

Breaking Boundaries through Music

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INTRODUCTION

Music has always been a major influence on literature, fashion, art, and lifestyle. It is an expression of people's attitudes about world situations both big and small. In all cultures, music has a variety of purposes. From religious celebrations to political statements, music is a means of expression. Teenagers especially use music to define themselves. At one time, it was very obvious what type of music a person listened to. Just look at their personal style. If they listened to country music, more than likely they were wearing boots and a cowboy hat. People who listened to heavy metal could be seen wearing mostly black, heavy makeup, and lots of chains. Specific styles of clothing can be related to all various types of music. However, lately this trend cannot be relied upon. More than ever, music artists are collaborating with artists of other genres, which introduces the listener to other artists he or she may not have been aware of. Because this is becoming more common, personal style cannot always dictate what a person listens to, especially among teenagers. It is just this type of cross genre collaboration on which this unit will focus.

This unit is primarily for high school students, but can be adapted for all grade levels. I have been teaching 11th grade for three years now at DeBakey. I'm lucky that my classes are filled with students from diverse backgrounds. Most students are familiar with music from their own culture as well as popular American music. What I have noticed is that there are specific artists that all students are familiar with regardless of background. When I was a student in school, most kids listened to one type of music and didn't branch out. The type of music a kid listened to defined what social group he or she was part of. For example, if someone listened to rock music, he or she was considered a "headbanger." If a person listened to country, he or she was named a "kicker." With my students, it does seem that they still favor one preference of music, but will listen to some from other genres. Often these other genres are introduced to them by collaborations between one of their favorite artists with someone from a completely different style. In fact, I was introduced to rap music when Aerosmith did a duet with the rap group Run D.M.C. When I first heard "Walk this Way," I was hooked. I began listening to more and more rap and hip-hop. Rock music was still my number one choice, but had these two artists not collaborated, I don't know if I would be such a fan of hip-hop today.

Music doesn't seem to completely define social class among students anymore. If I ask my students what type of music they listen to, almost all will reply that they listen to almost everything regardless of their backgrounds. The benefit of a school like DeBakey, whose makeup is widely diverse, is that students are introduced to many different types of music that they may not have known had they attended a school with a more uniform makeup. Students are introduced to a range of music not only by their friends, but by their teachers and families as well. I find it interesting that by the time students reach their junior and senior year, they are much more familiar with older artists such as The Beatles or The Rolling Stones. Some learned about these older groups from their friends, others through their families or even teachers.

The purpose of this unit is to challenge students to see how diverse collaborations can influence popular music. Also, I have found that using songs to teach literary terms and figurative language can be more successful than jumping straight into poetry. This unit will be a great introduction to poetry because, in my experience, when I start a poetry unit with my students, I am usually greeted by a lot of groans. Students often don't think of songs as poems. Of course, a lot of them aren't, so it is important for students to be able to recognize the difference between the lyrics of a U2 song and a Britney Spears song, the latter of which doesn't have the same depth as the former.

OBJECTIVES

This unit will satisfy HISD TAKS objectives in secondary English, specifically English III. The student will:

- Use effective strategies to evaluate his or her own listening, such as asking questions for clarification, comparing and contrasting interpretations with others, and researching points of interest or contention.
- Make informed, accurate, truthful, and ethical presentations.
- Read in varied sources such as diaries, journals, textbooks, maps, newspapers, and letters. Speeches, memoranda, electronic texts, and other media.
- Analyze the melodies of literary language, including its use of evocative words and rhythms.
- Rely on context to determine meanings of words and phrases, such as figurative language, connotation and denotation of words, analogies, idioms, and technical vocabulary.
- Establish and adjust purpose for reading, such as to find out, to understand, to interpret, to enjoy, and to solve problems.
- Write in a voice and style appropriate to audience and purpose.
- Analyze relationships, ideas, and cultures as represented in various media.
- Investigate the source of a media presentation or production, such as who made it and why it was made.

