

The Music of Politics

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INTRODUCTION

Last month I asked my sixth grade students what music meant to them. Their varied responses can be summarized in terms of the notion that music is both a source of entertainment and an expression of identity. I think most of us would agree that this is a fair assessment of music's role in our lives. We are, in large part, the choices we make. Knowing an individual's musical taste will shed light on his personality. It is worth pointing out, however, that most eleven-year-olds are only starting to develop their musical taste. More often than not their choice of music is dictated by its popularity. In my experience most middle school students aren't seeking out different music; they are merely embracing what is presented to them. In this way, they often echo each other's responses when asked for their favorite artists.

This unit has two primary objectives. I would like to expose my students to a variety of music while demonstrating to them that it can serve as not only a means of individual entertainment and expression, but of societal entertainment and expression as well. Music is a window into both present and past cultural events. I firmly believe it is important for students to understand the world around them. As I joke to my classes at the beginning of each year, "You guys are going to be voting in six years – that scares me!" Teasing aside, I do take my responsibility as a teacher quite seriously. I do not *just* teach Reading. I suspect that most of us are engaged in teaching life lessons that far exceed the boundaries of our specialized curriculum.

With all of this in mind, one of my pet projects each year is my Current Event assignment. Each quarter I give students the task of connecting their daily lives to the world around them. I believe it is important for them to realize that they are a part of history, serving to both witness and create it throughout their lives. Each year I have a similar discussion with my classes when I survey their world awareness. Students often feel alienated from both present and past historical events. I realize it is not always easy to relate to events which occurred decades before one's birth. What students fail to recognize, at the sixth grade level at least, is that they are a part of history as well. It is my hope that this unit, with its emphasis on music, will capture students' interests, lending them new insight into the world around them.

Without a doubt, one of the most history-making events in our lifetimes has been September 11th. The events of 9/11 and the subsequent war in Iraq have led to, among other things, a variety of music expressing a wide range of sentiments. I would like to focus students' attention on this fact, asking them to take note of what is around them. Once this is accomplished I hope to expose students to music's role in the not so distant past: the Civil Rights Movement and the response to the Vietnam War. My goal is for students to recognize that music serves to both affect and reflect history.

OBJECTIVES

The lesson plans in this unit will focus on two English Language Arts and Reading TEKS for grade 6. Objective 10 deals with student comprehension through accessing prior knowledge, determining main idea and point of view, and responding to open-ended, literal and interpretive questions.

Objective 13 focuses on student research: using multiple sources, summarizing and organizing information, and the production of research projects using visuals and media to support meaning.

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT:

History

The Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950s and 1960s emerged at a time of relative world peace. This revolution in race relations was long in coming, as evidenced by the fact that the Civil Rights Act of 1957, proposed by President Eisenhower, was the first legislation addressing civil rights since Reconstruction, the period of time directly following the Civil War. The Civil Rights Act of 1957 addressed voting rights, seeking to thwart the interference that black voters faced when attempting to vote. Though limited in its enforcement and scope, it paved the way for future legislative acts over the next ten years (Tindall 1380).

Although President Eisenhower was committed to civil rights reform, he was not the strongest leader in the field due to, in large part, his outlook on human nature. He famously stated, “I don’t believe you can change the hearts of men with laws or decisions” (Tindall 1377). What we see then is a multifaceted approach to societal change: legislation and judicial reform in combination with the grassroots efforts of individual leaders. In this regard, one cannot overlook or discount the contributions made by the music and musicians of the era. If laws cannot change the hearts of men, perhaps music is better suited for the job.

Music

The songs associated with the civil rights movement fall primarily into two categories: adaptations of African-American spirituals and folksongs. Spirituals were important to the movement not only because these songs were familiar to the audience, but also because the call and response musical structure was well suited for marches of large crowds led by a few individuals, as it accommodated improvisation. Additionally, the musical roots of these songs underscored the peaceful nature of the protests.

