

PRESERVING OUR ROOTS

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Recognize dominant themes expressed in the lyrics of American *roots music*;
- Select examples of *roots music* which illustrate each theme with an emphasis on Mississippi artists;
- Design and fashion a creative project which show-cases the themes and artists of American roots music; and
- Develop a strategy to educate the community regarding the importance of preserving roots music.

SUGGESTED GRADE LEVEL: 8-12

TIME FRAME

Two-three 50 minute class periods

CURRICULUM STANDARDS FOR SOCIAL STUDIES

I. National Council for the Social Studies

Standard I: *Culture*

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity.

II. Mississippi Social Studies Framework: www.mde.k12.ms.us

U.S. History, 8th Grade: Competency 3

Mississippi Studies: Competency 6

U.S. History: Competency 3

World History: Competency 6

Sociology: Competency 5

Problems in American Democracy: Competency 4

Minority Studies: Competency 2

Humanities I: Competency 6

Humanities II: Competencies 3 and 6

Local Culture: Competency 3

SUPPLIES/EQUIPMENT

Butcher paper for quotes
Copies of the *mad-lib* activity
Recording and filming equipment

BACKGROUND FOR TEACHERS

Singer and guitarist Bonnie Raitt describes American *roots music* as being at the “center of this country’s soul.” *Roots music* tells the story of who we are: our culture, diversity, values, and history. In this lesson, students will explore the values that are expressed in *roots music* and will realize the continuing relevance of the message in *roots music*.

SETTING THE STAGE

1. Prior to beginning the lesson, write the following *New Harmonies* quotes on butcher paper to display around the classroom.

- a. “Just play what you believe in.” Dewey Balfa, Cajun musician
- b. “This land was made for you and me.” Woody Guthrie
- c. “I learnt my own way. I did what I liked, and I learnt my own style.” Clifton Chenier, zydeco musician
- d. “American roots music is the sharing and blending of different kinds of music, like a brotherhood thing.” Flaco Jimenez, tejano musician
- e. “I just make it sound like I think it ought to.” Mississippi John Hurt, blues musician

2. Prepare the *mad-lib* activity below to use as a lesson starter. The information is quoted from the *New Harmonies* exhibit.

A. American music is about _____; _____ to choose, to change, to hang on to what’s important to _____. Country singers borrow from the blues. _____ musicians pick up a thing or two from _____. In music, barriers _____.

B. American music is about _____; people making their _____ heard. And _____ is invited to join in.

C. American music is about _____; every musician finding his or her own _____.

D. American music is about _____. It comes out of a _____ of different _____ from many different _____ of the _____.

E. American music reflects American _____. Singers swap _____ and _____. Spoons and washboards become _____. Americans can't resist playing around with something and making it _____.

LESSON PROCEDURES

1. Review with students an accurate identification of *roots music*. Tell them that most roots music reflects one or more dominant ideas or themes that are important to the American culture.
2. Distribute the *mad lib* exercise for students to fill in the blanks. This should be done without assistance from the teacher but inform them that clues to the answers can be found in the quotes posted around the classroom. Let them form small groups to compare their answers and to change them if they wish.
3. Teacher will read aloud to the class the information regarding the dominant themes and allow students to make corrections on their *mad libs*. (This information is located in the final section of the exhibit; it is also printed at the end of this lesson for the convenience of the teacher.)
4. To reinforce mastery, have students construct a bubble organizer or web map showing the themes of American roots music. This will be placed in their notebooks with their *mad lib* activity.
5. Divide students into small groups to research musical resources for additional examples which illustrate each theme. Teacher will need to provide library time, resources in the classroom, or a visit to the exhibit; students may wish to bring tapes, records, CDs from home to use, with teacher guidance. Helpful web sites are listed at the end of the lesson.

STUDENT PRODUCT

1. Assign each group to show-case the themes and to cite examples by creating a project for display and/or presentation. Encourage them to use various media to communicate their information.
2. At this point, students should have realized how roots music reflects ideas, themes, and values that are indisputably American and certainly have relevance for today. Ask them to discuss how this kind of music tells our

history, reveals various cultural identities, and produces new and different sounds as distinct instruments, melodies, and harmonies have merged through the years.

3. Using a rating scale of 1 – 5, with 5 representing their strongest feeling, ask students the question: “How important is it to preserve roots music?” Let them place this determination in their notebooks and write several sentences to explain their rating. Allow them to share their thoughts.

4. Have students suggest ways they might play a role in educating the community on the importance of preserving roots music. They may wish to create a brochure or collage to distribute or post in the community, especially if there are local roots musicians who could be identified. They might want to sponsor a production at the school and invite roots musicians; their projects then could then be displayed for the public to view.

LESSON EXTENSIONS

1. Have students write a verse of song representing one of the dominant themes of American roots music.
2. As students listen to additional recordings of roots music, they will recognize the themes. (Suggestion: Recordings by *Sweet Honey in the Rock* contain a variety of songs illustrating the themes as do the web sites below.)

WEB SITES

<http://shs.starkville.k12.ms.us/mswm/MSWritersAndMusicians/music.html>
<http://www.arts.state.ms.us/crossroads/resources.html>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_roots_music
<http://msmusic.org>
<http://allmusic.com>

COMPLETED *MAD LIB* ACTIVITY

A. American music is about freedom—freedom to choose, to change, to hang on to what’s important to you. Country singers borrow from the blues. Blues musicians pick up a thing or two from country. In music, barriers fall.

B. American music is about democracy—people making their voices heard. And everyone is invited to join in.

C. American music is about independence—every musician finding his or her own way.

D. American music is about diversity. It comes out of a mix of many different peoples from many different parts of the world.

E. American music reflects American ingenuity. Singers swap songs and rhythms. Spoons and washboards become musical instruments. Americans can't resist playing around with something and making it new.