



A SONG OF THEIR OWN: FEMALE SINGER-SONGWRITERS OF THE EARLY 1970S

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What did the success of the female Singer-Songwriters of the early 1970s reveal about the changing roles of women in the United States?

OVERVIEW

By the early 1970s, many young, middle-class women who were born during the Baby Boom, nurtured in the economic growth of the post-World War II era, and came of age during the tumultuous decade of the 1960s increasingly sought liberation from the traditional roles women were expected to play in American society. These women increasingly wanted a greater voice both within and outside the home. They sought entrée into decidedly male-dominated professions and advocated for greater control of their own bodies.

The emergence of a successful group of female Singer-Songwriters in the early 1970s – Joni Mitchell, Carole King, Carly Simon, Janis Ian – both reflected and advanced this growing spirit of female empowerment. Yes, women had always played a role in American popular music, from Folk artists Joan Baez and Mary Travers (of Peter, Paul and Mary) to Jazz vocalists Sarah Vaughan and Ella Fitzgerald to the “Girl Groups” of the early 1960s. Composers and lyricists such as Ellie Greenwich and Cynthia Weil had worked behind the scenes writing songs that propelled other artists to stardom. But the new female Singer-Songwriters were different: they typically sang songs that they themselves had written, often autobiographical in character. They frequently performed them with their own piano or guitar accompaniment. And because of these factors, there was an increased sense of intimacy to the performances. Different from many earlier female vocalists, the Singer-Songwriters typically pushed for a heightened feeling of honesty and authenticity that meshed perfectly with the kinds of songs they were writing and singing.

Many of the Singer-Songwriters’ songs focused, as earlier Rock and Roll songs had, on themes of romance and heartbreak. But the perspective now was that of a different femininity. In some cases, this new breed of Singer-Songwriter told of experiences only a woman could have. In Joni Mitchell’s cryptic “Little Green,” from the critically acclaimed album *Blue*, she captured the sorrow of a young, unwed mother who feels compelled to give her child up for



OVERVIEW (CONTINUED)

adoption. In “At Seventeen,” Janis Ian conveys a young girl’s pain at being deemed an “ugly duckling,” challenging prevailing societal conventions of feminine beauty.

As feminist activists such as Gloria Steinem called for equal pay for women in the workplace and advocated for reproductive rights, the new female Singer-Songwriters demonstrated that they were the artistic equal to their male counterparts and could even surpass them in popularity. Joni Mitchell’s album *Blue* achieved a level of critical and artistic success that few albums in history could claim. Carole King’s 1971 album *Tapestry* became the most commercially successful album of her era, with its broad, personal appeal. Perhaps no one personified the change in women’s roles in popular music more than King. Co-writing with her then-husband Gerry Goffin in the early 1960s, King was one of the most successful songwriters of her era. But it was not until 1971 that she began to take center stage as a performer. The vast commercial success of *Tapestry* and other subsequent albums proved that the American public was more than ready for the transition.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The important musical contributions of female Singer-Songwriters of the early 1970s, including Joni Mitchell, Carole King, and Janis Ian
- The historical context from which this music emerged, focusing on the burgeoning women's movement that challenged traditional roles of women in American society

2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Identify connections between artistic expression and the broader social context in which the expression occurs
- Compare and contrast musical performances by women in different eras
- Evaluate the degree to which key singer-songwriters gave voice to female empowerment in the early 1970s
- Common Core: Students will analyze and interpret song lyrics, both in text and in performance, and present their findings to the class (CCSS Reading 4; CCSS Speaking and Listening 2; CCSS Speaking and Listening 4)
- Common Core: Students will compare the meanings and use of the terms “girl” and “woman” and relate them to the changing role of women (CCSS Language 3; CCSS Language 5)
- Common Core: Students will take a position on the role of the singer-songwriter in the Feminist Movement (CCSS Writing 1)

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

Ask students:

- What is the difference between calling someone a “girl” and calling her a “woman”?
- Why might someone refer to a grown woman as a girl? What does that imply?
- Do the females in the class think of themselves as girls or women? Why?

PROCEDURE:

1. Distribute Handout 1: Excerpt from Lyrics to “My Guy” and play the brief video of singer Mary Wells performing the song in 1965.
2. Discuss as a class:
 - What is the song about? What kind of mood does it create?
 - Explain to students that “My Guy” was written by Smokey Robinson, who also co-wrote the Temptations’ hit song “My Girl.” Ask: Why do you think he titled the song “My Guy” and not “My Boy”? What does this suggest about attitudes toward women in this period?
 - Do you think a man is qualified to write a song expressing a woman’s feelings about her relationship with a man? Why or why not? Was something lost in an artistic way when women were not writing their own songs to sing?
 - Look at the lyric “I’m sticking to my guy like a stamp to a letter.” Overall, what does the song suggest about female roles? About what is worth singing about? About what is important in life?
3. Explain to students that “My Guy” was a No. 1 hit during the “Girl Group era” of the early to mid-1960s, when female vocal groups sang songs that were more frequently written by men than by women.
4. Play the video clip of another hit from that era, the Shirelles performing “Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?” in 1964. Note that the song was co-written by Carole King and her then-husband Gerry Goffin. Discuss:
 - What is the overall mood of the song? Is it similar to “My Guy?” In what ways? In what ways is it different?
5. Play the video clip of King performing the song, which was included on her 1971 album *Tapestry*. Ask students to compare the two versions of the song, specifically:
 - Compare the performers’ appearances. How are they dressed? What kind of facial expressions do they offer? What image of themselves are they presenting?
- What overall tone/mood does each version convey?
- Compare the vocal styles of each performance. How are voices used in each version?
- What are the performers in each video doing while singing? What message(s) do their actions convey? (Note: Be sure students notice that King is playing the piano, while the Shirelles are not playing instruments.)
- Would you classify the performers in each version as “girls” or “women”? Why?
6. Briefly discuss:
 - How is a song different when the person who wrote it performs it? Why might it be important to King to have recorded the song herself, even though it had already been a big hit?
 - Based on what you have seen in these two performances, what do you think had changed in the United States between 1964 and 1971?
7. Divide students into groups of no more than 3-4. Explain that each group will analyze one song written by a female Singer-Songwriter in the early 1970s and compare it to “My Guy.” The songs are:
 - Joni Mitchell, “Woodstock” (1971)
 - Janis Ian, “At Seventeen” (1975)
 - Carole King, “(You Make Me Feel Like a) Natural Woman” (1971)
8. Distribute the handouts for each group: Joni Mitchell, Janis Ian, and Carole King. If possible, set up a viewing station for each group where they will watch the video of their assigned artist performing her song. If this is not possible, play each video for the class as a whole.
9. Allow groups sufficient time to discuss the questions on the handout.
10. Have each group select a spokesperson who will report the group’s general findings to the class as a whole.

PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

Presentations should include:

- The name of the artist and the song
- A brief summary of the subject of the song
- A brief summary of the musical style/sound of the song
- The group's analysis of what the artist is trying to say through the song
- The group's overall reaction to the song – what they liked about it (or didn't), what resonated with them, etc.

11. Discuss as a class:

- What do these songs have in common?
- What do you notice about these songs musically? Do they tend to have a strong beat?
- How does the singing style affect your reaction to the song?
- What about the themes of the songs? Are they happy and upbeat? What words would you use to describe them?
- How are they different from “My Guy”?
- Do these performers strike you as “girls” or “women”? How so?
- Could these songs have been written by men? Why or why not?
- The adage that “the personal is political” was frequently used during the feminist movement of the 1970s. Are these songs personal or political? Can they be both? Why do you think this phrase was used so often by feminists and others during this period?
- Do these songs have a special appeal for women? Or are they equally appealing to men? Should they be thought of as “women’s songs,” or just songs?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

1. Play the clip of Carole King appearing with Jane Fonda and feminist Gloria Steinem on The Merv Griffin Show in 1982 (the interview begins at approximately 5:10 on the video). Explain that Steinem is a well-known feminist writer and activist and the co-founder of Ms. Magazine.

2. Discuss as a class:

- What does Steinem say about the role played by women’s music in the 1970s?
- Why do you think King (who has made very few television appearances over the years) wanted to appear with Steinem?
- What does King say about her role in the women’s movement of the 1970s? Was she actively involved?
- How does Steinem respond? What does she mean when she tells King, “You’re living it”?
- Overall, do you think the music made by King and the other women in this lesson was political? Was it making a statement about changing roles of and attitudes toward women? Or was it just women making music that people wanted to listen to?
- What do you think women performing as Singer-Songwriters in this era contributed to popular music? Think about music today and the styles it includes, the themes it addresses, and the performers who are most successful.

WRITING PROMPT:

How did the female Singer-Songwriters of the 1970s reflect changing attitudes toward women? Should their work be thought of as political, or were they just musicians making good music?

EXTENSIONS:

1. Ask students to watch the ABC News special *Now: Women's Liberation* from 1970. Have them write a two-page response to the special, describing the ambitions of the women's movement in that time and place and how they connected to what was happening with female Singer-Songwriters.
2. Ask students to compare the female Singer-Songwriters of the early 1970s to those popular today, such as Adele or Taylor Swift. In what ways is their work similar? In what ways is it different? Think about the musical styles as well as the themes they address in their work. Have these newer artists achieved popularity primarily with girls and women, or do they speak to a wider audience?

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 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

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.

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.

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

Language 3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

Language 5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

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

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices

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

- Carole King – (You Make Me Feel Like A) Natural Woman (1982)
- Carole King – Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow (1973)
- Joni Mitchell – Woodstock (1970)
- Mary Wells – My Guy (1964)
- Janis Ian – At Seventeen (1981)
- The Shirelles – Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow (1964)
- ABC News – Now: Women’s Liberation (1970)

FEATURED PEOPLE

- Janis Ian
- Carole King
- Joni Mitchell
- The Shirelles
- Mary Wells

HANDOUTS

- Carole King
- Handout 1: Excerpt from Lyrics to “My Guy”
- Janis Ian
- Joni Mitchell