One such song that is ubiquitous with the movement is “We Shall Overcome.” The text of the song finds its roots in Charles Tindley’s 1900 gospel, “I’ll Overcome Some Day,” while the opening and closing melody are from a 19th Century spiritual, “No More Auction Block for Me” (Ruehl “Overcome”).

As with any piece of folk history, there is some debate as to its evolution into its present form. What is known is that a piece of the song was sung during a strike by workers of the Negro Food and Tobacco Union in Charleston, South Carolina in 1945. “One of the women striking that day – Lucille Simmons – began singing slowly, “Deep in my heart I do believe we’ll overcome some day” (Ruehl “Overcome”). The song circulated quickly to union gatherings throughout the country. Pete Seeger, a prominent activist folksinger, is often credited as reworking the lyrics into those that we are familiar with today (Ruehl “Seeger”). It was recorded by Joan Baez in 1963 and became the unofficial anthem of the Civil Rights Movement. It was to this song that over 200,000 blacks and whites marched on August 28, 1963 down the Mall in Washington D.C. in what became the largest civil rights demonstration in American history (Tindall 1405).

The international popularity of the song has continued to rise as it finds renewed purpose. “Chinese students at Tiananmen Square wore T-shirts emblazoned with the motto. Archbishop Desmond Tutu invoked the song during South Africa's apartheid struggles. Most recently, thousands who had gathered at Yankee Stadium on September 23, 2001 to pay tribute to the victims of the September 11 terrorist attacks joined hands in a display of unity as the Harlem Boys and Girls Choir gave a stirring rendition of ‘We Shall Overcome’” (“Protest Songs”). This song has clearly had a profound impact on hundreds of thousands of hearts and minds.

Activist folksingers played a prominent role in garnering widespread and mainstream support for the civil rights movement. The aforementioned artist, Joan Baez, was one such musical giant. Baez, the daughter of a physicist of Mexican descent, felt the call to activism early on. At the age of fourteen Baez heard Martin Luther King, Jr. speak about nonviolence and civil rights and felt a call to action. She bought her first guitar the same year and began practicing acts of civil disobedience the following year. She released her first album in 1960 at the age of nineteen and was an immediate success. Baez went on to release an album a year for the next nineteen years. In 1962, while conducting the first of three college campus tours in the south, Baez would only play on campuses with a strict no-discrimination policy for members of the audience. In August of 1963 it was she who sang “We Shall Overcome” before the 250,000 people gathered in the March on Washington (Stewart).

Bob Dylan, a friend and sometime companion of Baez, was another powerful voice in the civil rights movement. Born Robert Allen Zimmerman in Duluth Minnesota, Dylan took his stage name after he started performing in honor of the late Welsh poet Dylan Thomas. Dylan dropped out of college in 1960 and moved to the folksinger's mecca: Greenwich Village, New York. Dylan composed a plethora of songs and quickly established himself as “one of the most original and poetic voices in the history of American popular music” (“Bob Dylan Biography”).

An intriguing song of Dylan's is “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” which was recorded in October of 1963. It narrates the death of 51-year-old Hattie Carroll, mother of ten, who was killed by the wealthy and white William Devereux “Billy” Zanzinger (referred to in the song as “William Zanzinger”), and his resulting sentence of six months in jail. The actual incident differed from Dylan's account as the song implies that Zanzinger beat Carroll to death with a cane when in fact it was determined that Carroll “had hardened arteries, an enlarged heart, and high blood pressure; that the cane left no mark on her; and that she died of a brain hemorrhage brought on by stress caused by Zanzinger's verbal abuse, coupled with the assault” (Frazier). Nevertheless, the song did accurately portray the social conditions at the time, highlighting existing tensions between the races.

