



BO DIDDLEY'S UNCONVENTIONAL 1950's SOUND AND ITS ANTICIPATION OF HIP HOP

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How were Bo Diddley's recordings an anomaly in relation to 1950s Pop music, and how is his rhythm-driven sound and self-presentation a precursor to Hip Hop style?

OVERVIEW

From his first appearance on the Billboard R&B chart in 1955 and continuing over his five-decade career, Bo Diddley has been celebrated for the rhythm-driven, percussive sound of his ensemble, at the center of which was Diddley's guitar playing. If by the Rock era the guitar solo became a symbolic centerpiece in recordings and performances, Diddley's emphasis was always on the rhythm guitar. His approach didn't revolve around the single- and double-note leads that came to dominate the music. Instead, Bo Diddley pioneered a sound that involved every member of his combo playing with a percussive sensibility. Rhythm was emphasized over melody, with a vocal style that often approximated Rap set against that rhythmic backdrop. Earlier even than James Brown, Diddley inadvertently pointed to a Hip Hop future. His best-known rhythm guitar pattern (three strokes/rest/two strokes, or "shave and a haircut, two bits") influenced many. The "Bo Diddley beat," as it came to be known, appeared on records by Buddy Holly, the Rolling Stones, Bruce Springsteen, U2, rapper B.o.B., and many others.



In Bo Diddley's own songs, the "Bo Diddley beat" was often combined with remarkably simple chord changes, as can be heard on his self-titled debut single, "Bo Diddley." Throughout that single-chord song, which went to No. 1 on the Billboard R&B chart in 1955, percussion takes clear precedence over melody or chord progressions. His emphasis on looped rhythm patterns, combined with semi-spoken, often boastful lyrics, position his music closer to the Hip Hop aesthetic than his fellow Rock and Roll pioneers in the 1950s, including Little Richard, Elvis Presley, and Chuck Berry. In a 2008 article in *Smithsonian Magazine*, music historian Ned Sublette writes that Bo Diddley "was practically rapping anyway, with stream-of-consciousness rhyming over a rhythm loop."

It was not just the "Bo Diddley beat" that set him apart however. Rather than singing about familiar images from postwar teenage life, as his labelmate Chuck Berry does on records such as

OVERVIEW (CONTINUED)

“School Days” (1957), Bo Diddley’s lyrics explore more exotic territories. On his 1956 recording “Who Do You Love,” he sings about cobra snakes, human skulls, and tombstones -- symbols borrowed from the hoodoo rituals possibly recalled from his childhood in rural Mississippi, before his family moved north to Chicago in 1934. These images drawn from a black southern culture well beyond the boundaries of mainstream American life further demonstrate how Bo Diddley’s music can be heard as a precursor to Rap, a genre rife with images and language from black life as experienced on inner city streets. Late in his career, Bo Diddley even recorded with Chuck D of the famed Hip Hop group Public Enemy, a symbolic collaboration indicating the throughline from 1950s Rock and Roll to the emergence of Hip Hop and Rap in the late 70s and early 80s.

In this lesson, students explore the particularities of Bo Diddley’s music, contrasting it with other artists of the late 1940s and early 50s, specifically John Lee Hooker’s “Boogie Chillen,” Chuck Berry’s “School Days” and The Chordettes’ “Mr. Sandman.” Through comparative listening, students will determine elements of Bo Diddley’s style, including his emphasis on rhythm and lyrical content, and examine how his recordings compared with the popular music of his peers. In groups, students watch 1980s-era footage of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, engaging in a guided discussion to draw conclusions as to whether they believe Bo Diddley can be viewed as a precursor to Hip Hop.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- How Bo Diddley's unconventional sound contrasted with popular music styles in the 1950s
- Hoodoo culture, as described by folklorist Zora Neale Hurston, and its connection with Bo Diddley's recording of "Who Do You Love"
- Elements of Hip Hop that may be reflected in Bo Diddley's recordings, including his self-referential lyrics set to a repeated rhythmic beat

2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Interpret a range of media, including songs, images, and sheet music to develop an understanding of an artist and his style
- Common Core: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone. (Reading 4)
- Common Core: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence. (Writing 1)

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

1. Play clip of the Hip Hop group Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five performing "The Message" (1982).

While watching, students should take notes on the performance and its general subject matter.

Ask the class:

- The hook of the song is "It's like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder how I keep from going under."
- What environment is this song depicting? What images stand out to you as a listener?

2. Working as a class, ask students to generate their own list of the "Elements of Hip Hop" and write responses up on the board.

(Answers may include: spoken lyrics over a steady beat, looping and sampling tracks, a repetitive "hook," self-referential or boastful lyrics, scratching an LP, etc.)

