will include multidisciplinary components ranging from site-specific visual installations to an album, a documentary series, and curricular materials for use by educators and the public.

Though the first tour officially launches this fall, preparation began much earlier through artist retreats and site visits across the nation—to Standing Rock (ND), New York City, and San Francisco (CA)—where artists engaged in historical and cultural research, which informs the overall storytelling and the commissions specifically. The process also included a series of retreats and open workshops, titled *Train Station Trios*, held in Sacramento (CA), New York City, and Springdale (AR). These culminated in informal, hourlong performances comprising trios of Silkroad musicians and local scholars and featuring new music inspired by the railroad’s impact on that particular area. The *Train Station Trios* series will continue in 2024 and beyond.

Arising from these workshops, as well as additional research, the commissions on the *American Railroad* tour all come from female-identifying or non-binary artists. Giddens’s new arrangement, broken into vignettes interspersed throughout the program, is inspired by “Swannanoa Tunnel,” a work song from the African Americans forced to labor on the railroad in Giddens’s home state of North Carolina—a tune which has long been associated with bluegrass and folk artists, its origins forgotten.

Two of the *American Railroad* tour commissions come from artists new to Silkroad. Grammy Award-winning vocalist and composer Cécile McLorin Salvant’s work is inspired by stories shared with and collected by Silkroad artists. Oglala Lakota artist, composer, and academic Suzanne Kite will create a graphic score using the Lakota written language based on dreams from members of the Silkroad Ensemble. Silkroad artist and pipa virtuoso Wu Man will also create a new work for the initiative, arranged by Chinese composer Haihui Zhang.

Silkroad artists Haruka Fujii and Maeve Gilchrist provide their own recontextualizations of railroad songs from immigrant communities. Fujii’s “Tamping Song” celebrates the Japanese

immigrant contribution to the railroad, particularly after the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, while Gilchrist's "Far Down Far" shines light on the tensions between Catholic and Protestant communities within Irish railroad workers. Silkroad artist Mazz Swift's take on the African American spiritual "O Shout!" also features on the program; according to Swift, the spiritual acknowledges the Ghanaian concept of "Sankofa," which roughly translates as going back into the past to retrieve something important. All three pieces were originally created for Silkroad's recent *Uplifted Voices*—another program intended to germinate ideas for *American Railroad*—but are being re-orchestrated for the larger November tour.

Select stops along the *American Railroad* tour are complemented by education and community engagement activities, including residencies at local universities comprising guest lectures, panel discussions, master classes, and open rehearsals; and public programs that allow audiences of all ages to engage more deeply with local railroad history. In the Los Angeles area, Silkroad artist Mazz Swift will lead a workshop through Project MUSIC (Music Uniting Strangers Into Community). Silkroad's Project MUSIC leverages partnerships within the justice system to bring shared musical experiences to carceral communities across the country, where walls are a literal and figurative divider. Additionally, Silkroad will partner with For Freedoms, an artist-led organization that centers art as a catalyst for creative civic engagement, discourse and direct action. Together, they will display four compelling billboards in Los Angeles that tell the story—from a visual perspective—of the fraught legacy of American Imperialism and the quiet histories of those who toiled to build this country.

The first tour of Silkroad's *American Railroad* takes place November 5-18, 2023, with most concert dates in California. A second tour is slated for fall 2024, with dates up and down the East Coast and in the Midwest of the United States.

2023 AMERICAN RAILROAD TOUR – ROSTER & SCHEDULE:

Rhiannon Giddens, banjo/vocals
Mazz Swift, violin/vocals
Wu Man, pipa
Sandeep Das, tabla
Haruka Fujii, percussion
Shawn Conley, bass
Karen Ouzounian, cello/vocals
Kaoru Watanabe, Japanese flutes/percussion
Michi Wiancko, violin
Francesco Turrisi*, frame drums/accordion
Niwel Tsumbu*, guitar
Pura Fé Crescioni*, lap-steel guitar/voice
Yazhi Guo*, suona

*Guest artist

Projections by Camilla Tassi

November 5, 2023
Center for the Arts at George Mason University
Fairfax, VA
[Tickets](#)

Educational Activities:
Residency with Rhiannon Giddens and Silkroad artists as part of Mason's Artist-in-Residence program for the 2023-2024 season (November 6).

November 9, 2023
The Granada Theatre
Presented by UC Santa Barbara Arts & Lectures
Santa Barbara, CA
[Tickets](#)

Educational Activities:
Residency at UC Santa Barbara with three Silkroad artists guest lecturing on world music and ethnomusicology (November 8).

November 10, 2023
Balboa Theatre
Presented by La Jolla Music Society
San Diego, CA
[Tickets](#)

November 11, 2023
Soka Performing Arts Center
Presented by the Philharmonic Society of Orange County and Soka Performing Arts Center
Aliso Viejo, CA
[Tickets](#)

November 12, 2023
The Soraya's Great Hall
Presented by the Younes and Soraya Nazarian Center for the Performing Arts at CSUN
Northridge, CA
[Tickets](#)

November 15, 2023
Bing Concert Hall
Presented by Stanford Live
Stanford, CA
[Tickets](#)

Educational Activities:
Residency at Stanford University with Silkroad artists (November 14).

November 16, 2023
Mondavi Center, UC Davis
Davis, CA
[Tickets](#)

Educational Activities:

Engagement with students from Fremont School as part of Silkroad Connect (November 16).

November 17, 2023

Zellerbach Hall

Presented by Cal Performances

Berkeley, CA

[Tickets](#)

November 18, 2023

Weill Hall

Presented by Green Music Center

Rohnert Park, CA

[Tickets](#)

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We are deeply grateful to our partners at the FreshGrass Foundation for providing Silkroad with retreat space and other resources that have nurtured the development of *American Railroad*.

Special thanks to the many communities across America whose culture bearers have worked with the artists of Silkroad to relay history and share stories and artistry integral to the creation of the music for the *American Railroad* tour and the overall initiative.

About Silkroad

Yo-Yo Ma conceived Silkroad in 1998, recognizing the historical Silk Road as a model for cultural collaboration—for the exchange of ideas, tradition, and innovation across borders. In a groundbreaking experiment, he brought together musicians from the lands of the Silk Road to co-create a musical language founded in difference, thus creating the foundation of Silkroad: both a touring ensemble comprised of world-class musicians from all over the globe and a Boston-based non-profit organization working to make a positive impact across borders through the arts.

Today, under the leadership of Artistic Director Rhiannon Giddens and Executive Director Ben Hartley, Silkroad leads social impact initiatives and educational programming alongside the creation of new music by the Grammy Award-winning Silkroad Ensemble.

To learn more, please visit silkroad.org and @silkroadproject on social media.

About Rhiannon Giddens

Rhiannon Giddens has made a singular, iconic career out of stretching her brand of folk music, with its miles-deep historical roots and contemporary sensibilities, into just about every field imaginable. A two-time Grammy Award- and Pulitzer Prize-winner, MacArthur “Genius” grant recipient, singer and instrumentalist, and composer of opera, ballet, and film, Giddens has centered her work around the mission of lifting up people whose contributions to American

musical history have previously been overlooked or erased, and advocating for a more accurate understanding of the country's musical origins through art.

As *Pitchfork* once said, “few artists are so fearless and so ravenous in their exploration”—a journey that has led to *NPR* naming her one of its 25 Most Influential Women Musicians of the 21st Century and to *American Songwriter* calling her “one of the most important musical minds currently walking the planet.”

Her third solo studio album, *You're The One*, released August 18 on Nonesuch Records.

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