ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How can teachers help students analyze and understand Rock and Roll?

OVERVIEW

Songs are like portals. Look into them and you can see the world in which they were made, see the social, cultural, and political landscapes that affected their making and their makers. For many listeners, however, it isn’t instinctual to approach music in this way. And it’s for good reason that this is the case — the personal, emotional response to music often overwhelms other ways of listening. This lesson is our effort to share some methods for bridging out from the personal/emotional response in order to contextualize songs and encourage critical thinking, hopefully giving teachers and students a sense for the rich possibilities around bringing popular music into the classroom.

If putting songs against their backdrops is an aim here, it nonetheless makes sense to begin with the music itself, considering issues of song structure, instrumentation, production, and so forth. While the aim of Rock and Roll: An American Story is to explore the many ways in which Rock and Roll can be analyzed, it is the music that provides the reason and the energy for such an undertaking. The music then becomes a kind of launching pad for an approach that situates songs in their moment. It is our belief that to understand and discuss a song’s basic musical features does not require expertise in the field, just the love of music that got us all here in the first place.

In this lesson we explore one song — Chuck Berry’s “Johnny B. Goode,” released on Chess Records in 1958 — and suggest several analytical frameworks in which one can deepen one’s understanding of the song: using a listening template; using a timeline to understand a song’s historical context; understanding Rock and Roll as a visual culture; understanding Rock and Roll as performance; understanding Rock and Roll as a literary form; and understanding the industry and technology of Rock and Roll. Of course, what we do with “Johnny B. Goode” can be done with any song. The objective is to understand a recording in the most complete way possible.
Upon completion of this lesson, students will develop frameworks through which they may:

- Chuck Berry’s role in solidifying the electric guitar as a central instrument in early Rock and Roll
- Use a Listening Template to understand a song
- Use a Timeline to understand the historical context in which a song was created
- Understand Rock and Roll as a visual culture
- Understand Rock and Roll as performance
- Understand Rock and Roll as a literary form
- Understand the industry and technology of Rock and Roll

ACTIVITIES

Using the Listening Template to Understand a Song:

One way to study Rock and Roll music is to have students analyze the sounds they hear. The Listening Template is designed to facilitate this analysis. No expertise is required for this process, and in many ways there are no “right” or “wrong” answers. A conversation about a song’s makeup should, in the best case, relax a class into feeling comfortable talking about music. Becoming aware of the kinds of sounds you are hearing, and beginning an analysis of a song in this way, can also lead to discussions about artistic choices and the aesthetic impressions they might convey.

- Distribute Handout 1: Listening Template.
- As a class, listen to the Temptations perform “My Girl” in 1965 (originally recorded and released in 1964). Follow along with the Listening Template to see how different elements of a song can be analyzed.
- With a partner or in small groups, use the Listening Template to structure a basic musical analysis of “Johnny B. Goode.” Note to teacher, the following notes can serve as a guide:
  - “Johnny B. Goode” Instrumentation (in order of entrance): lead/rhythm guitar, drums, bass, second guitar, piano, lead vocal
  - Mood: energetic, bright, slightly frenetic
  - Tempo: fast, uptempo
  - Lyrics: There is a strong sense of character and narrative, sung with crisp articulation
— you can understand every word, it’s a story about a kid who comes from a poor background and uses his guitar playing skill to make a name for himself

• Sounds Like: The piano sounds like Boogie-Woogie, the guitar exudes classic Rock and Roll energy, Blues riffs come in in places but the feel of the song is not Blues in the traditional sense

Using the Timeline to Understand a Song’s Context:

This approach emphasizes seeing the music in relation to the world in which it was made. First, it makes sense to establish the song’s place in music history. There are several ways to do this. One way is to look at the Billboard charts to see what songs were popular at the time of the one in question. For instance, in the last week of May 1958, “Johnny B. Goode” was at No. 8 on the charts, with Sheb Wooley’s “The Purple People Eater” taking the No. 1 slot. Dean Martin, the Four Preps, and Nat King Cole also had songs in the Top 10. For the teacher with some knowledge of popular music’s history, this much tells him/her that Rock and Roll was not in a position of pure and simple dominance. The teacher could then do an instructive comparison and contrast “Johnny B. Goode” with, for instance, either Dean Martin’s “Return to Me” or the Four Preps’ “Big Man.” Students who may not have a lot to say about “Johnny B. Goode” when hearing it in isolation will likely have something to share when they have a song to set it against. Adding another song, whether from Nat King Cole or one of the others mentioned, will provide further material for such an exercise. Use the Listening Template to draw up contrasting musical analyses. In each case, “Johnny B. Goode” will emerge more clearly as raw, guitar-driven Rock and Roll pitched toward a teen audience.

