

SINGING AMERICAN HISTORY

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"I hear America singing," Walt Whitman declared. A century and a half later we can still hear the music, whether we make it ourselves or, as is increasingly the case, we listen to others. If I judge my students correctly, many--especially the younger, traditional ones--believe that they possess certain inalienable rights: to life, to liberty, and to a stereo system.

Certainly our world is filled with music. There is no reason to exclude it from the classroom. Indeed, there are many reasons to include it:

(1) Music can be an effective way of catching (and stimulating) student interest.

(2) Music is a way to change the pace of a class. We shouldn't always do the same thing. Like showing a video, holding a classroom debate, or organizing a small group project, playing music is a way to shift pedagogical gears. Sometimes I take three or four minutes to play a single song, using it to illustrate a larger point; at other times I play a series of selections, weaving music through an entire class period.

(3) Music captures the emotions--the joy, frustration, and anger--of the past with a power that goes beyond that of the written word. For example, no matter what I say about violence against African Americans, nothing affects my students as profoundly as Billie Holiday's searing indictment of lynching, "Strange Fruit," which describes the outrage of a "black body hangin' from a poplar tree."¹ (Angry protest songs are not an invention of the 1960s or of the rap generation.)

(4) Most importantly, music is an integral part of American history. From the nineteenth century to the present, whether sung by slaves in Southern cotton fields or played on the pianos that were ubiquitous in Victorian parlors or blaring from stereos today, music has been part of the fabric of America.

But how should a teacher begin to incorporate music into American history classes? In an almost infinite number of ways. Public and university libraries are often rich in recordings for classroom use. Personal collections might contain more possibilities than one realizes. "Songs of the Civil War" (Columbia) includes versions of much of the music performed on Ken Burns's "Civil War" documentary and is an excellent, widely available source. This collection includes "Follow the Drinking Gourd," a song of the Underground Railroad. How was a slave to find the way north to freedom? The song gives directions--among them to walk toward the drinking gourd (the Big Dipper). "Songs of the Civil War" contains many

¹For more information about the song, see David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Cafe Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2000).

tunes--"Vacant Chair," "Was My Brother in the Battle," and, of course, "Taps" (first performed in 1862)--that remind listeners of the war's carnage.

Almost 200,000 black soldiers fought in the Union army. The most famous black unit, the 54th Massachusetts, was featured in the film "Glory." "Songs of the Civil War" includes "Give Us a Flag," composed by an anonymous soldier in the 54th. Analyzing its references--to General John C. Fremont, to Lincoln, to Jefferson Davis--is a way to introduce the attitudes of each man about black regiments. ("Old Jeff says he'll hang us if we dare to meet him armed.") There are other Civil War songs included on the album that students are likely to know, though perhaps not in connection with the war, such as "Battle Hymn of the Republic," "When Johnny Comes Marching Home," and "Dixie."

The most powerful song is "No More Auction Block for Me." While it is included on "Songs of the Civil War," I prefer another version, by the folk singer Odetta, when I use the song in class. As Odetta sings it, "No More Auction Block" celebrates emancipation, while simultaneously expressing profound sorrow. She sings: "No more auction block for me/ No more, no more/ No more auction block for me/ Many thousand gone." Whatever joy there is in the anticipation of freedom is muted by the memory of the generations who, over 200 years, toiled in bondage. It is worth noting that Bob Dylan adapted the tune for "Blowin' in the Wind," the archetypal protest song of the 1960s, from "No More Auction Block."²

One of the many benefits of using music is that it can be a way of showing, implicitly or explicitly, the contributions of African Americans to American culture. I might play the original version of a song by a black performer, followed by the often more famous cover version by a white musician. "Crossroad Blues," by the great 1930s bluesman Robert Johnson, was re-recorded by the rock group Cream as "Crossroads" in the 1960s. Some versions are equally notable for their similarities as for their differences. Even untrained ears can hear the musical likeness between Joe Turner's original 1954 version of "Shake, Rattle, and Roll" and the cover by Bill Haley, released later in the same year. But while Haley and his Comets appropriated Turner's notes, they bowdlerized his lyrics. Turner's version begins in the bedroom, Haley's in the kitchen. "You wear low dresses/The sun comes shinin' through," sings Turner, lines that the cover changes to "You wear those dresses/Your hair done up so nice." It is worth remembering that "rock 'n' roll" is a

²Helpful for the instructor and class are copies of Dylan's lyrics. Bob Dylan, *Lyrics, 1962-1985* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985) is thus indispensable.

blues euphemism for sexual intercourse.³ Thus, songs such as "Good Rockin' Tonight" can have overlooked meanings.

