

Teaching American History Project

The Great Depression

A Study through Song

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Grade: 9-12

Length of Period: 1-2 class periods

Inquiry:

- Music has long played a significant role in American society. Songs are usually written for entertainment; however many songs have been written pertaining to important issues facing the country. Throughout American history, music can be analyzed to generalize the general societal perception of the times. The key questions include, “How were songs used in the 1930s to represent people’s political and social opinions? Is that still done today?”

Objectives:

Students will know and be able to:

- recognize the influence of Great Depression music
- analyze song lyrics as primary resources and representations of the past
- connect issues of the Great Depression to issues today

Materials:

- Song of teacher’s choice
- Song lyric handouts
- CD Player
- Burned CD of “Brother Can You Spare Me a Dime”
- Guided questions to music during the Depression

Activities:

- As students enter the classroom, have a song playing on the CD player. It can be any song, as long as it helps to illustrate the social landscape of a specific American era.
- Ask students, “What is the meaning of this song?”
- Assign students into five different groups
- Assign each group a different song (5 songs available, plus “Brother Can You Spare Me a Dime”)
- Play “Brother Can You Spare Me a Dime” and have students respond to it in their groups on the guided questions
- Have groups read through packet, answer guided questions, then have them write lyrics to a song they would write today around an important issue facing our society
- Have groups share their answers to guiding questions, and have them perform their lyrics to their song expressing feelings on a present day issue
- Closing question: What are some examples of primary and secondary sources we have used in class? How can these be used to construct our understanding of the Great Depression?

Assessment:

- Informal: Student participation
- Check and Monitor Progress
- Formal: Guided Questions
- Personally written song lyrics

CT State Standards:

Educational experiences in **Grades 9-12** will assure that students:

- use primary source documents to analyze multiple perspectives
- initiate questions and hypotheses about historic events they are studying
- describe relationships between historical subject matter and other subjects they study, current issues and personal concerns

Music During the Depression

Do artists use music today to portray political and social opinions? For years, musicians have used their music as a way to share their views on certain issues. During the Great Depression, songs were written to convey different attitudes and opinions. The following lyrics are a few examples of songs written during the 1930s.

“Brother Can You Spare Me a Dime?” (1931)

They used to tell me
I was building a dream.
And so I followed the mob
When there was earth to plow
Or guns to bear
I was always there
Right on the job.
They used to tell me
I was building a dream
With peace and glory ahead.
Why should I be standing in line
Just waiting for bread?
Once I built a railroad
I made it run
Made it race against time.
Once I built a railroad
Now it's done
Brother, can you spare a dime?
Once I built a tower up to the sun
Brick and rivet and lime.
Once I built a tower,
Now it's done.
Brother, can you spare a dime?
Once in khaki suits
Gee we looked swell
Full of that yankee doodle dee dum.
Half a million boots went sloggin' through hell
And I was the kid with the drum!
Say don't you remember?
They called me Al.
It was Al all the time.
Why don't you remember?
I'm your pal.
Say buddy, can you spare a dime?

Once in khaki suits,
Ah, gee we looked swell
Full of that yankee doodle dee dum!
Half a million boots went sloggin' through hell
And I was the kid with the drum!
Oh, say don't you remember?
They called me Al.
It was Al all the time.
Say, don't you remember?
I'm your pal.
Buddy, can you spare a dime?

What do you think the author of this song is writing about?

What had Al done for his country?

What event took place in 1932 that this song may have appealed to?

**“Dust Bowl Blues”
(1930s)**

I just blowed in, and I got them dust bowl blues,
I just blowed in, and I got them dust bowl blues,
I just blowed in, and I'll blow back out again.

I guess you've heard about ev'ry kind of blues,
I guess you've heard about ev'ry kind of blues,
But when the dust gets high, you can't even see the sky.

I've seen the dust so black that I couldn't see a thing,
I've seen the dust so black that I couldn't see a thing,
And the wind so cold, boy, it nearly cut your water off.

I seen the wind so high that it blowed my fences down,
I've seen the wind so high that it blowed my fences down,
Buried my tractor six feet underground.

Well, it turned my farm into a pile of sand,
Yes, it turned my farm into a pile of sand,
I had to hit that road with a bottle in my hand.

I spent ten years down in that old dust bowl,
I spent ten years down in that old dust bowl,
When you get that dust pneumony, boy, it's time to go.

I had a gal, and she was young and sweet,
I had a gal, and she was young and sweet,
But a dust storm buried her sixteen hundred feet.

She was a good gal, long, tall and stout,
Yes, she was a good gal, long, tall and stout,
I had to get a steam shovel just to dig my darlin' out.

These dusty blues are the dustiest ones I know,
These dusty blues are the dustiest ones I know,
Buried head over heels in the black old dust, I had to pack up and go.
An' I just blowed in, an' I'll soon blow out again.