Next, the aim is to expand the timeline to include significant events that are not immediately related to Rock and Roll. Below is a short list of events that might be used to explore the general time period around the recording of “Johnny B. Goode.”

• Paul Robeson performs sold-out one man show at Carnegie Hall, 1958
• National Guard called in to Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1957
• American Bandstand, a local television show, joins ABC network, 1957
• Disneyland opens to public, 1955
• Passage of Federal-Aid Highway Act creates Interstate Highway System, 1956

By selecting any one of these events, an educator can begin to situate a song. In the case of Chuck Berry, issues of race will be an obvious point of discussion. In the pre-Civil Rights era, Berry was in the interesting position of being an African-American entertainer whose audience was significantly white. The same teenagers who were watching American Bandstand, which went national on ABC in 1957, were hearing directly from an African-American musician who recorded for a Chicago label, Chess, focused primarily on Blues and R&B. It was an instance of racial mixing through music, and this in the same general period when President Eisenhower was using
the National Guard to oversee the integration of a public high school. These two examples of racial mixing can, and should be, understood as related. To fully understand how the Civil Rights movement got traction in the 60s, one needs to go back and see what was happening in the 50s that set the stage.

**Understanding Rock and Roll as a Visual Culture: Film, TV, and Fashion:**

Not surprisingly, popular music is typically studied as music. The experience of popular music, however, is never just about sound. Since Rock and Roll’s beginnings, artists have always been seen as much as heard. Elvis Presley caused a certain furor on the basis of image alone. When people discuss the Beatles breaking into the American market in a big way, they talk about the band’s Ed Sullivan Show appearance. For artists of today, such as Lady Gaga, image is only that much more important. No surprise, then, that our study of Rock and Roll extends deeply into the visual realm. This level of analysis is about the look — fashion, the body, and televisual, photographic, and cinematic presentation.

As was the case with a strictly musical analysis, contrast is one way in which classroom discussions of image can come alive. For instance, in the lesson “Say It Loud: The Rise of Black Pride” in the Social Soul chapter, we invite students to compare a photograph of the Supremes in 1966 with a photograph of the Last Poets in 1970.

What these contrasting images point to is a shift in African-American culture that happened in the space of a few short years, as the mid 60s gave way to the 70s. Following Martin Luther King’s assassination and with the rise of the Black Power movement, there was a move toward a more “natural” look among African Americans — and African-American performers were often at the forefront of such change. The “afro” replaced straightened hair. Artists wore African Kente cloth. The locales in which artists were photographed often looked less like a studio and more like an urban street. And these developments were a symptom of deeper changes in how African-Americans were seeing their places in American life. The songs told a story; the images supported it.

In the case of the image of Chuck Berry, there is a clear sense of how Berry was being pitched to a teenage audience. A classroom conversation about the artist’s presence within that context, about what seems to work and what doesn’t, would illuminate some of the more curious aspects of his immersion in that milieu. His self-presentation is often described as “clownish,” and here he exudes some of that. A high school class could discuss the history of African-American representation in film, theater, and radio to consider what that clownishness might mean against the backdrop of American cultural life.

Not surprisingly, teaching the visual culture of Rock and Roll is particularly effective when it comes to generating classroom discussions. Across the whole of this curriculum we often turn to
issues of fashion, of hairstyle, of the body and its presentation, of television and film as vehicles for an artist’s career. It is a territory in which students feel some authority, and embarking on this kind of analysis is a means to generating conversation around a musical culture that, in many cases, may precede that of the students by several decades.

Understanding Rock and Roll as Performance: Dance, Live Shows, Theater:

This approach is, in some ways, an extension of the visual analysis of Rock and Roll. But performance may be better understood as a marriage of the sound culture and the visual culture of the music. We can close our eyes and still appreciate a James Brown performance — and indeed, his record Live at the Apollo, released in 1963, is proof of this — but to get the full effect of his power as an artist we need to see the performance. Likewise, much Hip Hop has a strong performative quality. An artist’s bodily approach to transmitting a song, his energy, his dance, is often what is remembered best when we can see the song being performed.

