



# THE SOUND OF BLUE COLLAR DETROIT

## OVERVIEW

### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did Rock and Roll serve as an expressive tool for the working-class youth of Detroit?

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*Like a stout heart within the city is Detroit industry, the vital pulse beat of technology and resources, which has put the world on wheels. Detroit's strategic location, its reservoir of know-how, its ability to deliver manpower, places it in the vanguard of choice spots in which to build, manufacture, and expand.* – Promotional film for the city of Detroit, 1965

*They were down river boys. They were guys who lived in the disused parts of Detroit, the industrial parts. And really, when you grew up in Detroit in those areas, you had one of two ways to go. College wasn't the option. It was usually, were you gonna work the [assembly] line, or were you gonna work in a tool and die shop, and how many fingers were you gonna lose by the end of your career?*— Musician David Was on the band MC5

Few places represented the prosperity of the postwar United States and the allure of the American dream better than Detroit in the 1950s and early 60s. Home of the thriving American auto industry, Detroit and its legendary assembly lines reflected the nation's command of industry and its international economic dominance. But for many of the thousands of young people growing up in Detroit's blue-collar neighborhoods, the city was less about progress and prosperity than the prospect of a life with few options beyond the monotony of a factory job.

As happened in so many other contexts, the young people of Detroit in the postwar era turned to music to express their frustrations and to challenge society's expectations for them. Bands such as MC5 and the Stooges eschewed the feel-good music long associated with Detroit through the success of Motown, producing instead a hard-edged, proto-Punk sound that managed to address both the limitations of working-class life and the general frustrations of youth.



## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The importance of Detroit and the auto industry to the postwar American economy
- The efforts of working-class musicians, including the members of MC5 and the Stooges, to challenge prevailing views about life amidst the auto industry and give voice to the frustrations of working-class youth

### 2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Trace musical expression to the social and economic context in which it was created
- Common Core: Students will work in pairs to read and interpret a job description in order to draw inferences and evaluate the economic decisions of a typical member of the working class in Detroit (CCSS Reading 1; CCSS Speaking and Listening 1)
- Common Core: Students will draw examples from the song lyrics studied to support their individual analysis and reflection on the typical experience of a member of the working class in Detroit in this era (CCSS Writing 9)

## ACTIVITIES

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

**1. Divide students into pairs. Distribute Handout 1: Detroit Job Description.**

**2. Ask students to read the job description and complete the chart.**

**3. Ask members of each pair to share their responses with each other, and then discuss:**

- Would you accept this job? Why or why not?
- Do you think you would want to stick with this job your entire career? Why or why not?
- How might your answer be different if you were in your late 20s and had a family with two children to support?
- How might other factors, such as the state of the economy and your own family background, influence your decision?
- If you did accept the job, how fulfilling do you think it would be? What do you think you would do with your spare time?

**4. Have a few pairs share their responses with the class as a whole.**

**PROCEDURE:**

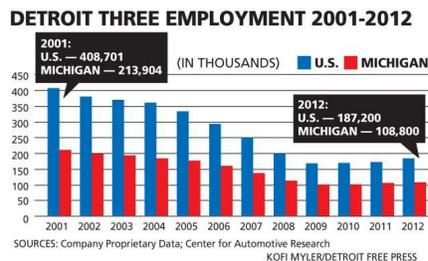
1. Play the short clip from the 1965 promotional video about the city of Detroit and discuss:

- What image of the city does the video project? What words come to mind?
- How does the video use music to create a particular impression about Detroit?
- According to the video, what was the prosperity of Detroit built upon in the mid-1960s?
- What was the main industry in Detroit at this time? (The instructor may wish to refer students back to the narrator’s explanation at the beginning of the clip that Detroit “has put the world on wheels,” as well as to the shots of the headquarters of Chrysler, General Motors, and Ford.)

2. Play the short clip of the 1984 song “Hello, Detroit,” by Sammy Davis Jr., and discuss:

- What is the overall mood of the song?
- How does the song’s image of Detroit compare with the image presented by the promotional video?
- Ask students why Berry Gordy might have been a Detroit “booster.” (Note to instructor: Inform the students that the song was co-written by Gordy, the man behind Detroit’s Motown Records, home of the Supremes, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, and many more.)

