

# Listening for History: Using Jazz Music as a Primary Source

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Picture this ... It's 8 o'clock on a Wednesday: "The regular crowd shuffles in" to an interdisciplinary teacher workshop called "Everybody's Got the Blues: Migration of the Blues in Post-World War II United States and United Kingdom." After exploring the push/pull factors of the Second Great Migration, social studies, music, and English teachers are on their feet clapping the shuffle rhythm, "stompin' the stallion," and singing an improvised 12-bar Delta Blues song about their morning while the workshop organizer accompanies them on double bass.

Now, picture students in an 8th grade U.S. history class stomp clapping freedom songs of the civil rights movement, high school students researching the "Leadership and Legacy" of Muddy Waters to align with the National History Day theme, world history students writing a poem entitled "War Is" in reaction to World War I poems and songs they analyzed, and high school juniors assuming the persona of a jazz musician they have researched for a performance-based learning assessment in a twentieth-century U.S. history class. Imagine music teachers seeking out social studies teachers in a workshop to better understand the historical context of Bessie Smith's performance of "Downhearted Blues," or teachers pouring over Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1964 speech in Arizona—analyzing it for historical references, literary elements, and passages with musical qualities.

These scenes highlight activities from a five-year professional development program focused on an interdisciplinary approach to teaching U.S. and world history using jazz and music often

linked to jazz: blues, gospel, and ragtime. The program, called Jazz from A to Z, represents collaboration between Arizona State University and the Mesa Arts Center in partnership with Jazz at Lincoln Center.<sup>1</sup> Through an integrated study of jazz music within the context of historical study, teachers and students can enrich both their historical and cultural knowledge. Music is an effective resource for teaching social studies, but it is often left out of secondary social studies classrooms.<sup>2</sup> Jazz music selections make for particularly compelling primary sources since the music often reflected the times. Additionally, music is a source that adolescents can relate to and enjoy. In what follows, we highlight useful resources and discuss how any teacher can incorporate jazz into their history courses.

## Jazz in the Social Studies Classroom

*"If 'jazz' means anything at all, which is questionable, it means the same thing it meant to musicians fifty years ago—freedom of expression. I used to have a*

*definition, but I don't think I have one anymore, unless it is that it is a music with an African foundation which came out of an American environment."*

—Duke Ellington as quoted by Stanley Dance<sup>3</sup>

Jazz is America's music. It has deep roots in ragtime, blues, and the music of the black church. It was shaped in American cities such as New Orleans, Chicago, New York, Kansas City, Pittsburgh, Detroit and Los Angeles after the mass migration of African Americans and immigrants in the first half of the twentieth century. Musicians steeped in these American urban cultures exercised their freedom of expression and made jazz their own.

Jazz musicians, deeply affected by time and place, created a soundtrack to America's history. The jazz trumpet of the great Louis Armstrong accompanied the migrants of the Great Migration. Americans and Europeans danced their way through the Great Depression to the swing music of Count Basie and Benny Goodman. The importance of jazz music emerges from its democratic roots and its tendency toward improvisation; these elements, along with technological advancements of the twentieth century and the prominence of the United States on the world stage have enabled it to cross political and cultural boundaries.

Jazz music is found in every era of twen-



Photographer: Marcie Jergel Hutchinson

Rodney Whitaker, one of the Jazz from A to Z workshop organizers, engages a high school student in singing the blues, January 14, 2015.

tieth-century history from the origins of jazz to World War I, the 1920s, the Great Depression, and the post-World War II era. (See Table 1, a table of historical eras and musical genres). Additionally, jazz music connects well with literature, art, and poetry. For example, in studying the Great Migration in the first part of the twentieth century, students could analyze and compare composer Duke Ellington’s “Harlem Air Shaft,” ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4NN-lecNvw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4NN-lecNvw)), painter Jacob Lawrence’s *Migration Series*, ([www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2015/onewayticket/](http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2015/onewayticket/)) and poet Langston Hughes’s “The Weary Blues”

([www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/weary-blues](http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/weary-blues)) to examine aspects of the African American experience during that time period. Although there are many aspects of jazz music that teachers can emphasize in social studies instruction, we have found that two of the most useful and engaging are (a) focusing on multiple perspectives by examining jazz in the context of U.S. and world history, and (b) analyzing the compositional and performance styles as well as the music lyrics.