But performance is more than a single artist or a group moving in space as they play a song live. Performance is also about the stage set, the choreography, the lighting, the venue, the fans’ bodily response to the music, whether in dance or in the absence of dance. One might think of it all as a kind of theater and analyze it as such. There are actors, costumes, choreography, stage conventions, audience conventions. If at times the musicians claim that they are unconcerned about any of this, that position, too, is a kind of theatrical strategy. For instance, in the Singer-Songwriter genre, performers eschewed much of the theater; but the scene in which they performed was theater nonetheless, with its more intimate lighting, increased talk between songs, costumes that were consciously anti-costumes (just “street clothes” — but, of course, not just any street clothes).

An extension of this mode of analysis, as suggested above, relates to the audience and its response to the music. Whether with Chubby Checker’s “The Twist” or in early Punk Rock, audience participation through dance or other forms of interactivity is central to how artists’ performances unfold. To study the audience is to grasp something of the culture in which the music was enmeshed. In the case of the Chuck Berry clip, dancing is key to the scene -- there is a physical dialogue between the performer and the crowd that surrounds him. Indeed, it was a time when music and dance were intimately tied. And that would change over time. One could compare this performance of Berry’s to one of Howlin’ Wolf’s, a labelmate of Berry, to great effect.

Understanding Rock and Roll as a Literary Form:

It is hard to explore Chuck Berry’s work without a discussion of his songwriting as writing. “Johnny B. Goode” is an excellent example of Berry’s narrative impulse. He is a storyteller in the great tradition. Few songwriters have so successfully fit so much into two and half minutes. Working as a poet, letting the images drive the narrative, Berry strikes a balance between the lead guitar lines and the verses that tell of a protagonist who becomes famous for his guitar prowess. As a narrative, it is in the American vein of Horatio Alger stories, a rags-to-riches tale of music giving a “country boy” a life beyond his wildest dreams. A class could take the song
lyrics and identify the five images that seem key to propelling the story it contains. They can dissect the narrative into sections, analyzing just how Berry moves the story forward. But, further, it is worth discussing the matter of diction and clarity in Berry’s use of language. Citing Nat King Cole as an influence, Berry has said that to be understood was always among his goals.

In order to underscore the points made above, a teacher may select a song such as Little Richard’s “Tutti Frutti” or Jerry Lee Lewis’s “Great Balls of Fire” — both early Rock and Roll songs released in the same period as “Johnny B. Goode” — and compare both the writing, the story aspect, and the delivery of language. Such comparisons will illuminate the unique character of Chuck Berry’s work. If he was a major artist for a white, teenage audience, part of his appeal was in that crisp delivery and the storytelling style, driven by his use of imagery.

**Understanding the Industry and Technology of Rock and Roll:**

Not all areas of analysis are equally accessible to the casual listener. A teacher using this curriculum is not expected to know the history of the music industry or the history of the technology used to make and distribute popular recordings. But the discussion of such histories is important to an understanding of the music and its place in 20th century life and after.

One place to begin when discussing the technology is in the present. Students will generally be eager to talk about their own ways of listening, and that conversation can be a springboard to historical investigation. In the computer-dominated present, listening is often done on headphones and is self-selected rather than programmed, as radio was. This is a significant contrast to the time in which Chuck Berry’s “Johnny B. Goode” was released.

Listening in 1958 centered on radio and records. Top 40 radio as a format was established in the early 50s, a vehicle for the 45 rpm “singles” that would dominate the teen market. With the advent of the transistor radio, which had gone into production in the mid 50s, teenagers could break away from the experience of family listening and define their own tastes. All of this meant that it was more possible for young people to listen to the African-American artists toward whom their tastes were leaning. And, in turn, this helped those same artists break into the Top 40 more regularly. In some respects, the transistor radio helped pave the way for more segmented, youth-driven marketing. It was a technology that allowed young people to break away, to define their own tastes independent of the parent generation. Like the programming that catered to a teen audience, the transistor radio thus played a role in Rock and Roll’s rise to dominance.

