Susan Aysen

Instructional Plan
Lesson Plan Author: Rebecca Holmes
Target Grade Level: 3rd and 8th Grade
Regional Arts Council Partner: Bayou Regional Arts Council

Notes from Lesson Plan Author:
In researching Susan Aysen, I discovered she is a clarinet player and songwriter and resolved to interview her about her songwriting process, inspirations, and influences. Because there are few resources about Aysen available online, I have included a lightly edited transcript of the interview as well as lyrics to two of her songs, “Ghosts of Laurel Valley” and “Good Night, Louisiana,” at the end of the lesson plan.

Focusing the lesson plan on songwriting allows for connections not only to music content but also to ELA. Aysen’s personal responses to interview questions yielded significant connections to the regional culture and provided rich examples of relevant creative influences.

Resources
As I prepared this instructional plan, the following resources helped broaden my own understanding of Susan Aysen’s music and its cultural context.

- 64 Parishes’ article “Cajun Music” and those about individual blues musicians
- Willie Nelson’s entry in the Songwriter’s Hall of Fame
- Online recordings of music by Cajun musicians, including Joe Barry, Vin Bruce, Jimmy Clanton, and Jo-El Sonnier
- Interview with Susan Aysen and lyrics to Aysen’s “Ghosts of Laurel Valley” and “Good Night, Louisiana” included at the end of the lesson plan
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Instructional Outline</th>
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<td><strong>Grades:</strong> 3rd &amp; 8th Grades</td>
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| **Focus:** Community and Culture in Louisiana Songwriting  
Folks residing in Bayou Country are often proud people, close to friends and family and close to the land and water. Their culture shows influences from French settlers, Native Americans, Africans and African Americans, and Catholicism. Much of the music exemplifies strong faith, a love for life, a tendency to dance, and an influence of the region’s place in Louisiana.  
Students will investigate Louisiana musical culture, guided by the questions:  
What influences do life experiences within the region have on a songwriter?  
What musical experiences influence the style of musicians in the region? |
| **Content Areas:** Music; optional alignment with ELA |
| **Overview:** Students will evaluate song lyrics as expressions of culture and as literary works and explore how words and music interact in song. |
| **Objectives:** As a result of this lesson, students will be able to create original song lyrics inspired by events and/or life experiences in their communities. Sub-objectives include identifying song form in a recorded sample, determining the poetic form of song lyrics, and interpreting figurative language. |
| **Curricular Alignment:** Student learning will address the following standards:  
**Louisiana Arts Content Standards: Music, K–4th Grades**  
- M-AP-E2 Recognize and respond to concepts of beauty and taste in the ideas and creations of others through the study of music.  
- M-AP-E3 Demonstrate awareness of where and how music is used in daily life and within the community.  
- M-AP-E4 Recognize that there are many possibilities and choices available in the creative process of music.  
- M-HP-E1 Recognize musical styles representative of various cultures.  
- M-HP-E2 Recognize and discuss the function of music within historical and cultural contexts, including celebrations, ceremonies, and special occasions.  
- M-HP-E4 Recognize professions in music and identify the roles of musicians in various cultures.  
- M-AP-M2 Recognize that concepts of beauty differ by culture and that taste varies from person to person. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Louisiana Arts Content Standards: Music, 5th–8th Grades</th>
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<tr>
<td>▪ M-AP-M2 Recognize that concepts of beauty differ by culture and that taste varies from person to person.</td>
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<td>▪ M-AP-M3 Describe the emotional and intellectual impact of music in various contexts.</td>
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<td>▪ M-AP-M4 Demonstrate awareness of various traditional and technological options pertaining to creative processes in music.</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ M-HP-M1 Identify distinguishing characteristics of musical styles representative of various historical periods and cultures.</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ M-HP-M2 Compare and contrast the function of music within historical and cultural contexts, such as celebrations, ceremonies, and events.</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ M-HP-M4 Describe careers for musicians and compare the roles of musicians in various cultures.</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ M-CA-E1 Identify the music form (e.g., AB, ABA) and describe in simple terms how the elements of music are used in various works.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ M-CA-M1 Identify the music form (e.g., round, canon) and explain how the elements of music are used in works representing various genres/styles.</td>
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<tr>
<th>National Core Arts Standards: Music, 3rd Grade</th>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Imagine: Generate musical ideas for various purposes and contexts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>o EQ: How do musicians generate creative ideas?</td>
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<tr>
<td>o EU: The creative ideas, concepts, and feelings that influence musicians’ work emerge from a variety of sources.</td>
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<tr>
<td>o MU:Cr1.1.3a Improvise rhythmic and melodic ideas, and describe connection to specific purpose and context (such as personal and social).</td>
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### National Core Arts Standards: Music, 8th Grade