Sam Phillips, the owner of Sun Records in Memphis, famously remarked that he could make millions if he could find "a white man with the Negro sound and the Negro feel." Phillips did not get the money, but he found the man when he became, in 1954, the first to record Elvis Presley. Many of my students have heard Elvis singing "Hound Dog" (1956). Few know of Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton's quite different original version, recorded three years earlier. White cover versions were often much more successful than the black originals in the 1950s. But to play "Shake, Rattle, and Roll" and "Hound Dog" is to present a more complicated truth. While the two versions of "Shake" sound much the same, Presley so completely transformed "Hound Dog" that his recording virtually constitutes a new song. Further complicating things: While "Hound Dog" was first sung by a southern black woman, it was written by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, two young northern white men. Early rock provides examples of whites appropriating black music for profit, but it was also a place of racial and cultural convergence.⁴

Music is a thread throughout W. E. B. Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), a book I use in some of my upper-level classes. Each chapter has two epigraphs--verses by white (often British) poets and the music of a Negro spiritual. Du Bois argues implicitly that black culture, especially its music, should be taken seriously, as is the literature of high white culture. It is no accident that the musical epigraph to the first chapter is "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen." Most white Americans in 1903 did not know the history of Reconstruction or the realities of life in the Jim Crow South. They did not know what it was like to be an invisible man, concealed by Du Bois's metaphorical veil. Nobody knows, Du Bois implies, so I will tell you. *Souls of Black Folk* concludes with a chapter entitled "Of the Sorrow Songs." Music proves the strength of black culture, even in the face of slavery, says Du Bois, recalling an old African song passed down in his family for 200 years. Blacks "have woven themselves with the very warp and woof" of America, through

³Jon Pareles and Patricia Romanowski, eds., *The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll* (New York: Rolling Stone Press/Summit Press, 1983), 474.

⁴Charlie Gillett discusses "Shake, Rattle, and Roll" in *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Dell, 1970). See also, B. Lee Cooper, *Images of American Society in Popular Music: A Guide to Reflective Teaching* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1982), especially chapter nine, "The Black Roots of Popular Music." Cooper's "popular music" is mostly rock music from the 1950s on. Both popular music and African-American contributions to it go back much further. I have learned much from Ken Emerson's *Doo-Dah: Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997). Foster, the first American to make his living as a songwriter, was using and reshaping black music a century before Elvis Presley.

their toil and, yes, their music--"the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas."⁵

I have found music especially helpful in reinforcing points I first make in traditional ways, through readings, lecture, and discussion. The 1920s provide an example. Every now and then artists--I'm thinking here of musicians--have pressed the cultural envelope, presenting their listeners with something radically new. Beethoven did it with the "Eroica," Stravinsky did it with the "Rite of Spring," the Beatles did it many times in the 1960s. And Louis Armstrong did it in the Twenties during the Jazz Age. So I play Armstrong and Duke Ellington and others of the era. For those who do not have extensive jazz collections, Ken Burns is again a help. Although many purists were critical of his "Jazz" series on PBS, the five-CD set, "Ken Burns Jazz: The Story of America's Music," provides many selections from the Twenties, useful for the classroom, including James P. Johnson's "Charleston." George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" (available in many recordings) isn't really jazz, but I play it, too, and make a point about the melding of black and white musical genres.

But the Twenties was not just the Age of Jazz. It also saw the birth of commercial country music. The Grand Ole Opry first broadcast in 1925. Millions of Americans might have moved to the cities, but many continued to think of their rural homes. If Armstrong took his listeners where they had never been, country music kept its listeners more or less safely in the present, or in an imagined past.