Perhaps Dylan's best known song addressing civil rights and human nature is “Blowin' in the Wind.” He first performed a still unfinished version of the song in April 1962, at Gerde's Folk City in New York's Greenwich Village. Although he claimed it was not a protest song, it has become one of the most memorable protest songs ever written. It was a popular song, eventually covered by more than sixty artists. The Peter, Paul and Mary version reached #2 in the singles charts in 1963 (Pratt 173). He claims to have written it in ten minutes, putting words to “an old spiritual.” It was a “...decisive break with the rhetorical, current-events conventions of topical folk, Dylan framed the crises around him in a series of fierce, poetic questions that addressed what Dylan believed was man's greatest inhumanity to man: indifference” (“Blowin' in the Wind”). Dylan poignantly asks in the last stanza, “Yes, 'n' how many years can some people exist/Before they're allowed to be free?” (Dylan). His words challenged Americans to take a hard look at the social dynamics of the time.

THE VIETNAM WAR

History

The tragedy of the Vietnam War was born from America's desire to prevent the communist takeover of South Vietnam and its reluctance to assume primary responsibility for this effort. Therefore, the Vietnam War was the result of a slow escalation of U.S. troops and involvement over the course of three presidencies. To this effect, when President Kennedy entered office in 1960 there were 2,000 "military advisors" placed in South Vietnam through Eisenhower's doing. In November of 1963, when Kennedy was assassinated, there were 16,000 such "advisors" in the region (Tindall 1410). Under President Johnson the war further escalated. Though he stated his opposition for the use of combat troops in Vietnam during his bid for the presidency in 1964, by the end of 1965 there were 184,000 troops in Vietnam. This number jumped to 385,000 troops in 1966 and reached its height of 542,000 troops in March 1969. By March of 1973, when American troops left, some 58,000 troops had died and another 300,000 had been wounded (Tindall 1425). The conflict in Vietnam had a profound impact on American society, and its effects continue to resonate in American culture and politics.

Music

When considering the music stemming from the war in Vietnam, songs of protest often come to mind. One should not overlook, however, music which expressed solidarity with the government. In 1965 Johnny Wright's "Hello Vietnam" expressed such a sentiment. Wright's country drawl voiced support for the war, going as far as to state, "We must save freedom now, at any cost/Or someday, our own freedom will be lost" (Hall). This sentiment reminds me of that which was expressed after 9/11. The "Freedom Isn't Free" bumper stickers, prevalent throughout the Houston-area leading up to and through the Iraq war, come to mind.

Not all country songs were in support of the war, however. Loretta Lynn's mournful "Dear Uncle Sam" was one of the top five country hits of 1966 (Pratt 171). Lynn expresses the agony felt by those who have lost loved ones in the war and begins to question the wisdom of the government's actions (*Van Lear Rose*).

Mel Tillis' "Ruby, Don't Take Your Love to Town," made famous by Kenny Rogers, portrays another side of the agony of war: that of a crippled veteran pleading for his love to stay. Though the speaker states he "was proud to do my patriotic chore" he also laments "It wasn't me that started that old crazy Asian war" (Rogers). The song climbed to number six on the U.S. charts selling a million copies, making it apparent that the social base of support for the war was weakening (Pratt 172).

The aforementioned Civil Rights Movement and the reaction to the Vietnam War played into each other. "The oppositional subcultures growing among whites and blacks were fueled by feelings of indignation over perceived contradictions between proclaimed American values and the revelations of flagrant incongruities in actual policy" (Pratt 173). In this way, the injustices of the Vietnam War mirrored those of the Civil Rights Movement. This discontented sentiment was voiced by a variety of songwriters.

Some artists took a direct approach with their lyrics. Phil Ochs, a friend and contemporary of Bob Dylan, wrote songs which were sometimes humorous, sometimes serious, and always political in nature. Ochs lends a serious and critical eye in "I Ain't Marchin' Anymore," narrating a historical overview of U.S. conflicts from the Battle of New Orleans in the War of 1812 up through World War II. He states, "It's always the old to lead us to the war/It's always the young to fall/Now look at all we've won with the saber and the gun/Tell me is it worth at all" (Ochs). Both this song and Ochs' "Draft Dodger Rag," were blacklisted and banned on U.S.

radio and television, but Ochs got his word out through tours of college campuses and coffee houses (Pratt 175).