You will return to this list throughout the lesson.

PROCEDURE:

1. Explain that the class will be exploring the recordings of Bo Diddley, a Rock and Roll pioneer during the 1950s whose style can be viewed as a precursor to Hip Hop. Play a clip of Bo Diddley performing “Hey! Bo Diddley” in 1965, a song he originally released in 1957. Students should pay close attention to both the lyrics and the rhythmic feel of the song. Ask students:

- Who is the subject of this song? What are some reasons why Bo Diddley might name the song after himself and refer to himself in the third person throughout the lyrics? (Answers may include: he is establishing his persona, he is boasting, deriving power as a performer by referring to himself, etc.)
- Describe the instrumentation of Bo Diddley’s band. How do the guitars, drums, and backup singers reinforce the rhythm of the music? (Answers may include: all the instruments are playing a similar rhythm, the beat is emphasized by the dancing, etc.)

2. Bo Diddley stood out from his contemporaries by crafting a percussive guitar technique that differed greatly from the traditional Blues style that influenced many other guitarists. Play an audio clip of Robert Johnson performing “Stop Breakin’ Down Blues” (1937).

Point out to the students that this is an example of Country Blues, in which the musician mixes rhythm guitar with finger picking on an acoustic instrument.

3. Next, play an audio clip of “Boogie Chillen” (1948) performed by John Lee Hooker, an Electric Blues artist who initially inspired Bo Diddley to learn the guitar at age 12. Students should pay close attention to Hooker’s guitar, on which he is playing a plucked rhythm, punctuated with single-note accents. Ask students:

- How does “Stop Breakin’ Down Blues” compare with “Boogie Chillen”? (Answers may include: acoustic versus electric, different rhythms, but the Blues style and fingerpicking sound is prevalent in both examples)

4. To contrast with these two recordings, play Bo Diddley performing “Bo Diddley” (1954). Students should pay close attention to the electric guitar style. Ask students:

- How is Bo Diddley playing his guitar on this recording? Do you hear single notes being picked on the guitar, or a strumming pattern? (Note to teacher: Bo Diddley is known for his percussive guitar strumming).
- How is Bo Diddley’s guitar style different from Robert Johnson’s “Stop Breakin’ Down Blues” and John Lee Hooker’s “Boogie Chillen”? (Answers may include: less fingerpicking, more powerful strumming, there are more instruments in the recording like bass, drums, and maracas, all reinforcing the rhythm).

Inform students that this distinctive rhythm (three strokes/rest/two strokes) influenced many artists and came to be known as the “Bo Diddley beat,” appearing on records by Buddy Holly, the Rolling Stones, Bruce Springsteen, U2, rapper B.o.B., and many others.

5. Bo Diddley did not just break away from Blues traditions, his songs also varied greatly from his contemporaries on the Pop charts during the early 1950s. Play an audio clip of the Chordettes performing “Mr. Sandman” (1954), which went to No. 1 on the Billboard Pop singles chart the year before Bo Diddley released “Bo Diddley.” Ask students:

- How does the melody of “Mr. Sandman” compare to “Bo Diddley”? (Answers may include: different instrumentation, use of vocal harmonies, more complex melody than “Bo Diddley,” etc.)

6. Project a page of sheet music for “Mr.

PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

Sandman” on the board. As a class, look at the guitar chord charts above the musical notation, indicated beside the red arrow. Ask students:

- How many chord changes do you count throughout this excerpt of the song? (Note to teacher: the chords change 10 times.)

7. Display a page of sheet music for the song “Bo Diddley.” Ask the students:

- How many guitar chord changes do you count throughout this excerpt of the song? (Note to teacher: the only guitar chord played during this song is the “G” chord; it does not change.)

8. Discuss as a class:

- As a guitarist, Bo Diddley would often play just one chord throughout an entire song. What other musical elements does this allow him to focus on? (Answers may include: focus on rhythm of that chord, innovate with lyrics and music on top of a steady chord, etc.)
- What relationship might one repetitive chord have with a repetitive (or looped) beat on a Hip Hop track?

9. In addition to his rhythm-driven musical style, Bo Diddley also differed from his contemporaries in terms of his lyrics. Distribute Handout 1: Lyrical Comparison to the students.

Play the first minute of Chuck Berry performing “ School Days ” (1957). As they listen, students should take notes on the key images presented in the song.

10. Next, play an audio clip of Bo Diddley performing “Who Do You Love” (1956). As they listen, students should take notes

on the key images presented in the song.

Discuss as a class:

- What types of images are evoked in each song?
- Which song do you think has imagery that would be familiar to a 1950s suburban teenager? Which images may seem foreign or strange to typical teenagers?