Many texts present Henry Ford as a symbol of the 1920s, as America was torn between its urban, industrial future and its small-town, traditional past. A teacher can give students a clear intellectual understanding of these cultural conflicts. It is not difficult to outline some of the clashes--religious fundamentalism versus Darwinian science, dries versus wets, nativists versus immigrants, and so on. Yet for many students the conflicts remain abstract concepts. Music gets the point across. Follow Armstrong's "Potato Head Blues" (found in the Burns "Jazz" box set) with almost anything by Jimmie Rodgers or the Carter Family--two of the first acts inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame--and students can immediately hear cultural differences. (Some like this raw music. Others might groan or laugh. Properly channeled, such reactions can lead to a discussion of the power of music and other cultural expressions to divide, as well as unite, us. Why do some people react so violently to music they don't like? It's a question worth exploring.) I sometimes play a song by the Carter Family, "Hold Fast to the Right," in which a mother counsels her son as he is about to leave home, presumably for a job in the big city. "Hold fast to the right," she urges him over and over, remember the things I taught you. She ends by giving him a Bible. What a contrast, musically and

⁵W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 178, 180, 187.

thematically, with Bessie Smith, who revels in her "sin" (her word) and drinks bootleg gin, and who ends one song ("Gimme a Pigfoot") by calling for a reefer.

There is a wealth of music from the Great Depression. Most public and university libraries have anthologies of Depression-era songs such as "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" Instead of simply mentioning the controversy over the refusal of the Daughters of the American Revolution to allow Marian Anderson to sing in Washington, D.C., in 1939, one can show a video of her performance at the Lincoln Memorial, arranged by Eleanor Roosevelt.⁶ The songs of Oklahoma balladeer Woody Guthrie are especially good for the period. "Pretty Boy Floyd" and "Jolly Banker" are lively and provocative. The first makes a hero of a bank robber, and the second makes a villain of a respectable banker.⁷

Most of my students know Irving Berlin's "God Bless America" and Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land," and they think of them in much the same terms: as straightforward patriotic songs. This is to say that they give the songs almost no thought at all. By the late 1930's, Berlin, long America's leading songwriter, was looking for a tune to boost the nation's flagging spirits. The result was "God Bless America," introduced by Kate Smith on Armistice Day in 1938. It was an instant sensation. But not all listeners were pleased. Guthrie found Berlin's song insufferably smug. In 1940 he composed his caustic response, "God Blessed America for Me." (Five years later he would change the title to "This Land Is Your Land.") I play both songs and distribute a copy of Guthrie's original handwritten lyrics (found in Joe Klein's biography, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*).⁸

There are lyrical similarities between the songs, a result, no doubt, of Guthrie's desire to mock a song he hated. Both invoke America's natural beauty and the grandeur of the land. "From the mountains/To the prairies/To the oceans, white with foam/God bless America, my home sweet home," writes Berlin. Guthrie

⁶A short clip of Anderson singing at the Lincoln Memorial can be found near the beginning of "A Job at Ford's," the first program in the PBS video "The Great Depression," produced by Blackside, Inc., in 1993.

⁷"Pretty Boy Floyd" includes these lines:

"There's many a starving farmer the same old story told
How the outlaw paid their mortgage and saved their little home
I see lots of funny men,
Some will rob you with a 6-gun, and some will rob you with a pen.
But as through life you'll travel, wherever you may roam,
You won't never see an outlaw drive a family from their home."

Quoted in Robert McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: Times Books, 1984), 211-212.

⁸Joe Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 447.

begins in what appears a like vein: "This land is your land, this land is my land/From California to the New York Island/From the redwood forest, to the Gulf Stream water"--but then comes a departure--"God blessed America for me." In the second and third verses, Guthrie appears, if we do not read him too closely, to be engaged in a quiet reverie, "walking down that ribbon of highway" with an "endless skyway" above. But when one remembers that he wrote the song in anger, when one recalls his ballads about the Dust Bowl, these seemingly straightforward words gain new meaning, which students can be encouraged to discover. "Roaming and rambling" is exactly what Guthrie's Okies did. They crossed the "sparkling sands of her diamond deserts" on their way to California. They were not wandering the highway to admire the scenery, but, in desperation, to seek a better life. If students are prepared for it, they will look at Guthrie's reference to "wheat fields waving, and dust clouds rolling" and find something new in the familiar.

