How did Dewey Phillips and Hunter Hancock help bring Rhythm and Blues music to mixed race audiences?

Throughout much of the 20th century, African Americans engaged in the “Great Migration” moved from the rural South to points north, often urban centers. Their presence in cities from Memphis to Chicago and New York would have a profound impact on American culture in general, and on radio programming in particular.

African-American audiences were eager to hear music performed by African-American artists, particularly the new Rhythm and Blues sounds that had begun to emerge from earlier Blues and Jazz styles. In 1949, WDIA in Memphis hired a team of African-American disc jockeys and began gearing programming entirely toward African-American audiences, with R&B and Blues at its heart. In some cases, it was white disc jockeys who championed this music, playing it on radio stations that would bring together black and white audiences.

This lesson will focus on two of those DJs: Memphis’s Dewey Phillips, whose popular show “Red Hot and Blue” frequently featured music by African-American artists, and Los Angeles’s Hunter Hancock, widely regarded as the first DJ in the western part of the country to regularly play R&B on the air. Reaching both black and white audiences, these pioneering DJs played an integral role in bringing African-American music into the mainstream, a process that lay at the heart of the soon-to-come Rock and Roll revolution.
Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):
   - The cultural impact on 20th century American life of the Great Migration of African Americans to northern cities
   - The growing desire of radio stations to market programming to the new urban African-American population
   - The pioneering role of disc jockeys Dewey Phillips (Memphis) and Hunter Hancock (Los Angeles) in playing Rhythm and Blues on the radio

2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):
   - Use a variety of sources to write an original script for a radio broadcast
   - Common Core: Students will read, listen to and watch a variety of sources to gather information and draw historical and thematic connections (CCSS Reading 1; CCSS Reading 7; CCSS Writing 8)
   - Common Core: Students will create a radio broadcast making strategic use of audio clips and other information to enhance their presentation (CCSS Writing 3; CCSS Speaking and Listening 4; CCSS Speaking and Listening 5)

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

1. Distribute Handout 1: Map of the United States, and display the map on the board. Ask if students can identify why some states are shaded in blue and others in red. (Note to instructor: This is a map reflecting the divisions of the Civil War era: the states in dark red seceded and became part of the Confederacy before April 15, 1861, and those in light red seceded and joined the Confederacy after that date; those in blue remained part of the Union; those in yellow were Union states that allowed slavery; and those in grey were territories that had not yet become states.)

2. Using a classroom atlas or online research, ask students to label the following cities: Los Angeles, California; Chicago, Illinois; Detroit, Michigan; St. Louis, Missouri; Cleveland, Ohio; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Washington, D.C. Discuss as a class:
   - In what parts of the country are these cities located?
   - Which part of a divided country would they have been in during the Civil War?

3. Ask students to describe life for African Americans in the American South after the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and the end of the Civil War in 1865. Ask them to discuss the institutions of sharecropping and the culture of Jim Crow, in particular. If
students are not firmly grounded in this material, guide them through these topics, offering explanation where needed.

4. Distribute Handout 2: African-American Population of Select Cities and display on the board. Make sure students understand that the table shows African Americans as a percentage of the overall population in 1920 and 1960. Discuss as a class:

• As a general trend, what was happening to the African-American populations in these cities? How significant were the changes?

• Where were these African Americans most likely coming from?

• What might have been some of the reasons they went to these cities? Why would they go to urban areas? (Note to instructor: You may again want to discuss both Jim Crow laws and customs and the lasting impact of sharecropping as aspects of Southern life affecting African Americans.)

• How do you imagine the increase in the African-American population influenced life in these cities? How do you imagine it influenced popular culture in particular? (Note to instructor: Be sure to discuss briefly that even when they remained in the South, many African Americans relocated from rural to urban areas in this period. This point will be further emphasized in the readings.)

PROCEDURE:

1. Divide students into pairs or small groups of 3-4. Explain that each group will work together to write a script for a ten-minute radio show that explores the impact of the growing African-American population on American cities in the 1940s and 1950s, focusing on radio programming. Their scripts will focus specifically on the influence of two disc jockeys in the late 1940s and 1950s -- Memphis’ Dewey Phillips and Los Angeles’ Hunter Hancock -- and the kind of music they played. In order to write their scripts, they will discuss a series of readings and short video clips.

2. Distribute Handout 3: Resources for This Lesson. (Required video: Roy Brown’s “Good Rockin’ Tonight,” Hunter Hancock’s “Huntin’ with Hunter,” Dewey Phillips’ “Red, Hot and Blue,” the radio interview Dewey Phillips On Air with Jerry Lee Lewis, and Ruth Brown’s “Teardrops From My Eyes.”) The readings include background on:

• The Great Migration
• The rise of Rhythm and Blues in the 1940s
• WDIA Memphis, the nation’s first African-American radio station
• Memphis disc jockey Dewey Phillips
• Los Angeles disc jockey Hunter Hancock

3. Allow students sufficient time to review and discuss the material in the handout. If students do not have access to individual computers, play the videos for the class as a whole.

4. Distribute Handout 4: How to Write Your Radio Script. Go over the instructions with the class as a whole.

5. Allow students sufficient time to prepare their scripts, which will be turned in at the end of the class.
SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

Discuss:

• How did the growing African-American population in American cities in the postwar period influence the kinds of music played on the radio?

• What is a disc jockey? Why do radio stations have them?

• What role can disc jockeys play in determining what music listeners hear?

• What specific role did Dewey Phillips and Hunter Hancock play in exposing white audiences to new kinds of music in the late 1940s and early 1950s?

• Some historians have suggested that the work of Phillips and Hancock and other DJs like them marked an important step in moving the country toward racial integration. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

WRITING PROMPT:

How did the work of disc jockeys Dewey Phillips and Hunter Hancock reflect changes in American society in the 1940s and early 1950s?

EXTENSION:

Have students perform and/or record their radio scripts. Play them for the class, or perhaps broadcast them on a school or local radio station.

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 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

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 3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

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 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Speaking and Listening 5: Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.

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

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 8: Science, Technology, and Society

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

Core Music Standard: Responding

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 – Radio Interview, The Dewey Phillips Show (1957)
- Hunter Hancock – Huntin’ with Hunter
- Ruth Brown – Teardrops From My Eyes (1950)
- Roy Brown – Good Rockin’ Tonight (1947)
- Dewey Phillips – Red, Hot and Blue (1952)

FEATURED PEOPLE
- Hunter Hancock
- Jerry Lee Lewis
- Dewey Phillips

HANDOUTS
- Handout 1: Outline Map of the United States
- Handout 2: African-American Population of Select Cities
- Handout 3: Resources for This Lesson
- Handout 4: How to Write Your Radio Script