ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What does a music producer do and in what ways does one hear the sound of a producer’s work in recordings?

OVERVIEW

Nearly every music recording includes credits for a “producer.” But what, exactly, does that person do? As the music producers featured in this lesson make evident, the role is malleable, with possibilities defined by that person’s skillset as well as his or her relationship with the recording artist, studio technology and the companies funding the recording. At various times producers may act as arrangers, song selectors, engineers, psychologists, referees between band members, or nearly any other role one could associate with recording music. The producer can play the part of a trusted friend, an assistant, or wield the power of a head coach or a dictator. However, within this vast range of possibilities, one constant emerges: the producer is responsible for the final product and oversees the transitional process through which songs become recordings.

In the case of George Martin, who helped The Beatles transform themselves from a successful nightclub act into international recording stars, the producer’s role was defined by trust, a collaborative spirit and thoughtful guidance. Martin knew the recording studio in ways The Beatles did not, at least during the making of the group’s first albums. Martin listened to The Beatles as performers and people, made suggestions, occasionally added arrangements and provided additional instrumental parts to their music where they all agreed it was beneficial, but, as he told Melody Maker’s Richard Williams in 1971, “It would have been silly to [try to] change them, because it would have destroyed their spirit.” Martin’s sound as a producer was transparent; one would not necessarily recognize a recording as “his.” Martin’s goal was to find and highlight the strengths of his artists to help them achieve their maximum potential. What he wanted listeners to hear was The Beatles, not George Martin.

Phil Spector, whose most celebrated work was released roughly around the same time as that of George Martin, approached production from a position of notable dominance. He used the recording studio, and anyone he could fit into it, to record the music he heard in his head. Recording what he referred to as “Wagnerian” Rock and Roll and “little symphonies for the kids,” Spector created what some have described as a sense of “heightened emotion” by constructing
OVERVIEW (CONTINUED)

densely layered arrangements with dozens of musicians playing at the same time. Though the singles were released with the names of the artists, many of whom were “Girl Groups” such as The Ronettes and The Crystals, Spector was the star. In this way, he was a very different producer than George Martin. In the following lesson, students experience the recording and production techniques of George Martin and Phil Spector through clips from Soundbreaking Episode One, historically-related archival journalism, and handouts, finally contrasting the two producers by way of a think-pair-share activity.

Phil Spector and George Martin both created defining sounds of the 1960s, but, inevitably, as music and culture changed, so too did some musicians’ ideas about allowing producers to exert control over their music. Some of the Singer-Songwriters of the early 1970s, such as Joni Mitchell, accepted little or no input from producers, focusing on the clarity and directness of the lyrics with sometimes minimal musical accompaniment. In the latter part of this lesson, students use a handout with information about both Betty Friedan’s seminal The Feminine Mystique and events in 1960s Second-Wave Feminism as a backdrop by which to consider Joni Mitchell’s decision to “self-produce” in the early 1970s.
Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):
   - About several major music producers of the 1960s and 1970s, including George Martin and Phil Spector
   - Several ways in which a music producer can contribute to the creation of recorded music
   - How George Martin helped The Beatles evolve into skilled recording artists
   - How musical arrangements and varied combinations of instruments can be used to affect listeners’ emotional experiences
   - How and why some artists chose to forgo the use of producers altogether as the cultural shifts of the 1960s reached a high point

2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):
   - Hear basic production techniques in recorded music
   - Analyze statements from historical materials to arrive at a better understanding of the past
   - Understand connections between popular culture and the time, place and social circumstances in which it was created
   - Make connections between popular music and historical events
   - Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visual, oral and audio forms

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

1. Ask your students the following questions and keep track of their answers on the board:
   - What do you think a “producer” is? Where have you heard the word used? What various things are being “produced”?
   - What do you think a “producer” might do for a musical recording?