Like other primary sources, music can be analyzed and interpreted. This analysis provides multiple perspectives that can help students understand the

National Council for the Social Studies themes of ❶ **CULTURE**; ❷ **TIME, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE**; ❸ **INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS AND INSTITUTIONS**; AND ❹ **GLOBAL CONNECTIONS**. Using jazz music as a primary source helps students understand the significance of the past, comprehend diverse cultures and shared humanity, assess change over time, develop historical empathy and recognize the importance of individuals who have made a difference in music and in history. This type of analysis also meets the Common Core Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, & Technical Subjects as well as the English Language Arts

**Table 1. 20<sup>TH</sup> Century Historical Eras and Related Music**

Please see “Jazz from A to Z” at [www.mesaartscenter.com/index.php/engagement/jazz-a-to-z/resources](http://www.mesaartscenter.com/index.php/engagement/jazz-a-to-z/resources) for information on each era and links to songs, past workshop topics, and teaching materials. See also “Smithsonian Jazz” at [americanhistory.si.edu/smithsonian-jazz/education](http://americanhistory.si.edu/smithsonian-jazz/education); “Folk Music and Song” at [www.loc.gov/folklife/guide/folkmusicand song.html](http://www.loc.gov/folklife/guide/folkmusicand%20song.html); and “Music that Scared America” at [www.humanities.uci.edu/history/ucihp/resources](http://www.humanities.uci.edu/history/ucihp/resources). Lyrics are often found with an Internet search; enter the song title and author. Free performances of most songs can be seen (or heard) on YouTube ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)) or Spotify ([www.spotify.com/us](http://www.spotify.com/us)).