UNIT BACKGROUND: U2

U2's song "One" was released in 1992 on the band's album *Achtung Baby* ("One" *Wikipedia*). It is widely considered to be one of the most popular songs the band has released. The group filmed three different videos for the song which led to many different interpretations of the song's lyrics. Bono, the lead singer of U2 and most public figure of the band, has said that the song is a story about a father and son. One video version has Bono dressed in drag, singing to his own father, which supports this interpretation and expands on it by suggesting the son is HIV positive and trying to confess this to his father. Some of the money from the sales of the single was distributed to AIDS charities ("One" *Wikipedia*). The first video released for the single was primarily made up of slow motion, out of focus shots of a buffalo running, a simple image, but one that critics have described as elegant and powerful because of its simplicity. It was originally intended to be the background shot during the band's live performances of the song, which focused on AIDS and intolerance towards homosexuals ("STI Lesson 10"). The director of this version developed his concept for the video from photographs of buffalos being herded off a cliff. The photographs make up the majority of the video. The photographer, David Wojnarowicz, died of AIDS around the same time the single was released ("STI Lesson 10"). Most of David Wojnarowicz's art dealt with homosexuality, AIDS, and transgender issues.

This interpretation is obviously one of the more controversial interpretations, but most critics seem to favor it. I would only introduce this interpretation to a more mature group of students.

When looking at the lyrics by themselves, it is easy to see how the lyrics could be about a father-son relationship, but it is the videos and the comments made by U2 that introduce the more controversial interpretation.

A completely different interpretation of the song suggests the lyrics are about the fall of the Berlin wall. The album was written primarily while the band was in Germany at the time of the fall of the Berlin wall. Some critics believe that the entire album can be related to the division of Germany and the fall of the wall. The central theme of the song focuses on reunited Germans who are “one” but had been separated due to war:

Well it's too late tonight
To drag the past out into the light
We're one, but we're not the same
We get to carry each other, carry each other
One (U2)

These lyrics would support this interpretation. Families had been divided by a physical structure for a long period of time. Now that they have been reunited, they realize that they are “one” family who must support and “carry” each other, but because of the amount of time they had been separated, they have many differences.

Often people misinterpret the song lyrics and think it is a love song. This cannot be true because of the following lines:

Did I ask too much
More than a lot
You gave me nothing
Now it's all I got
We're one but we're not the same
We hurt each other, then we do it again (U2)

Whoever the speaker is addressing is someone that the speaker has hurt and has been hurt by. This was an unhealthy relationship because the speaker explains that they did not support each other. The question is what type of relationship the speaker has with the person being spoken to. The lyrics are vague enough to fit any type of relationship. The point is that the relationship was unhealthy.

Students should also understand how political the song has become. It helped to launch the ONE Campaign which was developed by Bono. It is an organization that is striving to end poverty and AIDS world wide (“ONE Campaign”). Bono recently delivered the message of the ONE Campaign to President Bush. The speech he made was so powerful it was released as a book which can be read for free at the ONE Campaign website or can be purchased at a local bookstore.

Encourage the students to analyze and interpret the song lyrics without seeing the video or doing a lot of outside research. The goal is for the students to approach the lyrics as they would a poem. Because it is in the context of a song, it will be less intimidating for students who are not as strong with poetry analysis.

REMAKES OF U2’S ONE

There have been many remakes of U2’s popular song “One.” Johnny Cash, a country and western singer from Arkansas, covered the U2 song on his album *American III: Solitary Man*, which was released in 2000 (“One” *Wikipedia*). Cash has a lot of rock influences throughout his music. He is also known for being political, so it is understandable that he would be drawn to “One” which has been a major political influence. Joe Cocker and Wendy Matthews have also

covered the song. The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra also released an instrumental version of “One.”

The most popular remake would be the Mary J. Blige version, on which U2 performs. The collaboration sprung from a live performance that received major critical acclaim. The recorded song was released on Blige’s 2005 album, *The Breakthrough*. Even though the lyrics are not changed and the arrangement is very similar to the original, Blige definitely made it her own. While U2’s original version is much softer in tone, Blige uses much more power when singing the song. Blige has been described as a modern R&B artist. However, she also uses rap and hip-hop in a lot of her songs. All of these influences have made her one of the most successful female R&B artists today. As she got older, Blige’s music became more expressive and was more influenced by soul music (Proefrock).