11. Some historians believe that “Who Do” in the title of Bo Diddley’s “Who Do You Love,” was meant to be a play on the word “hoodoo,” a practice of folklore and spirituality found in the Deep South, where Bo Diddley was born. Distribute Handout 2: Hoodoo and Zora Neale Hurston. Invite student volunteers to read aloud, alternating paragraphs. Discuss as a class:

- What are some images from Bo Diddley’s recording of “Who Do You Love” that you think might be related to hoodoo? (Answers may include: cobra snakes, human skulls, rattlesnake hide, tombstones, etc.)

12. Display the following quote on the board and ask a student volunteer to read it aloud:



... A song called “Bo Diddley” about the exploits of a character named Bo Diddley, by an artist named Bo Diddley, who played the Bo Diddley beat. By name-checking himself throughout the lyrics of his debut record, Bo Diddley established what we would now call his brand. Today this approach to marketing is routine for rappers, but Bo Diddley was there 30 years before. He was practically rapping anyway, with stream-of-consciousness rhyming over a rhythm loop.

*Ned Sublette, music historian
Smithsonian Magazine, 2008*

Ask the class:

- According to the music historian Ned Sublette, how does Bo Diddley, a “first-generation” Rock and Roll artist, relate to the genre of Hip Hop?



SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

1. Once again, play clip of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five performing “The Message.” This time, ask students to pay close attention to the lyrics.
2. Divide the students up into small groups to engage in a guided discussion. Project the Ned Sublette quote for students to reference during their conversations. Each group will consider the following two prompts, which the teacher may either write on the board or read aloud:
 - Discussion Prompt 1 - Consider the lyrics of Bo Diddley’s “Who Do You Love” (1956) in contrast with “The Message” (1982). In what ways do both songs depict a setting that mainstream audiences might find unfamiliar?
 - Discussion Prompt 2 - Return to the “Elements of Hip Hop” list from the Motivational Activity. Which “Elements of Hip Hop” from our list do you see reflected in Bo Diddley’s songs? If you disagree with Ned Sublette’s quote and you do not think Bo Diddley serves as a precursor to Hip Hop, explain how you think Bo Diddley’s music is fundamentally different from Hip Hop.

Invite groups to share out their responses, and address any shared or conflicting opinions or reflections.

EXTENSIONS:

Students will read Bo Diddley - His Best, from Rock’s Backpages, which includes excerpts of liner notes written by Don Snowden in 1997. The article speaks of Bo Diddley’s influence on artists across multiple decades, particularly through the “Bo Diddley beat” (three strokes/rest/two strokes).

Direct students to a list of recordings that feature the “Bo Diddley beat.” Students should listen to these recordings independently:

- “Not Fade Away” by Buddy Holly (1957) / also recorded by Rolling Stones (1964)
- “I Want Candy” by The Strangeloves (1965) / also recorded by Bow Wow Wow (1982)
- “Magic Bus” by The Who (1968)
- “She’s the One” by Bruce Springsteen (1975)
- “Faith” by George Michael (1987)
- “Desire” by U2 (1988)
- “Play the Guitar” by B.o.B ft. André 3000 (clean version) (2011)

After reading the article and listening to a selection of recordings, students will choose one song from the list to research independently, writing a one-page response or contributing to a class discussion based on the following questions:

- How does this song utilize the “Bo Diddley” beat? Which instrument(s) are playing the beat?
- How does your selected artist compare to Bo Diddley? Consider the performance style, instrumentation, genre, and lyrical imagery.

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Reading Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 for Literature and Informational Text

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Reading 4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

Reading 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

College and Career Readiness Writing Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects

Writing 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Writing 8: Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 6-12

Speaking and Listening 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Speaking and Listening 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language for Grades 6-12

Speaking and Listening 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Speaking and Listening 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.



SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 3: Individual Development and Identity

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

Core Music Standard: Responding

Select: Choose music appropriate for a specific purpose or context.

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

Core Music Standard: Connecting

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- Grandmaster Flash – The Message (1982)
- John Lee Hooker – Boogie Chillen (1948)
- The Chordettes – Mr. Sandman (1954)
- Robert Johnson – Stop Breakin' Down Blues (1937)
- Bo Diddley – Bo Diddley (1955)
- Bo Diddley – Hey! Bo Diddley (1965)
- Chuck Berry – School Days (1957)
- Bo Diddley – Who Do You Love (1956)

FEATURED PEOPLE

- Chuck Berry
- Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five
- John Lee Hooker
- Robert Johnson

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1: Lyrical Comparison of Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley
- Handout 2: Zora Neale Hurston and Hoodoo