Historical Era	Musical Genre/Artist/Song – Some Examples
Roots of Jazz; New Orleans, Mississippi and the South	<i>Ragtime</i> : Scott Joplin, “Maple Leaf Rag” <i>Blues</i> : Leadbelly, “Good Morning Blues” <i>Jazz</i> : Jelly Roll Morton, “Black Bottom Stomp”; King Oliver, “Snake Rag,” “Chimes Blues”; Louis Armstrong, “St. Louis Blues,” “Sugar Foot Stomp”; Sidney Bechet, “Maple Leaf Rag”
World War I, 1914–1918	<i>Ragtime/Early Jazz</i> : James Reese Europe, “On Patrol in No Man’s Land”; Eubie Blake and Nobel Sissle, “Charleston Rag” and “Shuffle Along”; Lucky Roberts, “Junk Man Rag”
The 1st Great Migration, 1915–40s	<i>Women in Jazz</i> : Mary Lou Williams, “Jitterbug Waltz,” “Zodiac Suite”; Ella Fitzgerald, “How High the Moon,” “Cotton Tail”; Dinah Washington, “What a Difference a Day Makes,” “Lover Come Back to Me”; Sarah Vaughn, “Lullaby of Birdland,” “Embraceable You.”
The Culture Wars, 1920s	<i>Jazz</i> : “The Whoopin’ Blues”; Louis Armstrong, “West End Blues,” “Potato Head Blues,” “Heebie Jeebies”
The “New Woman,” 1920s	<i>Blues</i> : Bessie Smith, “Preachin’ the Blues,” “Safety Mama,” “Yes, Indeed He Do,” “Downhearted Blues”
The Great Depression, Keeping Spirits Up, 1930s	<i>Swing Music</i> : Count Basie, “Swingin’ the Blues,” “Jumpin’ at the Woodside”; Duke Ellington, “The Mooche,” “Take the ‘A’ Train”; Benny Goodman, “Sing, Sing, Sing” <i>Vocal Jazz</i> : Ella Fitzgerald, “Tisket-a-Tasket,” “Cotton Tail”
Civil Rights and the New Deal, 1930–40s	<i>Blues/Folk</i> : Leadbelly, “Bourgeois Blues,” “Scottsboro Boys”; Josh White, “Jim Crow Train,” “Uncle Sam Blues” <i>Jazz</i> : Billie Holiday: “Strange Fruit”
World War II, 1940s	<i>Bebop</i> : Charlie Parker, “Ko-Ko,” “Cherokee”; Dizzy Gillespie, “Salt Peanuts”
1950s: Conformity & Dissent	<i>Hard Bop</i> : Charles Mingus, “Fables of Faubus”; Sonny Rollins: <i>Freedom Suite</i>
Beginnings of Nonviolent Resistance	<i>Gospel Music</i> : Mahalia Jackson, “Come Sunday” / <i>Freedom Songs (Congregational Singing)</i> : “Wade in the Water,” “I Shall Not Be Moved,” “O Freedom” <i>Jazz</i> : Max Roach: <i>We Insist: Max Roach’s Freedom Now Suite</i> ; <i>Vocal Jazz</i> : Nina Simone, “I Wish I Knew”
1963 Civil Rights Movement	<i>Gospel Music</i> : Mahalia Jackson, “I Been ‘Buked and I Been Scorned” <i>Jazz</i> : John Coltrane, “Alabama,” Donald Byrd, “Amen,” “Cristo Redentor” <i>Popular Music</i> : Bob Dylan, “Blowin’ in the Wind”; Sam Cooke, “A Change is Gonna Come”; Curtis Mayfield, “People Get Ready”; Staple Singers, “Long Walk to DC”
Jazz Diplomacy during the Cold War	<i>Jazz</i> : Dizzy Gillespie, “Night in Tunisia,” Louis Armstrong, “What Did I Do To Be So Black and Blue,” Duke Ellington, “Far East Suite,” “Blue Bird of Delhi”; Dave Brubeck, “Blue Rondo a la Turk,” “Calcutta Blues”; Iola and Dave Brubeck, <i>The Real Ambassadors</i>
Post-World War II; 2 <sup>ND</sup> Great Migration; Civil Rights in the Urban North and West	<i>Delta Blues</i> : Son House, “Walkin’ Blues”; Robert Johnson, “Crossroad Blues”; Muddy Waters, “I Be’s Troubled” <i>Urban Blues</i> : Muddy Waters, “Mannish Boy”; Memphis Slim and Willie Dixon, “Chicago House Rent Party,” Johnny Young, “Stockyard Blues”; Big Bill Broonzy, “Black, Brown, and White”; Willie Dixon, “It Don’t Make Sense”; Marvin Gaye, “Inner City Blues”; Stevie Wonder, “Living for the City” <i>Jazz</i> : Nina Simone, “Backlash Blues,” “To Be Young Gifted and Black”

# Using Music as a Primary Source (An Analysis Tool)

**HANDOUT**

Read this handout in its entirety *before* listening to the music.

## 1. Describing the Music using Historical Context:

Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Composer: \_\_\_\_\_

Date Recorded: \_\_\_\_\_ Recording Company & Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Events Happening in the World/Country/Region at the Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Background of the Composer: (position, nationality, gender, occupation, social class, religion, ethnicity, etc.)  
\_\_\_\_\_

## 2. What did you hear? (First time played) Type of Music (folk, classical, blues, jazz, rock, etc.):

\_\_\_\_\_

Instruments (brass, woodwinds, strings, percussion): \_\_\_\_\_

Vocals: Is there a vocalist in the piece? \_\_\_\_\_

What language/dialect is being sung? \_\_\_\_\_

## 3. Analyzing the Music: (Second time played) Compositional and Performance Style: Use musical terms to analyze the music you just described (e.g., beat, call and response, dynamics). See the "Jazz Glossary" for definitions: <http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/jazzglossary/archives.html>.

