



THE BEACH BOYS AND THE SOUND OF THE SUBURBS

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did the music of the Beach Boys reflect the suburbanization of postwar America?

OVERVIEW

Embodying the optimism and ideals of mid-century America, the Beach Boys caught the attention of teenagers across the country with their close vocal harmonies and lyrics about surfing, cars, and romance. As members of the Baby Boom generation, the Beach Boys grew up in a postwar nation that was characterized by rapid suburban development. According to U.S. Census figures, by the year 2000, half the American population lived in areas described as “suburban.”



This shift from urban to suburban living began in the years after World War II, when hundreds of thousands of soldiers returned from overseas, ready to start families. It was an era defined by prosperity and rapid growth—growth that encompassed both the construction of sprawling suburban housing developments made up of one-family homes (epitomized by Levittown, the country’s first planned development, which added over 17,000 homes to a tract in Long Island, N.Y., between 1947 and 1951) and the building and expansion of roads, which increased mobility and made life in so-called “bedroom communities” more practical. That growth was aided by the G.I. Bill, which offered low-cost mortgages to war veterans, putting the “American Dream” of a home with a yard and a driveway within easier reach.

For teenagers, the shift toward the suburbs offered space that was both metaphorical and literal; their own room, perhaps, or maybe a garage or a finished basement where they might gather, away from adults. At the same time, the introduction of the transistor radio in 1954 gave teens more opportunity to listen to “their” music, away from the family entertainment console.

In short, the country’s landscape was changing, in ways that would have a major impact on American life and culture, and, certainly, on the worlds of young people. In this lesson, students will analyze the rise of the suburbs, and the ways in which the Beach Boys made music that evoked this important demographic trend.



OVERVIEW (CONTINUED)

(Please note that the instructor should pay particular attention to the location where the lesson is being delivered. For example, this lesson and its focus on middle-class, postwar suburban development will likely play out differently when delivered in an inner-city classroom comprised of low-income students than it will in an affluent suburb. The instructor should carefully consider the proximity or distance of his/her particular students to the demographic trends represented in this lesson and modify his/her questions accordingly.)

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The impact of suburbanization on American identity and popular culture
- The important musical contributions of the Beach Boys

2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Identify connections between artistic expression and the broader social context in which that expression occurs
- Common Core: Students will analyze and interpret texts, graphs, photographs and song lyrics to develop an understanding of suburban culture (CCSS Reading 4; CCSS Reading 7; CCSS Speaking and Listening 2)
- Common Core: Students will explore the advantages and disadvantages of suburbia (CCSS Writing 1)

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

1. On a piece of paper, ask students to draw a quick sketch of the neighborhood in which they live. Ask for volunteers to share their sketches. Then discuss briefly:

- Is your neighborhood crowded, or is it spread out?
- What kinds of buildings are most common (free-standing houses, tall apartment buildings, etc.)?
- If you had to describe your neighborhood as one of the following, which would it be? Urban, rural, or suburban?

2. Show students two photographs: one of downtown New York City in the 1950s and the other of Levittown, a suburban housing development in Long Island, New York, which was built between 1947 and 1951.

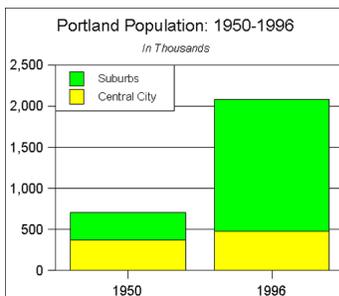
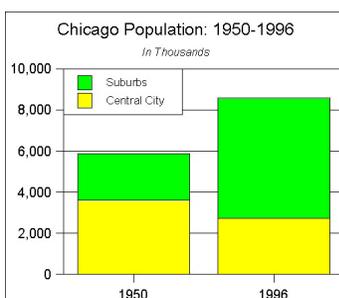


3. Ask students how their drawing compares to the two pictures. Does either photo remind them of where they live?

4. Briefly discuss with students what they think the pros and cons might be of living in one of the houses in the second picture. How might it compare with life in the city pictured in the first photo?

PROCEDURE:

1. Write the words “urban,” “rural,” and “suburban” on the board, and ask students to define. (Make sure that in their definition, they note that “urban” connotes city, “rural” connotes country, and “suburban” means an area outside of a city, often serving as a residence for people who work in that city.)
2. Explain to students that in this lesson, they will be exploring the rise of suburbia in postwar America and its influence on popular music and youth culture.
3. Display the following graphs using a projector or Smartboard:

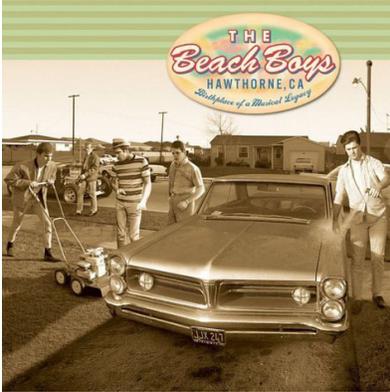
Portland Population: 1950–1996**Chicago Population: 1950–1996**

4. Discuss with students the trend the graph is depicting. Be sure to note that according to the U.S. Census, by the year 2000, 50 percent of the US population lived in areas defined as “suburban.” Note also that a good deal of the shift

from urban to suburban living took place during the postwar years, beginning in the late 1940s.

