



THE EMERGENCE OF GRUNGE

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What was Grunge and where did it come from?

OVERVIEW

“There’s a feeling of burnout in the culture at large. Kids are depressed about the future.”
— Music critic Simon Reynolds, 1992, about Generation X

The pre-Grunge era of the early 1980s was a time of media saturation, but many young people did not see themselves or their concerns accurately reflected in the slick music videos offered by MTV or in other mass media. The resulting alienation and apathy helped pave the way for the emergence of a new sound that became known, simply, as Grunge.



Sometimes called the “Seattle Sound,” Grunge began in the Pacific Northwest in the late 1980s and early 90s. The Grunge generation grew up on Heavy Metal, Punk, and Hardcore, drawing on elements of each to define its sound. The resulting aesthetic combined the droning, distorted guitar tones of Metal, the alienation and anti-authority attitude of Punk, and the edgy, physical stage shows of Hardcore. Like Punk, Grunge was full of anger, but with a dose of angst, self-deprecation, and depression added to the mix. And though the intimacy and spontaneity of live performances often gave it a similar feel to Punk, Grunge was more musically complex. More varied instrumentally, Grunge also accentuated dynamic shifts that evoked the frustrations of youth. Grunge musicians tended to reject the latest fashions and projected a feeling of indifference that was reflected in everything from their lyrics to their disheveled appearance. Adopting a thrift-store look, artists embraced lumberjack-style apparel -- most notably flannel shirts -- while pushing back against the exaggerated masculinity it often implied.

In its early years, Grunge was largely a localized phenomenon, emerging out of the club scene in the Pacific Northwest. Seattle had been deeply affected by the economic recession of the early 1990s, when unemployment was at a high and Starbucks did not yet have the ubiquitous presence it does today. Grunge, with its dour visuals and indifferent lyrics, seemed to encapsulate the grey and depressed mood of the region at the time. As the 90s progressed, the commercial success of groups such as Nirvana and Pearl Jam catapulted the Grunge sound into a national spotlight for which its creators and adherents were largely unprepared.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The influence of earlier musical forms, particularly Heavy Metal and Punk, on Grunge
- The social, cultural, economic, and geographic influences that led to the rise of Grunge
- The musical contributions of such Grunge artists as Nirvana, Mudhoney, and Pearl Jam

2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Connect music to the historical context in which it emerged
- Common Core: Students will analyze primary source documents, including videos, photographs, and newspaper/magazine articles in order to make inferences and cite specific textual evidence (CCSS Reading 1; CCSS Reading 7; CCSS Writing 9; CCSS Speaking and Listening 2)
- Common Core: Students will work collaboratively to write a three-paragraph review of early Grunge music (CCSS Writing 1; CCSS Speaking and Listening 1)

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

1. Ask students: When you watch TV or go to the movies, do you see people who look and sound like you? Who seem to share your outlook on life? Who seem to share the concerns and problems you face?
2. Display the three pictures below, explaining to students that they are all from hit TV shows of the 1980s and early 90s (Family Ties, Growing Pains, and Family Matters).



3. Ask students:

- What do you notice about the people in all three pictures, especially the teenagers? Do they look happy or unhappy? Do they appear to have the kinds of problems and issues teenagers typically have?
- If you had been a teenager then, how well do you think you would have been able to relate to these characters?
- Remember that there were no cell phones, no Internet, and no Facebook in the 1980s and early 90s. If you did not feel you were being represented in mass media, where might you turn? Where might you find art or culture that you felt represented your world and your outlook?

PROCEDURE:

1. Play the interview with the Grunge band Nirvana and briefly discuss:
 - What is their general attitude toward life?
 - How would you describe their appearance, especially compared to the characters in the television shows from the 1980s?
 - Why might their general attitude have resonated with teenagers during this time period?
2. Divide students into pairs. Explain that they will work with a partner to write a three-paragraph review of early Grunge music. The class will watch several music videos together, and each group will be given a set of documents that they will use as source material for their review.
3. Distribute the following handouts: Handout 1: Document Set; Handout 2: Discussion Questions; Handout 3: Graphic Organizer, and Handout 4: Music Review Template.
4. Inform students that they will use the discussion questions in Handout 2 to help them review the documents in Handout 1. As they do so, they should take notes on the graphic organizer in Handout 3. Inform students that it is not necessary to fill in every bubble on the graphic organizer; conversely, they should feel free to create additional categories and bubbles.
5. Before they begin analyzing the documents, play brief excerpts from the following videos to help students with their discussion of the music. Encourage students to take notes on the graphic organizer as they watch and discuss the videos. (Please note: The opening line of “Smells Like Teen Spirit” contains a reference to guns; instructors should decide if this material is appropriate for their classrooms.)
 - Black Sabbath, “Paranoid” (1970), example of Heavy Metal
 - Black Flag, “Rise Above” (1981), example of Hardcore Punk
 - Mudhoney, “Touch Me I’m Sick” (1988)
 - Nirvana, “Smells Like Teen Spirit” (1991)
 - Pearl Jam, “Alive” (1991)
6. Discuss with students:
 - Do you notice any similarities in instrumentation and/or vocals? What are they?
 - What do you hear in terms of dynamics? Are there contrasts between loud and soft? If so, what does this contribute to the song?
 - What do you notice about the performers’ clothing and appearance? Do you see any similarities in aesthetic?
 - What is similar about the attitude of the performers in the different videos?
 - What specifically do the Grunge songs (Mudhoney, Nirvana, and Pearl Jam) appear to draw from the earlier Punk and Heavy Metal performances?
7. After the discussion is complete, allow students ample time to work their way through the documents, complete the graphic organizer, and write their reviews. Emphasize that the reviews should incorporate as much specific information from the documents and video clips as possible.

SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

Ask a few groups to share excerpts from their reviews with the class. Discuss the different views of the Grunge songs and their meanings. Were certain viewpoints represented more than others?

WRITING PROMPT:

How did early Grunge reflect the social environment and the frustrations of youth in the Seattle area in the late 1980s and early 1990s?

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 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 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.

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 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 3: People, Places, and Environments

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

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

- Pearl Jam – Alive (1992)
- Nirvana – Smells Like Teen Spirit (1991)
- Black Flag – Rise Above (1984)
- Black Sabbath – Paranoid (1970)
- Nirvana – Interview (1993)
- Mudhoney – Touch Me I'm Sick (1988)

FEATURED PEOPLE

- Black Flag
- Black Sabbath
- Mudhoney
- Nirvana
- Pearl Jam

FEATURED PEOPLE

- Handout 1: Document Set
- Handout 2: Discussion Questions
- Handout 3: Graphic Organizer
- Handout 4: Music Review Template