Each moment in Rock and Roll history is defined, in part, by the technology used for listening. From the cassette recorder and mix tapes to the Sony Walkman and the iPod, technology has
affected listening styles and, indeed, listening communities. But a discussion of technology does not end at the point of reception, of listening. Technology has affected how the music is recorded in the first place. Of course, recording technology is sometimes more challenging to discuss, because it is often more distant to the listener, even if computer programs for recording, such as GarageBand, are common on personal computers today.

One reason to study recording technology, however, is to appreciate the leaps made at certain points in music history. Among the most celebrated, the Beatles’ Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band is a great example of a moment in recording history when the technology was pushed to its limit and, through this, defined the next horizon of that technology’s development. Created using four-track recording machines, that 1967 album was made possible because the recording engineers found ways to link multiple four-track machines, which — through a further process called “bouncing” -- allowed the creation of additional tracks. The Beatles were thus able to expand on the Rock and Roll sound by adding layers of vocals and instruments, orchestral elements and more experimental soundscapes. What one heard on record was now something that could not be reproduced live. And, indeed, by that time the Beatles had retired from playing live and were focused on their artistic lives in the studio. By contrast, Chuck Berry's recordings were made “live” on a two-track recording machine. When the term “live” is applied to the recording of Rock and Roll records, it generally means that an act played material as they would in a live setting and recorded it thus — as was the case with “Johnny B. Goode.” The technology was such that this was the approach that made sense. When you hear the record, it captures the sound of a band playing live. Compare Berry's track with “A Day in the Life” from Sgt. Pepper, and the distinction becomes palpable.

When studying the music business, a teacher gets into equally specialized content. This curriculum aims to make general points about shifts within the industry, but does not ask that a teacher arrive with prior knowledge about such shifts. Chuck Berry's “Johnny B. Goode,” significantly, was released on one of the great American Blues labels, Chess Records. Chess was founded by Phil and Leonard Chess, Polish immigrants who settled in Chicago. Recording a roster of artists that included Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, John Lee Hooker, and others in the 50s, the brothers catered mostly to a black audience. Chess was among a handful of key “independent” labels that included Atlantic, King, Imperial, Sun, and others. The independents are to be differentiated from the “major” labels of the period: Capital, RCA Victor, Columbia, Decca, and Mercury. Like Chess, the independents mentioned above often geared their recordings toward black audiences. When Rock and Roll burst on the scene in the mid-50s, with artists such as Chuck Berry leading the pack, it was these independent labels that had what teenagers wanted. Suddenly, the major labels had real competition from the margins of production. The labels that were making records for a black audience were suddenly charting Pop hits. In that way, a kind of racial mixing was taking place that would have enormous impact on American life.
SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

This lesson offers six distinct ways to study and understand Rock and Roll music. Certainly there are many more. The lesson plans in this curriculum use these entry points as the major means of exploration, drawing on those that are most relevant to the particular time periods and contexts of specific songs. We, of course, encourage you to consider others that might be relevant and applicable to your classes and your students. It is our hope that by reviewing these approaches, you as a teacher, and in turn your students, will begin to hear and study music more holistically, and feel the potency of doing so.

Becoming aware of musical elements and the various contexts of history, visual and aural culture, performance, and technology can connect the sounds that we are drawn to as listeners to the world around us. Again, these songs are portals, they reveal things about their time, their social world. Working through the lessons and chapters on this site will begin to open these worlds to you and your students, and help your students explore these worlds themselves.

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

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

Reading 10: Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

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 10: Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

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

Speaking and Listening 6: Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

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

Language 6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the
college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

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

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 3: People, Places, and Environments

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

Theme 7: Production, Distribution, and Consumption

Theme 8: Science, Technology, and Society

Theme 9: Global Connections

Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices

**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
• Jerry Lee Lewis – Great Balls of Fire (1957)
• The Temptations – My Girl (1965)
• The Beatles – A Day in the Life (1967)
• Chuck Berry – Johnny B. Goode (1965)
• Howlin’ Wolf – Smokestack Lightnin’ (1964)
• Little Richard – Tutti Frutti (1957)

FEATURED PEOPLE
• The Beatles
• Chuck Berry
• James Brown
• Aretha Franklin
• Lady Gaga
• The Last Poets
• Little Richard
• Elvis Presley
• The Rolling Stones
• The Temptations

HANDOUTS
• Billboard Chart, May 31, 1958
• Listening Template