5. Distribute Handout 1, “The Rise of Levittown.” Ask for a volunteer to read the handout aloud.
6. Briefly discuss with students:
 - How does the author describe the homes in Levittown? Were they luxurious?
 - Why does the author compare the homes to the Ford Model T car?
 - What was the appeal of the homes in Levittown, according to the author? Why did people want to live there?
 - If you had lived at that time, do you think you would have wanted to buy a home in Levittown? Why or why not?
7. Explain to students that the GI Bill, passed in 1944, was designed to ease the transition back to civilian life for returning World War II veterans. An important provision of the bill was low-cost, government-backed mortgages that made home ownership attainable for many who otherwise might not have been able to afford a house. Explain that this was a significant factor in the rise of suburban developments such as Levittown.
8. Play the clip from the 1957 film *In the Suburbs*. Discuss with the students:
 - Where does the family in the film live before they move? How is that environment depicted?
 - Where do they move to? How is that environment depicted?
 - What do the suburbs appear to offer young families?
 - Why might these elements appeal particular to a returning war veteran?

9. Display the image of the album cover of a Beach Boys anthology, depicting their hometown of Hawthorne, California, a suburb of Los Angeles. Tell students this is the image the album's designer chose to illustrate a modern collection of classic Beach Boys recordings, and visually represent the Beach Boys' music.



10. Briefly discuss with students the impression the picture gives them about life in the suburbs. Do they imagine this is a place they would have liked to live? Why or why not?
11. Ask students to identify the central image on the album cover (i.e., the car). Explain to them that the more Americans moved away from urban centers and into the suburbs, the greater role automobiles came to play in American life. Explain also that the postwar years were a time when many roads and highways were built and expanded, especially after the passage of the 1956 act creating the Interstate Highway System.
12. Explain to students that in 1963, the Beach Boys released a single called “Be True to Your School,” with the song “In My Room” on the B-side.
13. Distribute Handout 2, lyrics to the Beach Boys’ “In My Room,” and play the song “In My Room” for the class. Explain that Brian Wilson co-wrote the song based on his childhood room at the family home in the suburban town of Hawthorne, California.
14. Discuss with students:
- What is the overall mood/tone of the song? How do the vocals sound (rough, smooth, heavy, laid-back)? How do the vocals match the mood of the lyrics?
 - What is special about his room?
 - How does this song connect to the attraction suburban developments held for many Americans in the 1950s and 60s?
 - Why might this song have resonated with teenagers living in the suburbs in this time period?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

Play for the students the Beach Boys song “Fun Fun Fun,” and ask them to compare it to “In My Room,” addressing both the songs’ lyrics and their mood. Discuss these questions, having the students reflect back on the issues raised in the lesson: What images does “Fun Fun Fun” bring to mind? What is the girl in the song doing? What images does “In My Room” bring to mind? In what ways do these two very different songs reflect aspects of suburban life?

WRITING PROMPT:

In the postwar years, suburban developments such as Levittown were promoted as the fulfillment of the “American Dream.” Why might owning a home in the suburbs be considered the realization of a dream? Do you agree with that assessment? Why or why not? What might be the positives and negatives of life in such an environment? Use details and evidence from the classwork to support your answer.

EXTENSIONS:

1. Have students watch the video clip *Where the Mountains Meet the Sea*, a short film about life in Santa Monica, California. Explain to them that like the Beach Boys’ hometown of Hawthorne, Santa Monica lies within the greater Los Angeles area. Have students write a short paper addressing these questions: How does the video depict life in Southern California? Does it seem appealing? Why? Who is the man who’s decided to move there with his family at the beginning of the clip? Why has he decided to live there? Where has he just been? Why might a place like Southern California seem especially appealing to someone like him?
2. Have students research the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the G.I. Bill. Have them write a short paper about the bill that addresses these questions: What was the purpose of the bill? What did the bill offer to returning veterans? In particular, what were the provisions of the bill related to home buying and education? What impact did this have on rates of college enrollment and home ownership in the postwar years? In what ways is the G.I. Bill credited with playing a role in the prosperity of the postwar period and the rise of the suburbs in the United States?

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Reading Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 for Literature and Informational 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 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 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

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.

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

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 Beach Boys – Fun, Fun, Fun (1964)
- In The Suburbs (1957)
- The Beach Boys – In My Room (1964)
- Where the Mountains Meet the Sea (1959)

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1: The Rise of Levittown, N.Y.
- Handout 2: Lyrics for the Beach Boys’ “In My Room”