



DIVERGENT PATHS IN THE 1990S: GANGSTA RAP AND CONSCIOUS HIP HOP

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did Gangsta Rap and Conscious Hip Hop respond to the social and political conditions of the 1990s?

OVERVIEW

As the 1980s came to a close, Hip Hop's popularity only increased. Within the Hip Hop field, different styles and approaches emerged throughout the 1990s. While numerous subgenres gained traction, a recognizable division fell into place between so-called "Gangsta Rap" and "Conscious Hip Hop."

Gangsta Rap grew in part out of the social and political climate on the West Coast, where cities such as Compton, California, became engulfed in gang violence fueled by the crack cocaine epidemic. Longstanding tensions between the African-American community and the police came to a head in the Rodney King case and the announcement of its verdict. Gangsta rappers began to write explicitly about inner city violence. Songs were marked by a liberal use of profanity and images of the gun-toting toughs who lived amidst the brutality of the inner city. Gangsta Rap often overlapped with the East Coast-based "Mafioso Rap," whose practitioners cultivated personas of high-living, power-wielding gangsters who drove fancy cars, drank champagne, and sported intimidating weapons – all while promoting a strong sense of kinship. Fiction seemed to become fact when rappers Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G. were victims of unsolved, highly public murders.

Soon enough, a countermovement some called "Conscious Hip Hop" began to emerge, primarily on the East Coast. Many fans saw it as an answer to the often violent and controversial lyrics common in Gangsta Rap. Though in many ways responding to the same conditions to which Gangsta Rap reacted, this subgenre sought to inspire positivity through its lyrics, much like some of the earliest Hip Hop music. Lyrics were intended to challenge and inspire while also questioning the social and political status quo.

Both subgenres helped define Hip Hop's diverse spectrum of creative possibilities, as well as expanding its capacity to question and critique society. In this lesson, students will compare the two subgenres and explore the conditions from which they arose. They will further consider whether these subgenres should be categorized as two distinct movements, or as two different means of addressing the same issues and concerns.



OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The definitions of the two Hip Hop subgenres known as “Gangsta Rap” and “Conscious Hip Hop”
- The ways in which both subgenres reflected social and political conditions in the 1990s, particularly escalating tensions in race relations and the prevalence of crime in inner city neighborhoods

2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Evaluate the similarities and differences between Gangsta Rap and Conscious Hip Hop
- Analyze visual imagery in music videos
- Identify connections between musical movements and the social and political conditions from which that music emerged
- Common Core: Students will work cooperatively in groups to formulate and defend an argument by taking a position on whether or not Gangsta Rap should be played on a radio station (CCSS Writing 1; CCSS Writing 5; CCSS Speaking and Listening 1)
- Common Core: Students will review multiple texts, photographs and videos to answer guided discussion questions and build understandings (CCSS Reading 1; CCSS Reading 2; CCSS Reading 7; CCSS Speaking and Listening 2; CCSS Speaking and Listening 3)

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

1. Play the intro to Ice Cube’s “Gangsta Rap Made Me Do It” (2008), and discuss:

- What does this video say about the public perception of “Gangsta Rap”?
- Do you think the performer, Ice Cube, agrees with this perception? Why or why not?

PROCEDURE:

1. Divide students into groups of 3-4. Explain that each group will take on the role of the board of directors of a local radio station. The board must decide whether or not the station will play Gangsta Rap, or will only play Conscious Hip Hop. In order to make this decision, they must first learn about the history and goals of each of these musical genres.
2. Distribute the following handouts to each group: Handout 1: Discussion Questions; Handout 2: Excerpts from Song Lyrics; Handout 3: Compton, California; Handout 4: 1990s Hip Hop Timeline; Handout 5: Article on Conscious Hip Hop; Handout 6: Article on Gangsta Rap; and Handout 7: Two Views of Conscious Hip Hop and Gangsta Rap. As the board of directors, each group will use these materials to help develop their knowledge and understanding of Gangsta Rap and Conscious Hip Hop before they make their decision about the radio station's programming.
3. Play the videos of the excerpts from "Straight Outta Compton" and "Me Myself and I" for the class. Instruct each group to then begin discussing the questions on Handout 1: Discussion Questions. They will use what they have seen in the videos, the lyric sheets, and the other handouts to help them answer. (Depending on the teaching situation, you may wish to inform students that the "Straight Outta Compton" version used in this lesson was edited to eliminate the considerable profanity in the original, and that the uncensored versions of most songs considered Gangsta Rap would not generally be considered suitable for classroom use.)
4. Play the video of Ice-T discussing life on the streets to supplement the information about Gangsta Rap in Handout 6.
5. After groups have had sufficient time to discuss all the questions, briefly go over each question with the class as a whole.
6. Distribute Handout 8: Press Release Template. Instruct students that they must now decide whether their radio station will play Gangsta Rap or only Conscious Rap. They will issue a press release of two to three paragraphs announcing their decision. (Make sure students understand that a press release is a document issued to the media announcing something newsworthy.) Instruct students that they must include at least three specific arguments in the press release in support of their decision. No matter what they decide, their press release must acknowledge arguments on both sides of the issue. (For example, it might state: "We understand that many people feel..., but we do not agree with this argument because....")

SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

Have each group read the first paragraph of its press release to the rest of the class. Discuss which arguments were used most frequently and why.

WRITING PROMPTS:

Should your radio station play Gangsta Rap? Take a position and use evidence to support your argument.

EXTENSIONS:

Ask students to research other Subgenres of Hip Hop, including:

- Crunk, e.g., Lil John
- Pop Rap (or Hip Pop), e.g., Nelly, Ludacris
- Jazz Rap, e.g., Guru's Jazzmatazz Volume 1

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.

Reading 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Reading 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

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 5: Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

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.

Speaking and Listening 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Speaking and Listening 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

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

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 3: People, Places, and Environments

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

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

- Ice-T – Life On the Street (1989)
- Ice Cube – Gangsta Rap Made Me Do It (Explicit) (2008)
- De La Soul – Me, Myself And I (1991)
- N.W.A. – Straight Outta Compton (1988)

FEATURED PEOPLE

- De La Soul
- Ice Cube
- Ice-T
- KRS-One
- N.W.A.

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1: Discussion Questions
- Handout 2: Excerpts from Song Lyrics
- Handout 3: Compton, California
- Handout 4: 1990s Hip Hop Timeline
- Handout 5: Article on Conscious Hip Hop
- Handout 6: Article on Gangsta Rap
- Handout 7: Two Views of Gangsta Rap and Conscious Hip Hop
- Handout 8: Press Release Template