Credence Clear Water Revival (CCR), an American rock band popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s, put out several songs extremely critical of the Vietnam War. Front man John Fogerty's "Fortunate Son," released in 1969 and covered by Pearl Jam and U2 among others, echoes Ochs' lyrics, highlighting perceived class divisions between proponents of the war and the men actually doing the fighting. Written out of his disgust for President Nixon's daughter's marriage to President Eisenhower's grandson, Fogerty stated, "You just had the feeling that none of these people were going to be too involved with the war" ("Fortunate Son").

Neil Young, of Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, wrote the song "Ohio" in direct response to the events of May 1970 at Kent State University in Ohio. Young's powerful lyrics, "Four dead in Ohio . . . soldiers are shooting us down," highlighted the horror of the event in which young National Guardsmen panicked at a crowd of student protestors, killing four students and injuring nine. In an interesting commentary of the complicated politics of the time, polls actually indicated that the general public supported the National Guardsmen, saying students "got what they were asking for," though an official investigation condemned the "casual and indiscriminate shooting" (Tindall 1461). Young's voice in this matter, though powerful, was the minority. This is an important fact which may be overlooked today. The song "Ohio" persevered while the sentiment supporting the war did not.

Not all songs released in this era were intended to be specific to the Vietnam War. CCR's "Who'll Stop the Rain?" released in 1970, was intended to be symbolic rather than specific and therefore "timeless" in nature ("Who'll Stop the Rain"). Bob Dylan's songs also tended to be more generally than specifically about the war. What is apparent in Dylan's words is his biting cynicism. His "Masters of War" addresses a nameless "you" responsible for arming and ordering nameless wars. "With God on Our Side" juxtaposes historical events such as the plight of the Native Americans with the notion that God condones such actions. Dylan asserts that such religiosity is infused in culture. Though none of these songs did well on the charts, they were released by Columbia records and, as such, public access to them was unlimited. Those who *did* buy the records repeatedly listened to them. One should not underestimate the effect that this access had on the mindset of its listeners.

Another Dylan song, "All Along the Watchtower," was released in February 1968 not long after the Tet Offensive, an attack by the Vietcong on American and South Vietnamese forces that is often seen as the turning point in the war (Tindall 1429). While not directly about the war, the song contains distinctly Biblical and American rhetoric that speak to the feelings associated by a growing percentage of the general population with the war. Jimi Hendrix, arguably one of the most influential guitarists in rock music, covered the song and it remained on the charts for eight weeks (Pratt 177-178).

THE POST 9/11 ERA

History

The worst terrorist attack on American soil took place on September 11, 2001. We are all too familiar with the events of that infamous morning. Nineteen terrorists hijacked four American jetliners, crashing two into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York and one into the Pentagon in Washington D.C. The final jetliner, apparently on its way to another site in D.C., crashed in rural Pennsylvania as the result of the efforts of its passengers to prevent another targeted strike. 2,973 people died; another 24 are missing and presumed dead.

Music

The response to 9/11 was swift. Many citizens were quick to display the American flag -- whether at home, on their car or otherwise -- as a sign of solidarity (“September 11 Attacks”). CNN reported that Wal-Mart sold 450,000 flags between September 11 and September 13, 2001 compared to 26,000 during the same period a year prior (“Sales Spike for Red, White and Blue”). Music was another outlet for expression. Alan Jackson’s song “Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)” became an immediate anthem for the 9/11 attacks upon its release. Jackson won at least nine awards for the single, including both the Academy of Country Music and the Country Music Association’s Song of the Year in 2002 and the 2003 Grammy Award for Best Country Music Song of the Year (“Awards”). The song, which starts with the poignant question, “Where were you when the world stopped turning that September day,” contains myriad reactions felt by the American public in response to the attacks. Jackson’s simple questions, such as, “Did you call up your mother and tell her you loved her,” resonated with many Americans. As for myself, I clearly remember hearing the song on the radio for the first time. I wept through it. The second time I heard it come on, I turned the radio off. Even now, six years later, it takes me back.