- **Plan and Make:** Select and develop musical ideas for defined purposes and contexts.
  - **EQ:** How do musicians make creative decisions?
  - **EU:** Musicians’ creative choices are influenced by their expertise, context, and expressive intent.
  - **MU:** Demonstrate selected musical ideas for a simple improvisation or composition to express intent, and describe connection to a specific purpose and context.
  - **MU:** Use standard and/or iconic notation and/or recording technology to document personal rhythmic and melodic musical ideas.
- **Evaluate and Refine:** Evaluate and refine selected musical ideas to create musical work(s) that meet appropriate criteria.
  - **EQ:** How do musicians improve the quality of their creative work?
  - **EU:** Musicians evaluate and refine their work through openness to new ideas, persistence, and the application of appropriate criteria.
  - **MU:** Evaluate, refine, and document revisions to personal musical ideas, applying teacher-provided and collaboratively developed criteria and feedback.
- **Connect:** Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make music.
  - **EQ:** How do musicians make meaningful connections to creating, performing, and responding?
  - **EU:** Musicians connect their personal interests, experiences, ideas, and knowledge to creating, performing, and responding.
  - **MU:** Demonstrate how interests, knowledge, and skills relate to personal choices and intent when creating, performing, and responding to music.

- **Imagine:** Generate musical ideas for various purposes and contexts.
  - **EQ:** How do musicians generate creative ideas?
  - **EU:** The creative ideas, concepts, and feelings that influence musicians’ work emerge from a variety of sources.
  - **MU:** Generate rhythmic, melodic and harmonic phrases and harmonic accompaniments within expanded forms (including introductions, transitions, and codas) that convey expressive intent.
- **Plan and Make:** Select and develop musical ideas for defined purposes and contexts.
EQ: How do musicians make creative decisions?
EU: Musicians’ creative choices are influenced by their expertise, context, and expressive intent.
MU: Cr2.1.8a Select, organize, and document personal musical ideas for arrangements, songs, and compositions within expanded forms that demonstrate tension and release, unity and variety, balance, and convey expressive intent.
MU: Cr2.1.8b Use standard and/or iconic notation and/or audio/video recording to document personal rhythmic phrases, melodic phrases, and harmonic sequences.

- Evaluate and Refine: Evaluate and refine selected musical ideas to create musical work(s) that meet appropriate criteria.
  EQ: How do musicians improve the quality of their creative work?
  EU: Musicians evaluate and refine their work through openness to new ideas, persistence, and the application of appropriate criteria.
  MU: Cr3.1.8a Evaluate their own work by selecting and applying criteria including appropriate application of compositional techniques, style, form, and use of sound sources.
  MU: Cr3.1.8b Describe the rationale for refining works by explaining the choices, based on evaluation criteria.

- Connect: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make music.
  EQ: How do musicians make meaningful connections to creating, performing, and responding?
  EU: Musicians connect their personal interests, experiences, ideas, and knowledge to creating, performing, and responding.
  MU: Cn10.0.8a Demonstrate how interests, knowledge, and skills relate to personal choices and intent when creating, performing, and responding to music.

