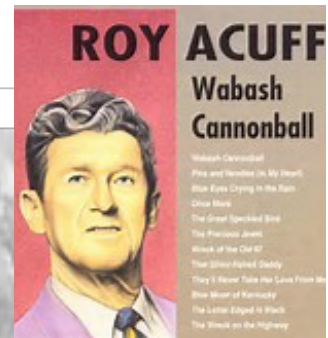


# The Wabash Cannonball

Traditional early to mid-1800s or perhaps words & music by J. A. Roff 1882



*Songs as you go*

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*D*  
From the great Atlantic Ocean,  
*G*  
To the wide Pacific shore,  
*A*  
From the queen of flowery mountains,  
*D*  
To the southland by the shore.  
*D*  
She's mighty tall and handsome,  
*D* *G*  
And known quite well by all.  
*A*  
She's the regular combination,  
*D*  
On the Wabash Cannonball.

## CHORUS

*D*  
Listen to the jingle,  
*D* *G*  
The rumble and the roar,  
*A*  
As she glides along the woodland,  
*D*  
Through the hills and by the shore.  
*D*  
Hear the mighty rush of the engine,  
*G*  
Hear the lonesome hobo squall.  
*A*  
Travelin' through the jungles,  
*D*  
On the Wabash Cannonball.

*D*  
She came down from Birmingham,  
*G*  
One cold December day.  
*A*  
As she rolled into the station,  
*D*  
You could hear all the people say.  
*D*  
There's a girl from Tennessee,  
*G*  
She's long and she's tall.  
*A*  
She came down from Birmingham,  
*D*  
On the Wabash Cannonball.

## CHORUS

*D*  
Our Eastern states are dandy,  
*G*  
So the people always say,  
*A*  
From New York to Saint Louis,  
*D*  
And Chicago by the way,  
*D*  
To the lakes of Minnesota,  
*G*  
Where the rippling waters fall,  
*A*  
No chances will be taken,  
*D*  
On the Wabash Cannonball.

*D*  
Here's to daddy Claxton,  
*G*  
May his name forever stand.  
*A*  
And always be remembered,  
*D*  
'Round the courts of Alabam'.

*D*  
His earthy race is over,  
*G*  
And the curtain round him fall.  
*A*  
He'll be carried home to victory,  
*D*  
On the Wabash Cannonball.

CHORUS

## *History*

"**The Wabash Cannonball**" is an American folk song about a fictional train, thought to have originated in the nineteenth century. Its first documented appearance was on sheet music published in 1882, titled "The Great Rock Island Route" and credited to J. A. Roff. All subsequent versions contain a variation of the chorus:

Now listen to the jingle, and the rumble, and the roar,  
As she dashes thro' the woodland, and speeds along the shore,  
See the mighty rushing engine, hear her merry bell ring out,  
As they speed along in safety, on the Great Rock-Island Route".

A rewritten version by William Kindt appeared in 1904 under the title "Wabash Cannon Ball".

There are many theories of the origin of "The Wabash Cannonball". Utah Phillips states that hobos imagined a mythical train called the "Wabash Cannonball" which was a "death coach" that appeared at the death of a hobo to carry his soul to its reward. The line, "You're travelin' through the jungle on the Wabash Cannonball," does not refer to the Amazon or Congo but to "hobo jungles," the areas at the edge of town, often at the edge of the railroad yard, where hoboes camped -- and still do (See more at [historynewsnetwork.org/blog/152354#sthash.GFiRKn5f.dpuf](http://historynewsnetwork.org/blog/152354#sthash.GFiRKn5f.dpuf)).

Another theory states that the song is based on a tall tale in which Cal S. Bunyan, Paul Bunyan's brother, constructed a railroad known as the *Ireland, Jerusalem, Australian & Southern Michigan Line*. After two months of service, the 700-car train was traveling so fast that it arrived at its destination an hour before its departure. Finally, the train took off so fast that it rushed in to outer space, and for all is known, it is still traveling through

space. When the hobos learned of this train, they called her the "Wabash Cannonball" and said that every station in America had heard her whistle.

Daddy Claxton mentioned in the last verse was a farmer in Alabama; thought to be an American who's parents came from Africa as slaves. Like many farmers at that time -- maybe 1890, maybe as late as 1910, he was hurting, because railroads maintained monopolies. Crops and livestock went to market by rail. Cars and trucks did not exist. Only one railroad served most counties. Even when two did, they did not compete; they agreed upon a common rate. That rate often bled their customers -- farmers -- dry, driving them to the brink of bankruptcy.

The Farmers Alliance, made up of Americans from all walks of life that predated the Populist Party, protested, but usually to no avail. Not knowing what to do, Claxton took matters into his own hands. He stole a train! Of course, his was only a partial solution, since he had no tracks. Eventually they caught him, charged him with theft, and brought him to trial. It is thought that he got off owing to jury nullification. This story cogently explains the lyrics: of course he would be remembered 'round the courts of Alabam' for his daring, which encapsulated and publicized the frustration and plight of so many people.

The Carter Family made one of the first recordings of the song in 1929, released in 1932. Another popular version was recorded by Roy Acuff in 1936. The Acuff version is one of the fewer than forty all-time singles to have sold 10 million (or more) physical copies worldwide.

It is a signature song of the Indiana State University Marching Sycamores and the Purdue All American Marching Band as the ISU and Purdue campuses are near the Wabash River. It is also associated with the Stephen F. Austin State University Lumberjack Marching Band, the Kansas State 4 Marching Band, and the University of Texas Longhorn Band. It was also used as the theme song by the USS *Wabash* (AOR-5).

The song "The Wabash Cannonball" is part of the *The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame's 500 Songs that Shaped Rock and Roll* list. It is the oldest song on the list.

<http://historynewsnetwork.org/blog/152354#sthash.GFiRKn5f.dpuf> and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wabash\\_Cannonball](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wabash_Cannonball)

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