The song Neil Young wrote in response to the attacks of September 11th concentrated on the one flight which failed to meet its target that day due to the heroics of those on board. In contrast to the other flights that day, multiple phone calls were made by passengers and crew which allowed investigators to reconstruct the final moments of the flight before its crash into an empty field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. One passenger, Todd Beamer, attempted to use an Airfone but could not get authorization. The call was routed to a Verizon customer service center in Illinois. Verizon supervisor Lisa Jefferson alerted the FBI and continued speaking to Beamer, gathering details of the flight. It is clear that Beamer and several other passengers formed a plan to fight back. The last words that Jefferson hears are Beamer’s: “Are you ready guys? Let’s roll” (Breslau). Young’s song of the same name, “Let’s Roll,” was a tribute to these passengers. Some interpreted the song as a war cry, intended to lend support to the war. Young’s website, however, maintains that such a view is a misrepresentation of the song (Warford).

One song in which there is no debate as to its message is Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American).” Keith reported writing the song a week after 9/11 in just twenty minutes (“Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue”). Keith also cites the death of his father six months prior in an auto accident as a motivating factor for the song. His father served in the Army in the 1950s and would always fly the American flag to display his patriotism. The song’s first title was simply “Angry American,” and with lyrics such as, “Justice will be served/And the battle will rage/This big dog will fight/When you rattle his cage,” it’s not hard to see why (Keith).

In conclusion, I believe it is apparent that music serves as a witness to and expression of history. The civil rights era, the Vietnam War and the events of 9/11 provide opportunities to examine this in the classroom, while providing students with a brief history lesson as well.

LESSON PLANS

Note: Three foundation lessons introduce students to historical background and lyrical analysis. The culminating activity is expressed through the fourth lesson in which students are assigned a research based PowerPoint presentation.

Lesson One: Post 9/11

(45 minutes)

Objectives

TEKS Objective 10, English Language Arts and Reading, Grade 6

The student comprehends selections using a variety of strategies. The student is expected to:

- use his/her knowledge to comprehend (a)
- establish and adjust purposes for reading such as reading to interpret and to enjoy (b)
- describe mental images that text descriptions evoke (d)
- determine a text's main (or major) ideas and how those ideas are supported with details (f)
- distinguish fact and opinion in various text (j)
- answer different types and levels of questions such as open-ended, literal and interpretive (k)

Procedures/Activities

First, I will ask students to recall what memories they have of 9/11. These memories may be a personal, first-hand account, but I know as the years go by students will be limited to sharing what their parents have told them about that day.

Next, I will share background information with students. I will create a short PowerPoint presentation incorporating facts and emotions surrounding the 9/11 attacks. While all of my students know and are familiar with the term "9/11" they do not fully understand the emotion and reality of the situation as they were too young to comprehend it. This PowerPoint will also serve to model a future assignment I will assign to students.

I will then play Alan Jackson's "Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)" for students. I will ask students to simply listen the first time, clearing their minds. I will then hand out the lyrics and play the song again, this time asking students to record their reactions on a piece of notebook paper. Students may wish to write down words or phrases from the song that pop out at them, draw or sketch to the music, etc. I will repeat this process with Neil Young's "Let's Roll."

Next, I will hand out a lyrical analysis handout incorporating the following questions:

What is the point of view of this song?

What inferences can you make concerning the songwriter?

Why was song written? (What was it in response to?)

How do you think this songwriter wanted this song to affect others?

What is the tone of the song?

Choose one line which stands out to you. What draws you to this particular line?

What additional questions do you have?

Lastly, I will ask students to create their own questions (3-5 in number) comparing and contrasting the two songs. I will have students exchange these questions with a partner to be answered in writing. Partners will discuss their responses with each other and a class discussion will follow.