**Louisiana Standards for English Language Arts: 3rd Grade**

- Reading Standards for Literature: Craft and Structure
  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.

- Writing: Text Types and Purposes
3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.
   - Establish a situation and introduce a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally.
   - Use dialogue and descriptions of actions, thoughts, and feelings to develop experiences and events or show the response of characters to situations.
   - Use temporal words and phrases to signal event order.
   - Provide a sense of closure.

Writing: Production and Distribution of Writing

4. With guidance and support from adults, produce writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task and purpose.

5. With guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, and editing.

6. With guidance and support from adults, produce and publish grade-appropriate writing, using technology, either independently or in collaboration with others.

Louisiana Standards for English Language Arts: 8th Grade

Reading Standards for Literature: Craft and Structure

4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.

5. Compare and contrast the structure of two or more texts and analyze how the differing structure of each text contributes to its meaning and style.

Writing: Text Types and Purposes

3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.
   - Engage and orient the reader by establishing a context and point of view and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally and logically.
- Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, and reflection, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.
- Use a variety of transition words, phrases, and clauses to convey sequence, signal shifts from one time frame or setting to another, and show the relationships among experiences and events.
- Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to capture the action and convey experiences and events.
- Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on the narrated experiences or events.

**Writing: Production and Distribution of Writing**

- 4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- 5. With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a different approach, focusing on how well purpose and audience have been addressed.
- 6. Use technology, including the internet, to produce and publish writing and present the relationships between information and ideas efficiently as well as to interact and collaborate with others.

### Activity 1: Analyzing an Interview As a Primary Source

**Duration:** 20 minutes

Post quote in a visible place in the classroom. Read aloud to students.

“It is no exaggeration to say that Louisiana is one of America’s richest sources of traditional ethnic music. Louisiana has produced many important musical styles and definitive and talented performers. Every part of the state has made important contributions that have influenced popular music far beyond its borders.” (Source: Ben Sandmel, “The Treasured Traditions of Louisiana Music,” louisianafolklife.org.)

Introduce students to Susan Aysen, a songwriter and clarinet player living in Thibodaux, Louisiana. Aysen is an active songwriter and performer whose work

### Materials & Resources:

- Worksheets with Susan Aysen interview text and questions
- Pencils, pens, or markers
- Classroom visual display
embodies many folk music traditions. The complete interview is available at the end of this lesson plan.

Distribute a copy of the interview text to each student. Display questions for written responses. Instruct students to annotate the text as you read aloud.

1. What facts did you learn about Susan Aysen?
2. What additional questions would you like to ask Ms. Aysen if you were conducting an interview?
3. What aspect or topic of this interview appeals to you most?
4. If you were to summarize what you learned from this interview, what would you say?

Students may generate answers to the student questions independently, in pairs, or the teacher may record student answers offered to a whole group discussion.

Activity 2: Sources of Inspiration
Duration: 10 minutes

Return to the interview text.

Explain that songwriting often has a source of inspiration. Where does Susan Aysen find inspiration? Instruct students to search the text of the interview for the sources of her creative musical output. Students should read independently first, underlining or highlighting relevant passages. After several minutes to work independently, allow students to share their thoughts with one another. Wrap up the class conversation with a summary of the influences on Aysen’s work.

Possible quotes from the interview include:

“Writing about life is what I love to do: people, family, friends, places (particularly South Louisiana), important events—the very things I am most passionate about.”

“Movies. Theater. Art.”

“My grandparents on my father’s side would rise every morning at 4 a.m., make a strong pot of jet-black coffee, and put this music on the radio. When I hear it or play it, it reminds me of them, and I smile. It is my heritage, my culture.”

Materials & Resources:

Worksheets with Susan Aysen interview text and questions

Pencils, pens, markers, or highlighters
“I ride through Laurel Valley Plantation pretty often. It takes me back in time. I can almost see what must have gone on there in the 1800s, slaves working the fields, living a very hard life. I imagine them cutting at the cane, singing spirituals as they work.”