Musical Term	Analysis (How is it used in the music? Why?)

## HANDOUT (cont.)

Song Lyrics: Write down the most important words of the song. How do they help tell the song's story?

Words/Phrase	Analysis (What does the word mean? Why is it used?)

Note anything the music informs about life in the world/nation/region at the time it was created.

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Video Performance (if available): Describe the performance (wardrobe, location, choreography, staging, interaction between the performers and the audience, depiction of the music, etc.) of the piece. How does the performance of the piece help to further the message of the song?

#### 4. Interpreting the Music: (Based on the description and the analysis of the piece.)

Motivation/Purpose: What is the message of the piece? What is the composer trying to do? Explain (using specific references from the music).

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Audience: Based on your description and analysis of the piece, who was the intended audience for the music? Explain.

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Impact/Effectiveness: Is the composer's message effectively presented in the music? What impact would it have on the intended audience? How did it make you feel? Explain with specific references to the music and its historic context.

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#### 5. Lasting Impression: What is the most memorable or powerful aspect of this piece? Explain.

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Standards for Speaking & Listening (e.g., interpreting a song's "word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used" [www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/SL/11-12/](http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/SL/11-12/)).

#### Multiple Perspectives: Giving Voice to the Voiceless

*"Jazz music is America's past and its potential, summed up and sanctified*

*and accessible to anybody who learns to listen to, feel, and understand it. The music can connect us to our earlier selves and to our better selves-to-come."*

—Wynton Marsalis, managing and artistic director of Jazz at Lincoln Center<sup>4</sup>

Music opens a window to the past, allowing us to hear the sounds and emo-

tions of a particular place and time. As a primary source, music awakens the listener to personal perspectives on past events and beliefs. Like other art forms, music reflects society and can be a forceful agent for change. Songs throughout history have given a voice to the voiceless. James Reese Europe conveyed the horrors endured by the Harlem Hellfighters



during World War I when he composed and performed “On Patrol in No Man’s Land.” Bessie Smith sang of issues that still face women: domestic violence, male supremacy, and working-class realities. Leadbelly sang the blues of African American migrants who experienced alienation, loneliness, and discrimination during the Great Migration. Josh White’s songs of social protest attacked segregation during World War II. Dave and Iola Brubeck parodied U.S. diplomatic efforts in Asia and Africa during the Cold War with their musical production, *The Real Ambassadors*. By examining these historical eras through the lens of music and the people who created the music, students can engage in historical empathy for people and events typically not included in social studies curricula. Teachers can integrate these perspectives into the units that they currently teach (see “Jazz from A to Z” for sample lessons and resources: [www.mesaartscenter.com/engagement/jazz-a-to-z/resources](http://www.mesaartscenter.com/engagement/jazz-a-to-z/resources)).

### Analysis Beyond Lyrics

Social studies teachers sometimes have students analyze music lyrics as part of primary source analysis activities. However, it is less common for students to analyze the genre, vocals, and compositional and performance style of a piece of music. The Jazz from A to Z program has developed an analysis tool (See handout/worksheet) to assist teachers in using any piece of music more fully as a primary source. The first author, Marcie Hutchinson, created the Music Analysis Tool for teachers in consultation with

Jazz at Lincoln Center’s teaching professionals;<sup>5</sup> however, the analysis tool can be used with any genre of music from folk to country or rock and hip-hop. Like any other primary source, music must be put in its historical context. Students using the Music Analysis Tool rely on historical thinking skills to consider the historical perspectives and context of a particular piece of music. Students are guided through five steps of analysis that include examining the historical context, examining the compositional and performance style, and assessing the impact of the piece in history. After students complete the Music Analysis Tool, teachers can use the additional questions (See p. 137) for a whole class discussion.