Lesson Two: We Shall Overcome

(45 minutes)

Objectives

TEKS Objective 10, English Language Arts and Reading, Grade 6

The student comprehends selections using a variety of strategies. The student is expected to:

- use his/her knowledge to comprehend (a)
- establish and adjust purposes for reading such as reading to interpret and to enjoy (b)
- describe mental images that text descriptions evoke (d)
- determine a text's main (or major) ideas and how those ideas are supported with details (f)
- distinguish fact and opinion in various text (j)
- answer different types and levels of questions such as open-ended, literal and interpretive (k)

Procedures/Activities

First, I will ask students to write down what comes to mind when they hear the words, "civil rights movement." I will then ask students to share what they have written with the class for a brief discussion period. Next, I will present students with an overview of the civil rights movement. I will again organize information into a brief PowerPoint for students.

Next, I will play the protest-march song "We Shall Overcome" for students and ask them to write their reactions on a piece of notebook paper. I will hand out the lyrics to both the original hymn the song is based on and the song itself. I will ask students to highlight the similarities between the two songs on the hymn sheet. Question for group discussion: why do you think this particular hymn rose to the foreground in usage for protest music?

Next, I will distribute the lyrical analysis sheet from lesson one to be used in conjunction with this song. (See lesson one for questions.) I will conclude the lesson by hosting a class discussion of the lyrical analysis handout.

Lesson Three: Vietnam Era

(45 minutes)

Objectives

TEKS Objective 10, English Language Arts and Reading, Grade 6

The student comprehends selections using a variety of strategies. The student is expected to:

- use his/her knowledge to comprehend (a)
- establish and adjust purposes for reading such as reading to interpret and to enjoy (b)
- describe mental images that text descriptions evoke (d)
- determine a text's main (or major) ideas and how those ideas are supported with details (f)
- distinguish fact and opinion in various text (j)
- answer different types and levels of questions such as open-ended, literal and interpretive (k)

Procedures/Activities

First, I will ask students to write down on a piece of paper what facts they know concerning the Vietnam War. I will then ask students to share what they have written with the entire class for a brief discussion period. Next, I will present a brief PowerPoint detailing some background of the Vietnam era.

I will then play CCR's "Fortunate Son" for the class. I will first have students simply listen to the song. After the song is played a second time, I will hand out the lyrics and have students write down their reactions to the music.

Next, I will again distribute the lyrical analysis handout (see lesson one for questions) and have students complete the handout independently. I will conclude the lesson by hosting a class discussion of the lyrical analysis handout.

Lesson Four: Student PowerPoint Presentation

(1 -2 weeks)

Objectives

TEKS Objective 13, English Language Arts and Reading, Grade 6

Reading/inquiry/research. The student inquires and conducts research using a variety of sources. The student is expected to:

- Use multiple sources, including electronic texts, experts and print resources, to locate information relevant to research questions (c)
- Summarize and organize information from multiple sources by taking notes (e)
- Produce research projects and reports in effective formats for various audiences (f)
- Present organized reports using visuals or media to support meaning (i)

Culminating Activity

The culminating activity of this unit is a student PowerPoint presentation. After three days of lessons in which I modeled PowerPoint presentations and lyrical analysis for students, it is now their turn to take the reins. I will ask students to choose one musician from one "era" (Civil Rights/Vietnam/Post 9/11) and to complete a PowerPoint incorporating: (1) brief historical background, (2) biographical information on artist, (3) analysis of at least one song (use previous discussion questions for guidance), and (4) a visual collage – pictures coordinating with the song lyrics/meaning – during the PowerPoint presentation. Upon completion, these PowerPoints will be presented to the class in three to five minute presentations.

I anticipate giving students two research days in the computer lab followed by three days in the computer lab to compile their PowerPoint. Our 6th grade curriculum calls for students to complete a computer course in the fall and, as I plan on assigning this in the spring, students will already be well versed in the logistics of creating a PowerPoint. Depending on your situation you may wish to consider having students work with a partner or small group.

Assessment

I will assign the following guidelines to be used for assessment: minimum of ten slides; at least one picture/graphic per page; limit amount of text on page (strike an appropriate balance between text and graphics); a bibliography must be submitted with project.

As previously stated, students will be expected to present their PowerPoints to the class in a brief three to five minute presentation. I will allow for a brief question and answer period after each presentation.

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