“I got up and went to my keyboard and began reflecting on the uniqueness of our culture and the beauty of our region, my home. From those feelings, a song was born.”

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<th>Activity 3: Words and Music</th>
<th>Duration: 20 minutes</th>
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<tr>
<td>(This activity explores the lyrics of a song with an accessible recording. While Ms. Aysen’s lyrics expose students to cultural influences of South Louisiana, the absence of a recording hampers direct exposure to music elements.)</td>
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“Blue Eyes Cryin’ in the Rain”
Recorded by Willie Nelson, Written by Fred Rose

View a performance of “Blue Eyes Cryin’ in the Rain” written by Fred Rose and recorded live by Willie Nelson. This song, and others by Willie Nelson, are mentioned by Susan Aysen as an influence on her own work. Read the lyrics with students and identify the literary elements present, such as rhyme scheme, repetition, simile. Determine the music elements that add to the general effect of the song. Discuss whether or not the application of music added to the expressiveness of the lyrics.

Some elements to discuss include:
- Dynamics
- Form
- Melodic line
- Pitch
- Repetition
- Tempo
- Tonality

Distribute index cards. Instruct students to answer the following questions independently:
1. What do you believe inspired Fred Rose to write the lyrics to “Blue Eyes Cryin’ in the Rain”? | Materials & Resources: |
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audiovisual equipment</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index cards</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pens or pencils</td>
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2. What musical element do you believe had the most significant impact? Why?
3. What effect would result if the music elements were manipulated to occur differently? For instance, how would altering the tempo change the expressiveness of the song?

**Activity 4: Looking at Lyrics**  
**Duration:** 10 minutes

When asked which lyrics she felt most connected to, Susan Aysen described two of her original songs, “Goodnight, Louisiana” and “The Ghosts of Laurel Valley.” The lyrics appear at the end of this lesson plan.

Instruct students, working collaboratively in pairs or small groups, to examine the lyrics for literary elements: form, rhyme sequence, figurative language. Instruct students to determine musical form. What musical effects do the words suggest? Ask students, “If you were the songwriter, how would you use music elements to convey the meaning of the song?”

Lagniappe: “The Ghosts of Laurel Valley” features a bridge of the melody from the song “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” Discuss the significance of the bridge as it relates to culture and history.

**Activity 5: The Power of Narrative**  
**Duration:** 30 minutes

Assign students to small groups. Instruct students to brainstorm a list of community influences and experiences that are significant in their lives. Then allow students to create their own original lyrics inspired by their community. Lyrics should include evident form, rhyme sequence, and figurative language. Revise and edit.

(Students often benefit from a template for creative activities. Determine a song format for students to guide their creativity, such as two verses with chorus, three verses, or verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-chorus.)

After lyrics are complete, ask students to reflect on their work. Ask: What musical effects do the words call for? Consider:

- Dynamics
- Form

**Materials & Resources:**

- Student copies of lyrics to Susan Aysen’s songs
- Pens or pencils
Melodic line
Pitch
Repetition
Tempo
Tonality

Assessing Student Learning: How will you assess what your students have learned?

- Assess song lyrics for the inclusion of community connectedness, form, rhyme sequence, and figurative language. Reward one point for each element to design a simple rubric.
- Distribute copies of completed song lyrics of each group to their peers. Instruct students to identify form, rhyme sequence, and figurative language for one song. Ask students to determine the cultural influence of the song.