(Lyrics available at <http://www.geocities.com/Nashville/3448/dbblues.html>)

“White House Blues”
1932-1933

Look here, Mr. Hoover, it's see what you done;
You went off a-fishin', let the country go to ruin.
Now he's gone, I'm glad he's gone.

Roosevelt's in the White House, doin' his best,
While old Hoover is layin' 'round and takin' his rest.
Now he's gone, I'm glad he's gone.

Pants all busted, patches all way down,
People got so ragged they couldn't go to town.
Now he's gone, I'm glad he's gone.

Workin' in the coal mines, twenty cents a ton,
Fourteen long hours and your work day is done.
Now he's gone, I'm glad he's gone.

People all angry, they all got the blues,
Wearing patched britches and old tennis shoes.
Now he's gone, I'm glad he's gone.

Got up this morning, all I could see
Was corn bread and gravy just a-waitin' for me.
And now he's gone, I'm glad he's gone.

Look here, Mr. Hoover, it's see what you done;
You went off a-fishin', let the country go to ruin.
Now he's gone, I'm glad he's gone.

(Song Lyric found at <http://www.fortunecity.com/tinpan/parton/2/whitehou.html>)

“The Rich Man and the Poor Man”

1932

There's just two kind of people, the sinner and the saint;
There's one that gets and always got while the other poor one ain't.
Oh, the rich man drives his Lincoln past the red light with a grin,
And the poor man follows right behind in his little hunk of tin.
There's a motorcycle copper following upon their trail;
Oh, the rich man tears his ticket, but the poor man goes to jail.

Oh, the rich man takes the high road anywhere that he may go,
But when the poor man's travelin' he must always take the low.
So if you're rich you'll travel snug as peas are in the pod;
Oh, the rich man rides a cushion and the poor man rides the rods.

Oh, the rich man when he's ailing stays at home and calls the doc,
But the poor man has to go to work, be in time to punch a clock.
The rich man takes his medicine, has his doctors and his nurse;
So the rich man he gets better but the poor man he gets worse!

Oh, the rich man steals a million from the bank that he controls,
While the poor man steals a loaf of bread or a penny's worth of rolls.
They take them to the courthouse, one is laughing, one's in tears;
Oh, the rich man gets an apology while the poor man gets ten years!

Oh, the rich man gets a lawyer and the lawyer pleads his case,
While the poor man asks for sympathy but of that there is now trace.
So if you're rich don't worry but the poor must give up hope;
Oh, the rich man gets acquitted while the poor man gets the rope!

Oh, the rich man when he kicks off has a casket made of gold,
While the poor man has a wooden box and his grave looks mighty cold.
The rich man gets a sermon but here's one thing that's sure,
When the rich man takes that last long ride he's as much dead as the poor!
(Lyrics can be found at <http://www.fortunecity.com/tinpan/parton/2/rich.html#top>)

“I Am a Constant Girl of Sorrow”
1930s

I am a girl of constant sorrow,
I've seen trouble all my days.
I bid farewell to old Kentucky,
The state where I was born and raised.

My mother, how I hated to leave her,
Mother dear who now is dead.
But I had to go and leave her
So my children could have bread.

Perhaps, dear friends, you are wonderin'
What the miners eat and wear.
This question I will try to answer,
For I'm sure that it is fair.

For breakfast we had bulldog gravy,
For supper we had beans and bread.
The miners don't have any dinner,
And a tick of straw they call a bed.

Well, we call this hell on earth, friends,
I must tell you all goodbye.
Oh, I know you all are hungry,
Oh, my darlin' friends, don't cry.

(Lyrics can be found at <http://www.fortunecity.com/tinpan/parton/2/girl.html>)

“No Depression (In Heaven)”
1936

For fear the hearts of men are failing,
For these are latter days we know.
The Great Depression now is spreading,
God's word declared it would be so.

CHORUS:

I'm going where there's no depression,
To the lovely land that's free from care.
I'll leave this world of toil and trouble,
My home's in Heaven, I'm going there.

In that bright land, there'll be no hunger,
No orphan children cryin' for bread,
No weeping widows, toil or struggle,
No shrouds, no coffins, and no death.

This dark hour of midnight nearing
And tribulation time will come.
The storms will hurl in midnight fear
And sweep lost millions to their doom.

(Lyrics can be found at <http://www.fortunecity.com/tinpan/parton/2/nodep.html>)

Song Analysis Worksheet

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

What is the author of this song writing about?

What feelings and/or opinions is the singer describing?

Does this song seem to resemble progress or decline in the American way of life?

What are some examples of songs we hear today that express political and/ or social feelings?

When you finish, on a separate sheet of paper, work with your group to write your own lyrics about an issue affecting you personally or your country today.