



DAN PENN

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did black artists and white songwriters and musicians interact in the Soul era, and what contributed to that interaction?

OVERVIEW

"I'd been digging black records for years and suddenly I got a chance to be involved in making them, even to go get a hamburger, that was all right with me – just to be there. And by being there I started getting lucky with some songs." – Dan Penn

If any single theme dominates this history of Rock and Roll, it is the theme of popular music culture as a place and an experience that allows a degree of racial mixing beyond what American everyday life offers. Again and again, new moments in Rock and Roll's ongoing history come when the boundaries that too often organize the races as separate are broken down. Most commonly, it has been black music that provides the primary materials, the inspiration and the talent that kicks off these changes, these moments. But oftentimes the contributions are the result of a kind of dialogue across racial lines. Booker T. and the MGs, a four-member Memphis combo comprised of two black and two white musicians, represents well the ideal form this dialogue can take. To be sure, their moment, 1960s Soul, is rich in examples.

This lesson looks at that juncture in Soul's history, when popular music and the Civil Rights movement seemed almost to be working in support of one another. Aretha Franklin, Otis Redding, Sam and Dave, the Motown acts; so much was happening, and so much was "crossing over," getting to a wide, appreciative white audience. But the focal point here is not what was happening at the front of the stage. Rather, this lesson goes behind the scenes, to see where young white musicians and writers were working with African-American performers to create something that was truly born of a dialogue.

The focus here is one particular songwriter-producer-musician: Dan Penn. Only 14 when he had his first hit, "Is A Bluebird Blue," recorded by Conway Twitty, Penn was entranced by black music, Ray Charles and Bobby "Blue" Bland among his very favorites. As the epigraph above suggests, Penn found a way to get close to the world associated with just such artists,



OVERVIEW (CONTINUED)

not caring if he was allowed in simply because he'd be an errand boy if one was needed. Along the way, he wrote some of Soul music's most enduring songs, including "I'm Your Puppet," "Out of Left Field," "Dark End of the Street," and "Do Right Woman." The artists recording those songs included Aretha Franklin, Percy Sledge, James Carr, and James and Bobby Purify, all African-American singers. As a white songwriter, Penn was writing for those voices, and he would be the first to tell you: "I mean, white singers are okay, but black singers are better. You don't even have to think about it."

Our aim here is not to assign greater value to white or black voices but to consider the musical results when a class of young white musicians and writers felt unambiguously that black voices were better, and they started writing songs for those voices. In that moment, a dialogue was underway.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The conditions that led to the interaction of black and white musicians, songwriters, and producers in the 1960s Soul era
- The songs of Dan Penn, including “Do Right Woman,” recorded by Aretha Franklin
- The unique status of popular music culture as a meeting ground of the races

2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Extrapolate arguments about music by assessing sound, mood, tone, instrumentation
- Draw connections among various print, audio and visual texts
- Write creatively for personal and/or small group expression
- Compare and contrast texts, arguments and ideas
- Common Core: Students will closely read a text and summarize key supporting details and ideas (CCSS Reading 2)
- Common Core: Students will view and analyze videos of musical performances to draw connections (CCSS Speaking and Listening 2)
- Common Core: Students will conduct a short research project and demonstrate their understanding of the musical contributions of their research subject (CCSS Writing 7)

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

1. Show the clip of Aretha Franklin performing “Do Right Woman” on The Merv Griffin Show. Ask students to describe who they think might have written this song. To the instructor: If need be, help students to understand the song’s basic premise, which revolves around the theme, “If you want a do-right woman, you’ve got to be a do right-man,” or treat-me-as-you’d-like-to-be-treated.

- Do you think the writer was a man or a woman?
- Was that man/woman white or black?
- Why do you think he or she wrote it?
- Where do you think the writer came from?
- What else do you think you can tell about the songwriter from this song?

PROCEDURE:

1. Give students each a copy of the Rock's Backpages article about Dan Penn. Ask them to take five minutes to read the piece, making notes as they read of any details they feel are significant.
2. When the group is done, ask them the following questions:
 - Were you surprised that the songwriter of “Do Right Woman” is a man?
 - Were you surprised that he is white?
 - Based on what you read, why do you think Dan Penn wrote “Do Right Woman”?
 - What part of the country was Penn from? Can you speculate on how that might have affected his musical interests?
 - What does Penn say about the importance of white and black artists coming together?
 - In Penn's view, did that collaboration across race lines allow for something special?
3. Have students compare two versions of another Dan Penn original, “I’m Your Puppet,” the first recorded by James and Bobby Purify, the second recorded by Dan Penn.
4. After they listen, ask them to break into groups of three, each group making two lists describing what they hear in each version. If it helps, have them use the Listening Template to organize their responses. If the differences between the versions are subtle to their ears, push the students to make some distinctions.
5. Lastly, ask them to answer the following question: which version do you think Dan Penn might have preferred and why?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

1. Show the students a clip of Booker T. and the MGs playing “Green Onions.” Ask students to have a class discussion regarding how they think Booker T. and the MGs embody what Dan Penn likes about Soul music. Ask them to point to aspects of the song, the performance, the group presentation to back up their answers.
2. Explain to students that the kind of interactions between the white and black creative communities that Penn treasured were complicated interactions. Explain that in the late 1960s many walls separated the black and white population.
3. Let them watch an excerpt of an interview with Jim Stewart, the founder of Stax Records, the label that released Booker T. and the MGs’ recordings.
4. Encourage students to reflect freely on what they heard in the interview. But ask them:
5. Did something happen in music culture, in the worlds of men like Dan Penn and Jim Stewart, that was different from life in the culture at large?

HOMework/ASSESSMENT:

Assign one or more of the following:

- Research: Assign students to research Dan Penn, Steve Cropper, Eddie Hinton, or Rick Hall, all white men who worked on important Soul recordings as either producers, writers, and/or musicians. Ask them to write one-page papers on how these individuals helped to break down the color line in their creative work.

EXTENSIONS:

Have students watch the ABC special about Aretha Franklin from 1968 and write two-page responses to the following questions:

- What did you learn from the program about the interactions of the black and white record-making communities?
- What do you think white musicians loved about the black music they were working on?
- Do you believe that such interactions changed American life?

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Reading Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 for Literature and Informational 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 7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

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 4: Individual Development and Identity

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

- Aretha Franklin – Do Right Woman - Merv Griffin Show (1967)
- Jim Stewart – Racial Integration at Stax (2007)
- Dan Penn – I'm Your Puppet (1994)
- Booker T and the MGs – Green Onions (1967)
- Aretha Franklin – ABC News Closeup (1968)
- James and Bobby Purify – I'm Your Puppet (1966)

FEATURED PEOPLE

- Booker T. and the MGs
- Aretha Franklin
- Dan Penn
- Jim Stewart