About the Louisiana Musical Legends Project

The Louisiana Musical Legends project is the first in a series of “Aunt Dorothy’s Teacher Toolkits” developed by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities to showcase new and engaging tools for teaching core curriculum concepts through the lens of Louisiana’s culture. Made possible through the generous support of retired music teacher Dorothy Hanna in partnership with First Lady of Louisiana Donna Edwards and the nine regional Louisiana arts councils, each Louisiana Musical Legends unit includes a brief musician biography, an educator-created lesson plan, and an original musician-focused video—all designed for classroom use. Featured musicians hail from across the state and include Luther Gray and Bamboula 2000 (Greater New Orleans), Nellie Lutcher (Southwest Louisiana), Tony Joe White (Northeast Louisiana), Amanda Shaw (Northshore), Susan Aysen (Bayou Parishes), Kenny Neal (Greater Baton Rouge), Little Walter (Central Louisiana), Leadbelly (Northwest Louisiana), and Nathan Williams Jr. (Acadiana).
Where do you draw inspiration from when you are creating a song?

Keep in mind that there is no law book for songwriting; for me, songwriting comes from many directions. Writing about life is what I love to do: people, family, friends, places (particularly South Louisiana), important events—the very things I am most passionate about. If a song has a great chord or rhythm structure, it almost writes itself. I just need to tell the story. For instance, starting a song in a minor key, such as Am, provides me with a feeling of inquisitiveness, sometimes sadness, and the song takes off from there.

A good songwriter is sometimes a well-read individual, appreciating creativity in written or spoken words. That knowledge and the feelings created come flooding back when writing a song. Good songwriters often spend a great number of hours listening to music, and to different genres of music. All of that plays a part in the inspiration for my creativity. You know that feeling—most people do—when a song moves you to tears, takes you to a place from the past, or gives you goosebumps. When I can tap into these feelings from reading or listening experiences, a song is born.

What genres or styles and musicians have influenced your musical preferences?

I grew up with old country music. It was the main genre my parents listened to in our household. The first song I was taught to sing and play on guitar was Willie Nelson’s “Blue Eyes Cryin’ in the Rain.” I still love Willie Nelson, one of the greatest songwriters ever. As I grew older my musical tastes changed. I was a teenager in the 1970s, so I loved classic rock, pop, soul, Motown. When I finished high school, I became involved in church music ministry. I learned so much there. I have a deep appreciation for the old hymns, but I love the new sounds and inspiring sounds of Christian rock today. All of these genres have molded the music I make today.

Are there any notable non-musical influences in your work?

Movies. Theater. Art. The work of the old actors/actresses and artists, the Judy Garlands, the Michelangelos of the world. I love the work and novels of Nicholas Sparks. I am a hopeless romantic. My imagination of how things should be is so much more than what real life presents. My favorite movies include The Notebook. It moves me so emotionally that sometimes I think I could have written the score for it. Of course, I could not, but I feel the story to my core.
What significant cultural connections are present in your music?

I participate in a group that gathers for an open music jam every other week. It’s Cajun music, and the group is a non-profit called the Cajun Music Preservation Society. It’s a fun time. There are guitars, accordions, harmonicas, triangles, a cajon (beat box), upright basses, and scrub boards. We play Cajun music for about two hours. I play mandolin with this group. My grandparents on my father’s side would rise every morning at 4 a.m., make a strong pot of jet-black coffee, and put this music on the radio. When I hear it or play it, it reminds me of them, and I smile. It is my heritage, my culture. When my songs finally get recorded, there will be an accordion and harmonica in there somewhere!

What lyrics have you written that you feel a strong connection to?

Actually, there are two songs. I am most passionate about our very own coastal erosion issues in southeast Louisiana and the environment. Back in 2010, during the BP oil spill, I cried as I watched oil gushing into the ocean hour after hour, day after day. Then, wildlife getting rescued: ducks pulled from the water covered in thick, black sludge. One night, I went to bed so upset, and I lay awake thinking, our beautiful state, the coast is toast. The estuaries, ruined. All of that on top of the lives that were lost in a horrific explosion. I couldn’t sleep. I got up and went to my keyboard and began reflecting on the uniqueness of our culture and the beauty of our region, my home. From those feelings, a song was born. The name of the song is “Goodnight, Louisiana.” I thought of all the beautiful experiences and people here. I think I wanted to say, “Goodbye, Louisiana,” but somehow, I found the courage to just say goodnight and pray for better days and the recovery to come.

