



# THE ROOTS OF COUNTRY ROCK

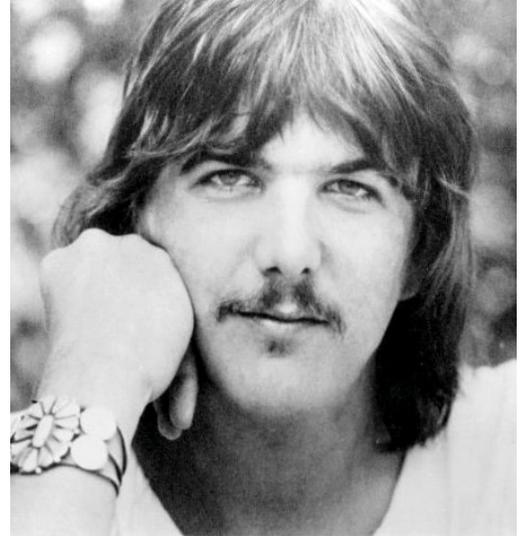
## OVERVIEW

### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did Country Music influence Rock and Roll and the musicians who made it?

### OVERVIEW

Long before there was a thing called Country Rock, Rock and Roll was deeply entwined with Country music. One could go so far as to say that without Country, there would be no Rock and Roll, Soul Music would be different in character, and the Rolling Stones would be another band altogether. So, in some respects, the merger of Country and Rock shouldn't have surprised anyone when, in the late 60s and 70s, Bob Dylan released *Nashville Skyline*, the Byrds released *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*, the Flying Burrito Brothers formed, bands such as the Eagles came together, and the term "Country Rock" was put into circulation. When it comes to Rock, Country had, simply put, been there all the while. However, what the above acts did, in this particular historical passage, was to give Country a new emphasis.



This lesson looks to some of the early cross-pollination between Country and Rock and Roll. Taking Chuck Berry's "Maybellene" as an example drawn from early Rock and Roll, students will have the chance to see and hear Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys perform "Ida Red," the song Berry said provided source material for "Maybellene." In addition, students will watch two clips of Johnny Cash performing, engaging in a discussion of why it was that Bob Dylan might have felt a kinship with Cash, enough so that he asked Cash to record a duet of "Girl from the North Country," the track that would open Dylan's *Nashville Skyline*.

Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, the Everly Brothers, Jerry Lee Lewis: all grew up with Country. Jerry Lee Lewis, when citing his three greatest influences, put Jimmie Rodgers, the so-called "Father of Country Music" at the top of the list. In the years following his Rock and Roll career, Lewis would even change his direction and pursue what became a wildly successful Country career. Bob Dylan, years after *Nashville Skyline*, would bring together a group of artists for a Jimmie Rodgers tribute album. And Hank Williams is regularly cited as one of Rock and Roll's founding fathers, by the likes of Keith Richards and Bruce Springsteen. Among African-American artists, the influence of Country was also strong. Taking Ray Charles' album *Modern Sounds in Country Music* as a kind of case study, students will consider just what an artist associated with R&B did with a song that came straight out of Country. And, finally, students will have a chance to write their own responses to this question: why did early Country matter to musicians in both the black and white communities?

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The manner in which Country music influenced Rock and Roll from the beginning
- The way Chuck Berry borrowed from a Country song to write the early Rock and Roll hit “Maybellene”
- The influence of Country music on both white and black performers of the Rock and Roll era

### 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 (a music review) to identify and evaluate the claims made by the reviewer (CCSS Reading 8; CCSS Speaking and Listening 2)
- Common Core: Students will either take a position on the music review (CCSS Writing 1) or write a short story (CCSS Writing 3) or explain the role and influence of musical artists (CCSS Writing 2; CCSS Writing 10)

## ACTIVITIES

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

#### 1. Play the clip of Chuck Berry performing “Maybellene.” Ask students:

- What musical genre does the song belong to?
- What kind of music do you think Chuck Berry listened to that influenced him as a musician?
- How would you describe the style of the song and the performance?
- Do you think Berry grew up listening to white or black musicians? Or both?

