ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What is Folk music? To what extent did Folk Rock sustain the spirit of Folk music?

OVERVIEW

For a small but vibrant minority of young people in the 1950s, the creature comforts of the Pax Americana were not enough to balance out the anxieties of the era. Raised in the aftermath of war, haunted by the specter of nuclear holocaust, weighed down by the burden to conform, facing a rapidly growing emphasis on consumer culture, these young people felt a kind of alienation. Some of them sought refuge in subcultures removed from the mainstream. For some among these young people, Folk culture offered a kind of artistic, cultural, and political “authenticity,” something seemingly more real. Like Punk Rock and, later, Grunge, Folk music offered a kind of alternative -- it was a place to be, a way of thinking, a community: all sitting outside of the mainstream but somehow commenting upon it.

One historian describes the interest in Folk music as belonging, paradoxically, to a particularly modern sensibility: “Folk culture is a category that didn’t exist until there was a modern world to invent it… Which is to say, folk culture emerged as a concept when the modern world started shuttling forward in time and, along with the joys of progress, faced a growing anxiety, an anxiety about all that forward momentum. Folk culture suggested something outside of all that movement and industrializing, commercializing energy. It was William Morris’s fantasy of the Middle Ages. It was the Brothers Grimm collecting folk tales that had been passed along not through the channels of print but through oral transmission. In most cases, an interest in folk culture is, among other things, a kind of response to something that is going on — in music, it’s often a response to commercialization. It points to a past that feels, to the Folk enthusiast, more ‘pure.’”

With its spare melodies and acoustic instrumentation, Folk music indeed embodied a kind of purity. It evoked a simpler past, a non-commercial culture. There was romance in the common-man rambles of Folk heroes like Woody Guthrie. And the simple musical base of Folk music meant that it was easy to pick up and, further, provided a platform for lyrics that ranged across the political and sociocultural
landscape. It gave ample room for commentary, political and social. If some teens in the 1950s connected with the Rock and Roll of Elvis and Chuck Berry, others who found Folk more immediate entered a Folk scene in which ideas associated with everything from existentialism to Civil Rights were being contemplated, and artists like Pete Seeger were sharing a world view that challenged the ideas of the American mainstream. When Rock and Roll evolved in the mid-1960s, no surprise then that a Folk-Rock hybrid would emerge as what might be called the conscience music of the Hippie movement.

This lesson introduces the Folk Rock phenomenon with a look at the genre’s roots in American Folk music traditions. Students will read a brief but colorful description of Folk music from the vantage point of American master Woody Guthrie and also view footage of Guthrie’s protégé, Pete Seeger, singing and talking about Folk music. Students will hear a later version of one of Pete Seeger’s most famous songs (co-written with Lee Hays), “If I Had A Hammer,” and assess the extent to which the “transitional” version of the song, performed by Peter, Paul and Mary, was true to the original spirit of Seeger’s version. Finally, a more fully formed version of the Folk Rock sound will be considered by way of a further comparison between Seeger’s “Turn, Turn, Turn” and a cover of the song by the Byrds, which went to No. 1 on the Billboard singles chart in 1965.
Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):
   - Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger’s contributions to and conceptions of the Folk genre
   - The influence of the song “If I Had A Hammer,” written by Pete Seeger and Lee Hays
   - The influence of Peter, Paul, and Mary in navigating the transition from Folk to Folk Rock
   - The influence of the Byrds as an early exemplar of Folk Rock

2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):
   - Extrapolate explicit and implicit arguments from written, audio and video texts
   - Common Core: Students will read a text closely to determine the main ideas presented by the authors, and use that information to support conclusions they will draw from the text in constructing their own definitions (CCSS Reading 1; CCSS Reading 2; CCSS Writing 2; CCSS Language 4)
   - Common Core: Students will watch and compare videos of musical performances (CCSS Speaking and Listening 2)

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

1. Play the clip of Pete Seeger singing “If I Had A Hammer” and distribute Handout 1, with the lyrics to the song.

2. Discuss the following:
   
   For students who have a background in 1950s Rock and Roll:
   - In what ways is Seeger different from the Rock and Roll stars (Elvis, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Bo Diddley) of the mid-1950s? Consider such issues as appearance, temperament, performance, instrumentation, sound, musical genre, lyrics.

   For all students:
   - To what extent is Seeger performing for the audience?
   - To what extent is Seeger performing with the audience?
   - What does Seeger’s enthusiasm for audience participation suggest about his view of popular music?
   - What is the song’s primary political argument?
PROCEDURE:

1. The day before the lesson, assign students to watch the 1947 educational film Are You Popular? You might also assign them to read the Woody Guthrie handout, or you can distribute it after the motivational activity and allow students sufficient time to read it quietly at their desks. Discuss:
   - What is Guthrie's definition of bad music?
   - What is Guthrie's definition of good music?
   - According to Guthrie, what is the definition and purpose of Folk music? How does it compare to other forms of popular music?