Although students will likely have sung "This Land" before, few will have sung the verse in which Guthrie, a member of the Communist Party, questioned private property. Nor will they have heard the last verse of his original version (not recorded by Guthrie, but reprinted in Klein's biography): "One bright sunny morning in the shadow of the steeple/By the relief office, I saw my people/As they stood hungry/I stood there wondering if/God blessed America for me."⁹

The lyrics of "God Bless America" and "This Land Is Your Land" can be studied as one would study any texts. As such they become valuable primary sources for understanding some of the conflicts of the Depression. More than that, they stimulate a critical re-evaluation of two classic songs most students think they know. "God Bless America" was an immensely popular song, notwithstanding Guthrie's criticism. Why? What does its popularity tell us about Americans in the 1930s? Guthrie wrote "This Land" as an act of protest. Why do so few Americans understand it that way today? How did it become "housebroken"?

My students have some knowledge of the music of the 1960's, but it is often incomplete. (Even the ubiquitous oldies stations play only a fraction of the music of the era.) Hardly any of my traditional students are familiar with "Blowin' in the Wind," the most important protest song of the 1960s, which can be linked with both the civil rights and antiwar movements. ("How long can some people exist before they're allowed to be free?" Dylan asked. Recall that he based his tune on "No More Auction Block for Me." One hundred years after emancipation, "some people" were still not free in America.) "Blowin' in the Wind" also merits serious attention because of its demand for individual moral responsibility. Students can explore what they think their social responsibilities are.

⁹Klein, *Woody Guthrie*, 140-141, 276.

Students are aware, in a general way, at least, that songs played a part in protests against the war in Vietnam. In my experience, a few students have heard Country Joe and the Fish denouncing the war at Woodstock or they know Edwin Starr's "War" (either through the 1970 original, a number one hit, or Bruce Springsteen's cover in the 1980s). But few of the younger students know "Ballad of the Green Berets," which was number one on Billboard's chart for five weeks in 1966. The singer, Sgt. Barry Sadler, a Green Beret himself, celebrated the special forces and their involvement in Vietnam. The song could not have topped the rock charts after the 1968 Tet Offensive that helped turn American public opinion against the war. That it could earlier is a reminder of the initial public acceptance of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. Playing "Ballad of the Green Berets" demonstrates how much the mood of the country changed in just a couple of years. Likewise, country music provides a valuable contrast to the more widely known songs of protest. Merle Haggard's "Okie from Muskogee" and "Fightin' Side of Me" (which, again, few students have heard) are pointed musical critiques of the counterculture. I have paired them with Jimi Hendrix's version of "Star Spangled Banner" at Woodstock (to some, the aural equivalent of flag burning) and set off lively discussions. Music conveys the emotions of the past and sometimes rekindles them in the present. Understanding the Sixties requires examining the decade's conservative aspects as well as its liberal and radical ones. Tell me about the 1960s, I ask my students. Whether traditional or non-traditional, they associate the decade with protests, drugs, psychedelic music, free love, and hippies. Where was all this happening? California, they tell me. And who, I ask, was the governor of California after 1966, while all this going on? Ronald Reagan, every bit as much a political product of the era as Abbie Hoffman, is a reminder that the Sixties, like the Twenties, is a more complicated time than sometimes portrayed. With both periods, music helps make the point.

I observed at the start that our students are surrounded by music. Having played a wide variety of music during a course, I have occasionally allowed students to put together a project at the end in which they explore a topic using songs of their own choosing. Many approach the task with great enthusiasm. Some simply like to share their music with others. (Often students will bring additional songs to class, even when there is no assignment to do so.)¹⁰ In the process, many

¹⁰One can be surprised by what students bring in. Once, in an upper-level course in American Cultural and Intellectual History, I played portions of Charles Ives's "Concord Sonata" that attempts to portray New England Transcendentalism in musical form. Written for solo piano, the sonata's four movements are entitled "Emerson," "Hawthorne," "The Alcotts," and "Thoreau." The music is so extraordinarily daunting, even for trained musicians, that I can't recommend using it. Yet, the one time I did, a student, who had been relatively quiet during the course, brought me a tape that included Ives singing some of his own songs. You never know what will connect.

come to understand their music in deeper ways, as part of a grand and continuing American cultural tradition.