Recently, a group of eighth graders in a team-taught Language Arts and Social Studies class analyzed a recording of “Downhearted Blues” by Bessie Smith ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=go6TiLleVZA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=go6TiLleVZA)) as part of a unit on the 1920s. The students worked in pairs to describe the music in its historical context by discussing traditional and more modern views of women in the 1920s, and determining significant biographical aspects of the lives of Bessie Smith and the composers of the piece: Alberta Hunter and Lovie Austin. After the first play of “Downhearted Blues” many students, including those who had not studied music before, could determine the type of music, name the instrument used, and comment on the use of language in the lyrics. In checking for their understanding, it was easy to identify students who played an instrument

or sang in a choir. Using a jazz glossary ([ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/jazzglossary/archives.html](http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/jazzglossary/archives.html)) and their own experiences, these students served as “experts” by explaining the musical terms to their classmates and helping them identify them in the performance. For example, the music students pointed out how the piano player established the tempo by accenting the beat or pulse of the song. That tempo helped the listeners to focus attention on the lyrics sung by the “Empress of the Blues.” Then it was time for the class poets to shine. They could help analyze the lyrics by determining important words and discussing how the word choice and Smith’s phrasing of the melody drove the message of the song.

After a few minutes of quiet time to interpret the music using their descriptions and analysis of the piece, students then engaged in “think, pair, share” in their groups and came up with some amazing interpretations. All the students recognized the song as a modern depiction of women by linking evidence from the song with the issues facing women in the 1920s. Many students thought that the music and the lyrics were powerful and would have attracted young women who were ready to challenge traditional views. One usually quiet young woman eagerly described Bessie Smith’s performance as bold, confident, and deliberate, basing her opinion on evidence from the instrumentation, the historical context, and Smith’s approach to the music. Students were eager to share their lasting impressions of the piece using evidence from the music and the historical context.

## Discussion Questions

1. What does the title of the piece tell you about the message of the song? Who was the composer? Provide some information on his/her background.
2. What historical events were occurring at the time the piece was written? What was the motivation of the composer to write the piece? Does the music effectively support the composer’s message? (Include relevant and specific detail from the historical context in your answer.)
3. What questions would you ask of this composer in an interview?
4. Do you agree with the message of the piece? Cite specific information to support your view.
5. Imagine yourself to be a music critic at the time the piece was first performed. How would you rate the piece? Why?
6. How will you remember this piece so you can identify it when you hear it again?

Students left the class talking about how women still face some of the same issues that Bessie Smith sang about in the 1920s.

## Conclusion

*"In music and in life, serious listening forces you to recognize others."*

—Wynton Marsalis<sup>6</sup>

By teaching our students how to use music as a primary source, we not only engage them in historical thinking, we also teach them how to be active listeners. The Jazz from A to Z workshops we have run and the Music Analysis Tool we have developed have allowed teachers and students to practice listening and hear the voices of past musicians whose music reflected the times and also advanced social change. By practicing listening, students are better equipped to recognize others' voices on current issues and then express their own ideas in an

informed, deliberate and civil manner. 🗣️

## Notes

1. The professional development program was partially funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.
2. Jeffery A. Mangram and Rachel L. Weber, "Incorporating Music into the Social Studies Classroom: A Qualitative Study of Secondary Social Studies Teachers," *Journal of Social Studies Research* 36, no. 1 (2012): 3-21.
3. Stanley Dance, *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 5.
4. Wynton Marsalis with Geoffrey C. Ward, *Moving to Higher Ground: How Jazz Can Change Your Life* (New York: Random House, 2008), 13
5. The music analysis tool was developed by Marcie Hutchinson in collaboration with Jazz at Lincoln Center's teaching professionals Rodney Whitaker and Eli Yamin. The collaboration was influenced in part by analysis tools from Frederick D. Drake and Lynn R. Nelson, *Engagement in Teaching History: Theory and Practice for Middle and Secondary Teachers*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson, 2008), 67-77; and National Archives, "Document Analysis Worksheets," [www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets](http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets).
6. Marsalis with Ward, 66.

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