CROSS GENRE COLLABORATIONS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

Today it is becoming more common to see artists collaborate with one another. A more recent trend has artists from different genres coming together to create music. Collaborations between diverse artists have occurred in many forms. The most common is two singers performing together, but this is a more recent trend. The Beatles were heavily influenced by other cultures, specifically Hindustani, which was apparent in their later works (“The Beatles”). Elvis Presley was also heavily influenced by American Blues, which at the time had remained primarily in the black community.

For the sake of this unit, I will focus mainly on more recent groundbreaking collaborations that are more traditional in form. One of the most groundbreaking and influential collaborations was between legendary rock group Aerosmith and rap group Run D.M.C. Their song “Walk this Way” helped to bridge the gap between rap and rock and would eventually lead to new genres of music that combine rap and rock, for example Kid Rock, whose music comprises of both rap and rock genres. When the song was first released and the video first aired on MTV, it was a groundbreaking event. Traditionally, only white America listened to rock and black America listened to rap. This collaboration introduced a new genre to a large group of people. The collaboration also helped rap become a mainstream genre.

Another collaboration that was monumental was Santana’s *Supernatural* album. Santana’s music is primarily influenced by Cuban and Latin styles. When this album was released, younger generations did not know who Santana was for the most part. On this album, his most famous and successful song was “Smooth,” a collaboration with rock singer Rob Thomas. Another hit song from the album was “Maria Maria,” which was a collaboration with hip-hop artist Wyclef Jean. This album introduced a younger generation to the musical style of a Mexican-American artist who was popular in the 1960s and 1970s, Carlos Santana. The diverse collaborations helped to popularize Latin American music in America.

Other unique collaborations that students may want to research are Aretha Franklin and George Michael’s “I Knew You Were Waiting for Me,” Nelly and Tim McGraw’s “Over and Over,” The White Stripes cover of Dolly Parton’s song “Jolene,” Herbie Hancock’s album *Possibilities* which has a diverse group of artists that Hancock pairs up with, and finally Frank Sinatra’s album *Duets* which has him collaborating with various contemporary and classic artists. All of these collaborations show a wide range of artists from different genres coming together to sing new original pieces as well as old standards. The more common these types of collaborations, the less divided people will be when it comes to music preferences. People can enjoy many different types of music because new genres are being presented to them through a familiar artist, which makes the transition smoother.

LESSON PLANS

(This unit was designed to take place over a two-week period of 90 minute classes.)

Lesson One: Analyzing Song Lyrics

Objectives

Students will recognize and analyze literary devices in a popular song as a class and in groups. Students will then write a literary analysis of the song.

TEKS/ TAKS objectives 1, 3, 4, 6

Materials Needed

Song lyrics for U2's "One"

Terms to Explain

tone, mood, repetition, parallelism, imagery, etc.

Activities

For the focus activity, ask the students to pick one song that they feel best represents them and why. Ask for specific examples.

For the first activity, ask the students if they are familiar with the group U2 and its hit song "One." Most will probably say no. Play the song for them without the lyrics handout. After listening to the song once, ask for general impressions.

Next pass out the lyrics to the song and introduce the literary terms by defining the ones they don't know. Begin looking through the lyrics for examples of repetition, parallelism, and imagery. Ask the students how the identified literary terms define the mood and tone of the song. This should be done with the whole class.

Students should then be broken into collaborative groups. Play the song again. In groups they should discuss and write down their answers to the following questions. First have the students discuss if the mood and tone change or differ when reading the lyrics on a piece of paper compared to listening to the song. Next, they should begin analyzing the lyrics to reach an interpretation of the song. Each group should present their findings to the class.

Each student will then write an in-depth analysis of the song's lyrics. This should be completed for homework. Explain to the students that they will take the lyrics line by line and break them down for individual interpretation.

Assessment

Students' group finding that are presented to the class orally; literary analysis essay

Lesson Two: Analysis of the collaboration between U2 and Mary J. Blige for the song "One"

Objectives

Students will compare and contrast mood and tone between two stylistically different versions of the same song.

TEKS/TAKS objectives 1, 3, 4, 6

Materials Needed

U2 version of the song "One" and Mary J. Blige version of the song "One"

Activities

The first activity is a focus activity, but it will be longer than normal. Adapt to the time you have available. Have students stand up and form a circle. The teacher should lead off to set the example of how the activity will work. The teacher will say something true and general about him or herself. For example, the teacher could say, “I am wearing green today.” The teacher will then stand in the middle of the circle along with any other student for whom the statement is true. Each student should have turn doing the same thing. Explain to the students that it is up to them to decide how personal their statement will be.