We have a beautiful historical landmark here in Thibodaux: Laurel Valley Sugar Plantation. It is on the US National Register of Historic Places. There are a number of original structures remaining on the property, including the slave cabins. It is the largest surviving sugarcane plantation complex left in the United States and still functions as a working sugarcane farm. There is a general store on the property that houses many old artifacts, and there are animals (chickens, goats, pigs, etc.). I bring my little granddaughter to feed the chickens. I ride through Laurel Valley Plantation pretty often. It takes me back in time. I can almost see what must have gone on there in the 1800s, slaves working the fields, living a very hard life. I imagine them cutting at the cane, singing spirituals as they work. I feel tremendous empathy for these people who carried the weight of a country on their backs. Again, after one of my little excursions through the plantation, I felt a strong urge to tell a story with a song. That day, a new song came forth, “The Ghosts of Laurel Valley.”
"Goodnight, Louisiana" (Original by Susan Aysen)

Verse 1
- Bm
- A
- G
When church bells ring, on the bayou
- Bm
- A
- G
We gather and raise our hands
- Bm
- A
- G
The moss-covered trees are swayin' 
- D
- F#m
- G
We give thanks for this beautiful land.

Verse 2
- Bm
- A
- G
Our children are raised on the water;
- Bm
- A
- G
The wildlife is precious too
- Bm
- A
- G
Gardens are watered by the spirits
- Bm
- A
- G
Of a people seeking truth.

Bridge
- D
- G
- A
This way of life is simple
- D
- F#m
- G
Happiness is living off the land.

Chorus:
- D
- G
- A
There's music across the River 
- D
- G
- A
and dancing on Lake Ponchartrain 
- D
- F#m
- G
The sunset whispers, 'I need you'
- D
- A
- D
and the Moonlight eases your pain
- D
- G
- A
Goodnight, Louisiana 
- D
- G
- A
Your breeze sings me to sleep
- D
- F#m
- G
While the shrimp boats are safe in the harbor
- D
- A
- D
I'll see you in my dreams.

Verse 3
- Bm
- A
- G
As evening comes I fall to my knees
- Bm
- A
- G
For the culture we will bleed.
- Bm
- A
- G
Our treasures will not be forsaken
- Bm
- A
- G
or suffering caused by greed.

Chorus:
- D
- G
- A
There's music across the River 
- D
- G
- A
and dancing on Lake Ponchartrain 
- D
- F#m
- G
The sunset whispers, 'I need you'
- D
- A
- D
and the Moonlight eases your pain
- D
- G
- A
Goodnight, Louisiana 
- D
- G
- A
Your breeze sings me to sleep
- D
- F#m
- G
While the shrimp boats are safe in the harbor
- D
- F#m
- A
- G
I'll see you, oh I'll see you in ……my dreams.
“The Ghosts of Laurel Valley” (Original by Susan Aysen)

(light picking)

Verse 1

B7
Along the bayou
E
Near the railroad tracks
B7
There’s a village
E
With little cypress shacks.
A
If walls could talk
E
You’d hear the stories
B7
E
Of a people, with scars on their backs.

Chorus

Am
The sun always shines in the land of sugar
E
B7
We carry the burdens that history’s taught
E
Listen for the whispers
A
Coming from the galley
E
Along with the cries
E
B7
Of the ghosts of Laurel Valley.

Bridge

E
Am
Swing low, sweet chariot
E
B7
Coming for to carry me home
E
Am
Swing low, sweet chariot
E
B7
E
Coming for to carry me home.

Outro

E
Listen for the whispers
A
Coming from the galley
E
Along with the cries
B7
E
Of the ghosts of Laurel Valley.

Verse 2

E
B7
In the 1880s
E
The workers went on strike
B7
For a better wage
E
For a better life
A
In the fury of a battle
E
Three hundred lives were lost
B7
E
Chains forever broken, at the highest cost.