## PROCEDURE:

1. Following the above discussion, have students break into small groups of four or so.
2. Play the clip of Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys performing “Ida Red.” As they’re watching and listening, give each group the handout with excerpted lyrics for both “Ida Red” and “Maybellene.” Then have the students in each group take ten minutes to formulate an argument regarding what it was that Chuck Berry took from “Ida Red” when writing “Maybellene,” lyrically, musically, and otherwise. If necessary, allow them to see the Chuck Berry clip one more time in order to formulate their answers.
3. When the groups have finished, go around the class to let each group share their reflections. To facilitate the classroom conversation, if necessary, ask the class the following questions:
  - What is at the heart of the narrative in “Ida Red” and, similarly, what is at the heart of the story in “Maybellene”? What elements do they share as stories?
  - Why might the story within “Maybellene” have had an appeal in mid-century America? What do you think cars meant to the people in the listening audience?
  - Do the songs have similar human themes? Is there romance involved?
  - What musical sections of “Ida Red” are reminiscent of what you hear in “Maybellene”? Do the verses seem at all alike?
  - Is the instrumentation of the two different? If so, in what ways?
  - How do the performance style, the tempo, and the vocal presentation compare?
4. Explain that a lot of successful Country music has a strong and obvious “story” element. In order for a song to have that, the lyrics need to be clearly written and performed with careful articulation.
5. Explain to the class that Chuck Berry has always been very open about the fact that “Ida Red,” a song associated with Country, was the song he borrowed from to write “Maybellene.”
6. Based on what they know of the two songs, ask the class the following questions:
  - Is “borrowing” in any way the same thing as stealing?
  - What artists would you borrow from if you were to write a song today?
  - Do you think there is any way to write a new song without being influenced by what you hear on the radio, online, from friends, and so forth? Encourage them to consider the idea of influence.
7. Explain that many white and black Americans at mid-century had contact with Country music, and that it influenced many of the early Rock and Roll performers -- not just Chuck Berry, but others as well, including Elvis Presley (the teacher may want to refer to the Elvis and Race lesson plan to show that Elvis’s first single had a song associated with Country on its B-side).
8. Introduce the students to the Grand Ole Opry, a radio show that started in the 1920s and was widely listened to. Explain that many, many people, including African-American musicians, heard the show, absorbing Country music. Chuck Berry, in knowing and loving Country music, was one of many black artists who did so.
9. As a second activity, play a clip of Johnny Cash performing the song “I Walk the Line.” Ask the students to which genre they feel the song belongs, Rock and Roll, Country, or Blues, and why. If necessary, put the three genre names up on a board and list what attributes of the song and Cash’s performance would

## PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

go under which genre name. Structure a debate/discussion around the question. As a conclusion, have the students

compile a list of words describing what they think Country music is, based on what they have learned thus far.

## SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

1. Following the debate/discussion, have students watch and listen to the clip of Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues."
2. Ask them if the Dylan song sounds like Country music, referring back to the list of Country music attributes just compiled. Have them cross reference the list with what they hear in "Subterranean Homesick Blues."
3. With that done, now contrast "Subterranean Homesick Blues" with another piece of music, not telling them the artist's name: the song is Bob Dylan's "One More Night," from Nashville Skyline.
4. Ask the students to write down on a piece of paper the ways in which this recording is more accurately a Country song than is "Subterranean Homesick Blues." Have them create two lists, one for "Subterranean," the other for "Mystery Song."
5. Once they have had a chance to write their thoughts down, have the students share their responses.
6. Lastly, tell the group that the "Mystery Song" is also by Bob Dylan, taken from his Nashville Skyline album. Tell them that the first song on Nashville Skyline was a duet with Johnny Cash, whom they saw earlier. Explain to them that Dylan, like Chuck Berry, grew up hearing Country music, and that it influenced him throughout his career. But Nashville Skyline was the Dylan record that many critics branded Country Rock.

## EXTENSION:

1. Have students read the New York Times review of Nashville Skyline, written in 1969 and included here among the RRAS Rock's Backpages resources. Ask them to write a response to the review, answering the following questions:
  - Did the writer see Nashville Skyline as a departure for Dylan? Why?
  - Did he think it was among Dylan's best work—or is that not immediately clear?
  - Does the review feel useful, or not?
  - Lastly, in writing a conclusion to their responses, have students consider a comment Beatle George Harrison made about hearing a song from Nashville Skyline before the album's release: "I thought, 'A lot of people are not going to like this.'" Though Harrison himself loved the song and is among the most outspoken Dylan fans, he thought that Nashville Skyline was going to get a bumpy reception. Explain why he might have made the comment. In the light of Harrison's point, answer the following question:

## EXTENSION: (CONTINUED)

- Do you think the New York Times review is ultimately positive?
2. Allow students to write a three to four paragraph story about two characters (with a beginning, a middle, and an end) that they feel could be easily adapted as a Country song. Have them write a short explanation of why their story would work. For the ambitious: write the Country song that could be created from that story and record it.
  3. Pick one of the artists mentioned in the introduction above (the Byrds, the Flying Burrito Brothers, the Eagles) and explore their connection to Country music. Write a short description of what these artists took from Country music.

## STANDARDS

### COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

#### *College and Career Readiness Reading Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 for Literature and Informational Text*

Reading 8: Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

#### *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.

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.

Writing 3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

Writing 10: Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

#### *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

- Chuck Berry – Maybellene (1965)
- Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys – Ida Red (1952)
- Johnny Cash – I Walk the Line (1957)
- Bob Dylan – Subterranean Homesick Blues (1965)

### FEATURED PEOPLE

- Chuck Berry
- Johnny Cash
- Bob Dylan
- Bob Wills

### HANDOUTS

- Handout 1: Excerpts from Lyrics to “Maybellene” and “Ida Red”