3. Display the graph of employment in the automotive industry in the Detroit area and discuss:



- How important were automotive industry jobs in the Detroit area in the 1970s? In more recent years?

- Imagine you were a teenager around the time the promotional film was made (1965)
- What employment possibilities do you think would have been open to you?
- What do you think your parents and community were likely to have expected from you in terms of your career?
- How might living in this context have influenced your answers to the questions in the opening activity?

4. Play the first short clip from the 2008 BBC documentary Motor City’s Burning: Detroit from Motown to the Stooges and discuss:

- Is the sound of the song in any way similar to that of “High School”? If so, in what way(s)?
- Does the song have a similar message to that of “High School”? In what way(s)? Be as specific as you can.
- What happens musically in this clip? Does the sound change or develop much? How might the sound reflect what is being said in the lyrics?
- Overall, what ideas do you think the band is trying to express in this song?

5. Play the second short clip from the documentary Motor City’s Burning, of the Stooges’ Iggy Pop explaining his musical influences, and discuss:

- What did Iggy Pop find so impressive about the machine at the Ford Rouge plant? What did it represent to him?
- Why would a band want to imitate this sound? Would someone who feels powerful in his or her everyday life be likely to feel the need to express him or herself this way?
- What kind of person would say -- or what kind of experiences would lead someone to want to say — “to hell with all this finery”?
- How did the music of the Stooges and MC5 reflect that the residents of Detroit are “tough people”?

## SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

Discuss with the class as a whole:

- How did the music of the Stooges and MC5 reflect the band members' working-class backgrounds?

## WRITING PROMPT:

If you had grown up in Detroit in the 1960s and had to pick one of the songs in this lesson to represent the city, which would you choose – “Hello Detroit,” “High School,” or “1969,” and why?

## EXTENSIONS:

1. Have students research MC5's affiliation with radical politics in Detroit, which grew substantially after the city's experience with widespread riots in 1967. The band joined the “White Panther Party,” a leftist group co-founded in the Detroit area by their manager, poet/activist John Sinclair. The White Panther Party issued a ten-point manifesto in 1968, whose platform included the demand to “Free all schools and all structures from corporate rule — turn the buildings over to the people at once!” and “Free the people from their phony “leaders” — everyone must be a leader — freedom means free every one! All Power to the People!” Students should compare and contrast the vision of the group to that of the Black Panther Party, which in 1966 had issued its own ten-point program (discussed in the lesson “The Message of Social Soul”). (Note: Instructors should preview the White Panther Party platform, which includes profanity as well as references to drug use and sexual activity, to decide whether it is appropriate for their students.)
2. Show the entire 2008 BBC documentary *Motor City's Burning: Detroit from Motown to the Stooges*, to further explore the Detroit music scene of the 1960s. The film contrasts the success of Motown with that of MC5, the Stooges, and other artists in this period. Instructors should preview the film to decide if it is appropriate for their students, as it contains profanity and numerous references to drug use and sexual activity.
3. Both MC5 and the Stooges are considered “proto-Punk” bands that heavily influenced the Punk Rock movement that would gain popularity in the late 1970s. Students should analyze the degree to which the sound of these bands, as well as their emphasis on expressing the anger of working-class youth, helped lay the groundwork for the Punk Rock movement.

## STANDARDS

### 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.

*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 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

*College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 6-12*

Speaking and Listening 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

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

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 3: People, Places, and Environments

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 7: Production, Distribution, and Consumption

### 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 Stooges – 1969 (1969)
- BBC's Motor City's Burning – The Stooges
- Sammy Davis Jr. – Hello, Detroit (1984)
- BBC's Motor City's Burning – MC5
- Detroit: City on the Move (1965)
- MC5 – High School (1970)

### FEATURED PEOPLE

- The Stooges

### HANDOUTS

- Handout 1: Detroit Job Description
- Handout 2: Song Analysis