Once each student has had a chance to participate, the students should return to their seats. Have the students discuss what they noticed about who stood in the middle for the different statements. Most likely there will be some surprises for the students. Most likely students who aren’t friends will have things in common. The purpose is to show no matter how different people are, they usually share something in common. Ask the students to share any observations they felt were interesting during the activity. This discussion will lead into the main activity.

For the next activity, remind the students of the U2 song “One” by playing it for them again. Next, play the Mary J. Blige version. Have the class share their first impressions of Mary J. Blige’s version. Have the students get in to small collaborative groups. Each group should create a Venn diagram comparing and contrasting the tone and mood for Blige’s version.

Have students share what their group determined.

Assessment

Each group’s graphs and their oral presentation to class should be graded.

Lesson Three: Remakes of Classic Songs

Objectives

Students will research and evaluate contemporary artists’ remakes of classic songs and compare and contrast the original to the remakes.

TEKS/TAKS objectives 1, 3, 4, 6

Materials Needed

You can decide which songs best suit your needs. For the sake of this lesson I will choose other remakes of U2’s “One” as well as “Can’t Take my Eyes off of You” by Frankie Valli and the remake by Lauryn Hill. Lyrics for “Can’t Take my Eyes off of You” will also be needed.

Activities

For the focus activity, have students list current songs that they know are remakes. Ask the students why classic songs often get remade. Which do the students prefer and why?

To support the last two lessons, play Johnny Cash’s version on U2’s “One.” You may need to replay the original song as well as well as Mary J. Blige’s remake. Have a roundtable discussion over which song each student prefers. They need to be as specific as possible when explaining their choice. Simply saying that they don’t like country music, therefore they don’t like Cash’s version, is not enough.

Have students discuss whether or not the meaning of the song lyrics changes based on the artist’s presentation of the song.

Next play the Frankie Valli version of “Can’t Take my Eyes off of You.” Ask for general observations that the students noticed when listening to the song. Next play Lauryn Hill’s version. In groups, students should analyze the effect the different arrangements have on the

tone, mood, and style of the songs. Explain to students how the style of the song reflects the time period when each was released. Students should record their findings. Outside research may be necessary for the students to better understand the time periods for both song versions.

Assessment

Each student should turn in their observations. The teacher can choose to have them organize their observations in a Venn diagram or T-chart.

Lesson Four: Cross Genre Collaborations

(This lesson could easily be spread over a longer period of time depending on how much time the teacher wants the students to have to research. The longer time to research, the more in-depth the final product should be.)

Objectives

Students will analyze the social and cultural affects collaborative pieces from diverse artists have had on contemporary popular music.

TEKS/TAKS objectives 1, 3, 4, 6

Materials Needed

Copy of the Aerosmith and Run D.M.C. song “Walk this Way”; additional choices that are Nelly and Tim McGraw’s “Over and Over,” Santana’s and Rob Thomas’s “Smooth,” and Frank Sinatra’s album *Duets*. The last is an album full of classic songs that Frank Sinatra remade with other artists, classic and contemporary. There are many collaborations between artists that are from different genres for further information; refer to the collaborative section of the curriculum unit.

Activities

For the focus activity, have students make a top five list of artists from various genres such as rock, hip hop, rap, pop, and any other genre they wish. The important part is that the genres they pick are diverse. Once they have their charts, have them decide which two artists would be strangest to collaborate. Students should share their choices.

Have students listen to the song “Walk this Way” by Aerosmith and Run D.M.C. Explain to students the social impact this collaboration had on the music industry, specifically helping to thrust hip hop and rap into mainstream popular music. Ask students if contemporary collaborations like Nelly and Tim McGraw’s “Over and Over” and Santana’s and Rob Thomas’s “Smooth” would have happened and been accepted by audiences if Aerosmith and Run D.M.C. hadn’t originally collaborated. Outside research will be necessary to answer these questions.

Next, students should research and pick a collaboration between two artists of different genres. Students should then analyze the social influence this collaboration had on music and society as a whole. Students should present their findings to the class at the next meeting. Findings should be in the format of a research paper.

Assessment

Students will turn in their research papers.

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