

Learning from Lyrics

Lesson Overview:

Students research contemporary songs (alternative, blues, country, metal, pop, rap, and rock music) to study current social issues. They deliver oral presentations using factual data, graphics, and other media to interpret the song lyrics.

Length of Lesson:

Six 45-minute periods

Instructional Objectives:

Students will

- analyze the song to determine the artist's point-of-view regarding the subject addressed in the song.
- create visual representation of the songs and the relevant cultural and historical information about each.
- design and create an original visual aid that illustrates a central theme of the song.
- identify the social studies issue/event/person that is addressed in the song.
- identify three Social Studies Concepts that apply to the issue/event/idea expressed in the song.
- interpret song lyrics based on contextual clues and research information.
- present their opinions and research information orally.
- synthesize their learning through a presentation that incorporates music, visual arts, and oral speech.

Supplies:

Selections of music from students' home collections

Instructional Plan:

Note: The teacher will act as a facilitator, since this unit is based on independent research. The teacher will provide song list, recordings, current magazines and books, and a list of approved websites for computer research. The teacher will provide a classroom display of projects created by former students or by an instructor.

Students choose three contemporary songs.

The foregoing is a list of the most common styles in contemporary popular music. It is likely that the students will choose songs from one of these genres:

Top 40 Pop
Top 40 Rock
Hip Hop
R & B
Soft Rock
Hard Rock/Metal
Alternative

The vast majority of students in most school districts will opt to choose current songs, ones that will undoubtedly fit into one of the aforementioned genres. However, an alternative should be suggested, one which offers students the opportunity to stretch themselves and their knowledge, or to explore an area of music in which they have always had an interest. Suggest that for those who may wish to do so, there are other categories from which to choose. The foregoing is such a list:

- Folk
- Blues
- Jazz
- Country
- Opera
- Musicals
- Celtic/British Isles
- Oldies
- Other Foreign
- Ethnomusicological
- Work songs
- Other

Students who choose from the first category will most likely end up exploring current issues. Other students may choose to select songs from the second category, discovering issues contained in the lyrics of these songs that may deal with other issues, issues separated from our current context by time, culture, or distance. This offers students the opportunity to do research into a wide array of different topic areas. This research would undoubtedly lead to interesting discoveries, both for the researcher and for the rest of the class to whom the results are presented.

Here are a few examples:

Folk: The first time Bob Dylan played an electric guitar at the Newport Folk Festival, it caused quite a stir. Folk purists in the audience were infuriated at him, berating him with cries of "sellout!" and the like. Dylan was moving into a new genre of music, and his choice to do so had profound effects on the course of the 1960s and the lives of a generation. Choose three of his most politically charged songs and discuss.

Blues: The lyrics of blues songs are a map of the emotions and social issues affecting the lives of African-Americans for the last century. There are different types of blues - explore these genres on the [Blues Road Trip](#). Choose three examples, compare and contrast the lyrical choices, and explain them with reference to their respective social contexts.

Jazz: Billie Holliday sang a lot of songs about love and heartache. Choose several of her songs for analysis. How are her songs different than love songs of today? How are they the same?

Country: This genre of music is known for its common themes (love and loss, country life, pickup trucks, etc.). Choose songs representative of this. Are these themes significantly different from the themes present in forms of contemporary music more

common in urban areas, or are the differences only superficial, with underlying meanings being the same?

Opera/Musicals: Music is a mirror of life and culture. Songs can provide a window into the soul of the artist, tackle important issues, or tell a story. Music serves a variety of functions and purposes in society, with opera and musicals usually falling into the story-telling role. What different types of moods are evoked by these types of musical stories? Choose three fairly disparate examples, such as a comedic song, a hopeful song, and a tragic song.

Celtic/British Isles: This region of the world has a powerful, diverse, and rich musical tradition. Of the many forms in this genre, the ballad is one of the most salient sub-genres. Find several choices, become familiar with the standard format of the ballad, and then find modern equivalents for comparison.

Oldies: Parents, grandparents and great-grandparents enjoyed popular music in their day. Choose several examples of music that was popular at some point in history prior to 1950. How are the selections representative of the time period in which they were popular?

Students may also choose to examine music from another country, (perhaps their country of origin, if they are recent immigrants). Perhaps they will choose music from a country in which they have an abiding interest, using the exploration of the music as a vehicle for discovering more about that country.

Students may also have an interest in more obscure ethnomusicological selections. Research into the songs of a culture quite different from ours, perhaps a primitive culture, could provide for interesting discovery.

Students may wish to explore work songs, such as sea shanties, or they may wish to learn more about songs from the beginnings of the labor movement, either here in the States, or in Europe during the Industrial Revolution.

The aforementioned activity suggestions offer the opportunity to expand the scope of this lesson tremendously. The teacher should feel free to extend the time allotted for this learning program.

- Students listen to the songs at classroom or computer lab workstations, or they may bring them in from their home collections.
- Students identify key words and ideas from the lyrics.
- Students identify the composer, performance genre, instrumentation, and musical elements (tempo, form, dynamics, rhythm, expressive qualities, mood) of the songs.
- Students identify the lyrics' main theme of each song, placing it in appropriate historical context.
- Students identify social issues presented in the songs.
- Students read books, articles, and online research information to form their own opinions of the social issues addressed in the music.
- Using computer capabilities and/or charts, students create visuals, graphics, or multimedia presentations to explain their opinions, the musical form, the composer, the performer, and related historical/cultural material for each of the three songs.

- Students will share their results by performing three 10-15 minute classroom presentations that synthesize music, oratory, and the visual arts.

Assessment:

Assess the students' work by using the following criteria:

Design

- design and present three multimedia projects utilizing popular (or other) music and original artwork. Each song presented must reflect an event, idea, subject person, and/or theme that is included in the 7-12 Social Studies Curriculum.

Investigate:

- identify the Social Studies issue/event/person that is addressed in the song. Research and prepare a 10-15 minute lesson in which you describe and explain the topic discussed in the song. (Student will orally present her or his material to the class, thus teaching others.)

Application:

- identify three Social Studies Concepts that apply to the issue/event/idea expressed in the song. (Student must explain how/why each concept applies to the topic.)

Critique:

- analyze the song to determine the artist's point-of-view regarding the subject addressed in the song. Cite lyrics as evidence to support your finding. (Student must then assess the validity and accuracy of the artist's opinion, utilizing specific facts/data to support his/her conclusion.)

Invention:

- design and create an original visual aid that illustrates a central theme of the song. (Students may use any art form or medium to complete this task. The visual aid will be incorporated into the presentation. Student must explain the significance of the work in relation to their song topic.)

Sources:

Web:

Poetry and War Between the States

<http://www.civilwarpoetry.org/>

Worldwide Internet Music

http://www.music.indiana.edu/music_resources/

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