2. Watch the clip from a Pete Seeger concert in which Seeger talks about Woody Guthrie and Folk music, performing some Guthrie songs.
   - What seems to be Seeger's definition of good music?
   - According to Seeger, what seems to be the definition and purpose of Folk music? How does it compare to other forms of popular music?
   - Are Seeger and Guthrie similar in their views?

3. (Note to instructor: As a young man, Pete Seeger traveled across America with Woody Guthrie, learning about the art and politics of Folk music. He became a prominent voice in the labor, antiwar and Civil Rights movements of the 1940s and 1950s. In 1955, having already recorded hits as a member of the Folk group the Weavers, Seeger was convicted of contempt of Congress after he refused to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee (the House of Representatives' counterpart to Joseph McCarthy's hearings in the Senate). He was blacklisted and could not tour until his conviction was overturned in 1962. This 1963 footage is from the first stop on his first tour after his touring ban was lifted.)

4. Discuss and collectively brainstorm an answer to this question: “With Seeger as your example, what is the definition and purpose of Folk music?” Be sure that in constructing their definitions, students cite the Guthrie quote, the clip from the Motivational Activity, the footage from Seeger’s Australia show, and the classroom discussion of the lyrics to “If I Had A Hammer.” Consider how Folk music offered an alternative culture.

5. Following that, have students discuss the ways in which the Folk music culture promoted by Seeger and Guthrie offered an “alternative” culture to the one promoted in the 1947 educational film Are You Popular? Discuss: If Are You Popular? is an example of the mid-century American push toward conformity that alienated many young people, how did Folk music and its communities offer an alternative?

6. (Note to Instructor: Like the Blues, Folk music is an older musical and cultural art form that became part of the Rock and Roll phenomenon of the 1950s and 1960s. Ultimately, a Folk Rock hybrid was born as bands from the hippie counterculture were drawn to the sound and politics of Folk music. The closing segment of the lesson asks students to listen to Peter, Paul and Mary’s cover of Pete Seeger’s “If I Had A Hammer” and assess the extent to which it stayed true to or strayed from the spirit of Folk music.)

7. Play the video of Peter, Paul and Mary’s version of “If I Had A Hammer.”

8. Discuss as a class:
   - To what extent is this performance true to the spirit of Folk music as we defined it?
   - Have each student make a short list of the differences between the two versions, considering issues of performance, musical style, tempo, and vocal approach.
**SUMMARY ACTIVITY:**

1. “If you can’t sing well,” Pete Seeger was fond of saying, “Sing loud.” Throughout his 70+ years as a Folk musician, Seeger insisted that to experience Folk music, people have to sing it. But Seeger, too, was influenced by the power not just of Folk but of well-produced popular music.

2. Have the class listen to his version of “Turn, Turn, Turn,” followed by the Byrds’ version, which hit No. 1 on the Billboard chart in 1965.

3. Ask students to identify first, the Folk elements Seeger put into the song and, following that, the Rock elements the Byrds added.

4. Poll the class to find out which version is the students’ favorite. Explain to the class that Seeger changed how he sang the song based on the Byrds’ version, both because he liked it and because that’s the one most people knew.

**EXTENSIONS:**

1. Watch the short documentary “To Hear Your Banjo Play” (16 minutes) that is on the Chapter homepage and features Pete Seeger and renowned folklorist Alan Lomax. Write a response to and/or discuss this question: What argument does the film make for the validity of Folk music? Consider the film’s definition of Folk music.

2. Read the Rock’s Backpages article about Pete Seeger’s life in 2007. To what degree did he stay true to his ideas of what a Folk musician should be?

3. Read the Rock’s Backpages article that criticizes use of the term “Folk Rock.” Do you agree with this writer’s viewpoint? If not, how would you challenge it?

4. Research the McCarthy Senate and HUAC hearings in the 1950s, with a particular focus on Pete Seeger’s confrontation with his accusers.
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 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

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 2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

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

Standard 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 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

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
• Peter, Paul and Mary – If I Had a Hammer (1964)
• The Byrds – Milestones/Turn, Turn, Turn (1966)
• Are You Popular? (1947)
• Pete Seeger – Turn, Turn, Turn (1962)
• Pete Seeger – If I Had a Hammer (1963)
• Pete Seeger – Talking About Woody Guthrie (1963)
• To Hear Your Banjo Play (1947)

FEATURED PEOPLE
• Woody Guthrie
• The Byrds
• Woody Guthrie
• Peter, Paul and Mary
• Pete Seeger

HANDOUTS
• Handout 1: Lyrics to “If I Had a Hammer”
• Handout 2: Woody Guthrie on Folk Music