I have mentioned a few songs and a few ways to use them in American history classes. But the possibilities for music in the classroom are endless. Music has considerable pedagogical value: engaging student interest, changing the pace of a class, illuminating points made in assigned readings or lectures. But the most important reason for using it is, if you will, a Whitmanesque reason. Music should be a part of American history courses because it is part of American history. And we are still singing.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

The purpose of my essay is to encourage the use of music in the classroom, but not to prescribe or limit what music should be used. The discography should be read in this light. It is comprehensive neither in the music it covers nor in its suggestion where particular songs can be found. Songs I have found on one album can often be found on others that I have not listed. Some albums I have used are no longer available. In such cases, I have tried to provide an appropriate substitute. The music listed below and discussed in the essay only scratches the surface.

Carter Family. "The Country Music Hall of Fame." MCA.

Cream. "The Very Best of Cream." A&M.

Dylan, Bob. "The Bootleg Series, Vols. 1-3; Rare and Unreleased, 1961-1991." Sony/Columbia. This set contains Dylan's performance of "No More Auction Block."

_____. "The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan." Sony/Columbia. This album, Dylan's second, from 1963, includes many songs appropriate for classroom use. In addition to "Blowin' in the Wind," it contains "Masters of War" (a bitter indictment of those who make war and profit from it), "A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall" (about nuclear war), and "Oxford Town" (about James Meredith).

_____. "Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits, vols. 1 and 2." Sony/Columbia.

Ellington, Duke. "Beyond Category." Buddha.

Haggard, Merle. "12 #1 Hits, vol. 1." Platinum Disk Corporation.

"The Great Depression: American Music in the '30s." Sony/Columbia.

Guthrie, Woody. "Dust Bowl Ballads." Buddha.

_____. "Library of Congress Recordings." Rounder.

_____. "This Land Is Your Land." Smithsonian Folkways. Useful for much more than the title song.

"The Hand That Holds the Bread." New World Records. A rich assortment of songs from the late nineteenth century, including "The Anti-Monopoly War Song," "Drill Ye Tarriers, Drill," "Eight Hours," "No Irish Need Apply,"

- "When the Girls Can Vote," "Ma! Ma! Where's My Pa?" "Father's a Drunkard and Mother is Dead," and "The Chinese, the Chinese You Know."
- Ives, Charles. "Piano Sonata No. 2, Concord, Mass., 1840-60," performed by Gilbert Kalish. Elektra Nonesuch.
- Johnson, Robert. "The Complete Recordings" [Box Set]. Sony/Columbia.
- "Ken Burns Jazz: The Story of America's Music" [Box Set]. Sony/Columbia.
- Presley, Elvis. "The Sun Sessions." RCA. Presley's first album, record by Sam Phillips in 1954, includes covers of black artists ("Good Rockin' Tonight") and bluegrass pioneer Bill Monroe ("Blue Moon of Kentucky").
- _____. "The Top Ten Hits." RCA.
- Rodgers, Jimmie. "Riding High, 1929-1930." Rounder.
- Sadler, Barry. "Ballad of the Green Berets." Collector's Choice Music.
- Smith, Bessie. "The Collection." Sony/Columbia. "The Collection" is actually one of many Bessie collections. This one includes "Gimme a Pigfoot" and her classic "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out." "Poor Man's Blues" is a reminder that the prosperity of the Twenties was not universally shared.
- Smith, Kate. "Best of Kate Smith: God Bless America." Atlantic.
- "Songs of Protest." Rhino. A wonderful assortment of music for the 1960's, including, among others, the Kingston Trio ("Where Have All the Flowers Gone"), Barry McGuire ("Eve of Destruction"), Donovan ("Universal Soldier"), Phil Ochs ("I Ain't Marchin' Anymore"), The Rascals ("People Got to be Free"), Janis Ian ("Society's Child"), Dion ("Abraham, Martin, and John"), the Temptations ("Ball of Confusion"), and Edwin Starr ("War"). The version of Country Joe and the Fish's "I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-to-Die Rag" is more playful and less obscene than the one performed live at Woodstock, and, for my purposes, less effective. Here, "Gimme an F! . . ." leads to the spelling of F-I-S-H.
- "Songs of the Civil War." Sony/Columbia. One of many recordings of Civil War music.
- Thornton, Big Mama. "Hound Dog." MCA.
- "Woodstock" [Box Set]. Atlantic.