



THE MUSICAL ROOTS OF DOO WOP

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did Doo Wop develop as a musical genre?

OVERVIEW

From the beginning, Doo Wop music had what today might be called a DIY or “Do It Yourself” character: it could be performed nearly anywhere — without the need for expensive equipment or special technology — at almost any time by anyone with some singing ability. Years before gaming consoles and cable TV, harmonizing on the street corner or front stoop was an enjoyable way to pass the time, particularly for residents of poorer neighborhoods for whom other forms of entertainment may have been prohibitively expensive. Musical instruments, after all, cost money. Singers replaced backing bands with their voices, supplying full harmonies and even mimicking the sounds of instruments. When Doo Wop emerged as a musical phenomenon in the 1950s, this kind of group singing became part of American popular culture on a bigger scale. Amateur or semi-professional groups were taken off the streets in neighborhoods like Harlem in New York City and put into recording studios. White groups began imitating black groups, and the sounds of Doo Wop were everywhere by the middle of the decade.



Doo Wop’s musical and social roots point to a long history of vocal harmony in American culture, particularly in African-American communities. Social singing provided entertainment in barbershops, bars, schools, churches, theaters, and other communal spaces. Some of the musical precedents students will consider in this lesson include the barbershop quartets that flourished from the 1890s through World War I; the Pop vocal groups such as the Mills Brothers that topped the charts in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s; and the Gospel singers who made harmonizing a spiritual practice throughout the early twentieth century.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The characteristics of Doo Wop music as it emerged in the 1950s
- The history of group harmony singing as a form of entertainment in the United States during the twentieth century
- How earlier styles of vocal harmony (Barbershop, Pop, and Gospel) contributed to the development of Doo Wop

2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Point out similarities and differences between different genres of music
- Describe how one style music can influence another
- Derive historical information from primary and secondary source materials, including musical recordings

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

1. Write the word “harmony” on the board. Ask students to define the word and to generate some sample sentences. What kinds of things can be “in harmony”? Students may also look the word up in a dictionary. (Guide students to synonyms like “agreement” and “cooperation,” and encourage discussion of phrases like “peace and harmony” and “living together in harmony.”)
2. Explain that in music, “harmony” is when two or more musical tones, also called pitches or notes, are sounded together. These combinations of notes are called chords, and they can be produced with voices or musical instruments or both. Tell the class that today’s lesson will focus on the development of a specific kind of harmony singing called Doo Wop.
3. Play the video of Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers singing “I’m Not a Juvenile Delinquent” and explain that this is an example of Doo Wop music from the 1950s. Ask students how it exemplifies harmony (there are multiple singers singing different parts at the same time; their voices are in cooperation).

PROCEDURE:

1. Before class, set up three different stations (a large class might benefit from having more than one of each type. If multiple computers are not available for this activity, the instructor should work through the stations with the entire class). Each station includes one video and one handout:
 - Station 1: “Barbershop Quartets”
 - Handout 3
 - “Barbershop Quartets” video
 - Station 2: “The Mills Brothers: A Pop Vocal Group”
 - Handout 4
 - Mills Brothers “I Ain’t Got Nobody” video
 - Station 3: “Group Singing in Gospel Music”
 - Handout 5
 - Golden Gate Quartet “Gospel Train” video
2. After the motivational activity, model what students will be expected to do at each station by discussing Doo Wop music as a class. Distribute Handout 1, a worksheet for this lesson, and Handout 2, an informational text about Doo Wop.
3. Ask for volunteers to read the text in Handout 2 aloud.
4. Play the video clip of the Flamingos singing “Would I Be Crying,” an example of Doo Wop. Have students complete the first section of the worksheet based on the information they have gathered from the text and video, then share answers with a partner. They will answer these two questions:
 - What does the music sound like? (For example: uses nonsense syllables, and has a mix of high and low voices singing in harmony.)
 - Who performed Doo Wop music, and where was it performed? (For example: groups of 4-5 singers performing in public places, particularly in African-American communities.)
5. At each station, students will read a short text, view images, and listen to musical examples. They will also complete the relevant section of the worksheet. The stations do not need to be visited in order.

SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

1. Reconvene the class.
2. Go through the three genres of vocal harmony students learned about at the stations. For each genre, have student volunteers read their worksheet answers aloud. Ask the class to come up with musical similarities between that genre and Doo Wop (number of singers, imitation of instruments with voices, etc.) and then contextual similarities (where it was performed, who the performers were).
3. Ask the students if these vocal harmony groups of the past have any similarities with contemporary artists. Do any musical groups they currently listen to borrow from these older styles?

WRITING PROMPT:

Imagine you are a singer in 1955, and that you and your friends are putting together a group to perform Doo Wop music — but you only have three people, and you need one more! Write an ad for your school newspaper to recruit a new group member. Briefly explain what kind of music you will be singing and what your musical influences are. Be sure to say where you will be practicing and what your new group member will be expected to do.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY:

1. In a music class, or with the aid of a musically trained teacher, have the class learn to sing some simple harmonies and experiment with singing in harmony vs. singing in unison (perhaps vocalizing with nonsense syllables like singers of Doo Wop). What is different about the experience of singing in harmony?
2. Watch the video of Dion DiMucci, of the Doo Wop group Dion and the Belmonts, discussing Doo Wop. Ask students: what does Dion identify as the musical inspiration for the sound of his group? (Horn groups playing at the Apollo Theater in Harlem). How does this resemble what the Mills Brothers did?
3. Have students watch the video of Bono, “Harmony and Friction in a Band.” Discuss:
 - In what sense does Bono use the word “harmony”? (To mean getting along and working well together.)
 - What word does he use to mean the opposite of “harmony”? (“Discord.”) What does that word mean in this context?
4. Have students look up the following terms related to vocal harmony and write a brief definition of each in their own words:
 - Acappella
 - Accompaniment
 - Backup singer
 - Chord
 - Lead singer
 - Quartet
5. Music teachers may wish to explore another common element in Doo Wop songs: a chord progression called the “Doo Wop Progression” or the “1950s Progression.” The progression, I-VI-IV-V, appears in many Doo Wop songs.

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

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

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.

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

Language 4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.

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

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

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

- The Mills Brothers – Paper Doll (1942)
- Columbia Quartet and Polk Miller’s Old South Quartette – Barbershop Quartets (1910)
- Golden Gate Quartet – Golden Gate Gospel Train (1937)
- The Flamingos – Would I Be Crying (1956)
- Golden Gate Quartet – God Told Nicodemus (1941)
- The Mills Brothers – I Ain’t Got Nobody (1932)

FEATURED PEOPLE

- Dion
- The Flamingos
- Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers
- Mills Brothers

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1: The Musical Roots of Doo Wop Worksheet
- Handout 2: Doo Wop
- Handout 3: Barbershop Quartets
- Handout 4: The Mills Brothers: A Pop Vocal Group
- Handout 5: Group Singing in Gospel Music