2. Now Play Clip 1, Soundbreaking - What Does a Producer Do? Have your students take notes on a piece of paper and keep track of the various roles that producers can play. Ask your students:
   - In the first half of the clip, in what ways was the role of a producer described?
   - Why do you think a musician would allow a producer to suggest that a recording was not good enough and that they should try it again? (Encourage your students to consider the ways in which a producer who isn’t a band member can provide an expert, outside opinion about a song)
   - Having now viewed this clip, how might you now describe what a music producer does? Do you think there is a “right,” or “best” way to do it? (Students should recognize from the clip that “producing” can take many forms related to the person producing and the artist being produced.)
   - Can you think of any aspect of your life in which someone helps you by acting as a “producer”? (Students may suggest a sports coach, teacher, counselor, parent, friend, etc.)
PROCEDURE:

1. Ask your students what they know about The Beatles. Inform your students that in 1961-2, before The Beatles became internationally known, they performed almost nightly, often playing 3 to 5 hours of music per show. Now play Clip 2, Soundbreaking - The Early Beatles and George Martin. Ask your students:

   • Who do you see The Beatles playing to in this clip? How old does their audience seem to be? Do you think it was a quiet or loud environment?

   • In what ways do you think The Beatles might have prepared their music to please this audience? (Encourage students to consider what they like at a concert. The Beatles worked to excited their audiences in a number of ways such as playing up-tempo songs and moving together on stage, insuring that their audience was dancing, etc.)

   • In what ways do you think The Beatles might have shaped their music to fill 3 to 5 hours per show? (The Beatles could have added instrumental solos and played extended versions of their songs.)

2. Display the following photos, Slide 1, of the audience at a Beatles concert and Slide 2, George Martin (seen in the upper right) in the control room of the recording studio during a Beatles’ session.

   Ask:

   • How do you think the studio environment pictured here differed from the live environment in which The Beatles were accustomed to playing?

   • In what ways do you think a band’s goals might be change as they transition from a live venue to a recording studio? (Live the goal is often to excite fans in the moment. In the studio, there are no watching fans, and the goal is most often to create a recording that will inspire repeated listening. Also, the album format of the era limited the total amount of time allowed on a recording, so songs tended to be shorter.)

   • In what ways do you think these differences might affect the way The Beatles played their songs? (Encourage students to consider what might excite them at a concert: volume, lights, quick tempos, energy, etc. Then have students consider the various moods for which they might play a recording. Are there types of music or feelings that they would prefer to hear at home than at a live concert?)

   • How do you think George Martin might have been able to assist The Beatles as they transitioned from being a “live band” to a recording ensemble?

   • In what ways do you think The Beatles were “intuitive” and how do you Martin might have contributed something “intellectual” to what they were doing? In what ways do you think music can be “intellectual”? (Encourage your students to consider Martin’s experience and comfort in the recording studio and the ways in which he was able to guide them as they recorded music they’d been performing live. Have students look at Slide 1 and Slide 2 again and consider what might seem “intuitive” or “intellectual” about each situation.)

3. Play Clip 3, Soundbreaking - Yesterday. Ask your students:

   • What do you think might have made Paul McCartney “reluctant” and, as he says in the Soundbreaking clip, “frightened” of using strings? (Encourage your students to consider their own ideas about music. Would they be more comfortable playing with guitars and drums, or a string section? What do strings, and Classical music in general, represent to them?)

   • How do you think “Yesterday” would have fit into The Beatles’ live repertoire?

   • Can you see any ways in which the relationship of the strings to The Beatles music represents the relationship between George Martin and The Beatles as a whole? (Encourage your
PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

students to again consider the idea of The Beatles as “intuitive” musicians and Martin as “intellectual.” Though they were self-taught musicians, The Beatles composed hundreds of songs. Martin had musical training and the ability to score and compose parts that augmented The Beatles’ composition, but he would not have been able to write the songs themselves.)

• In what ways do you think George Martin and The Beatles might have helped each other accomplish musical and personal goals?

4. Introduce Phil Spector, a record producer who achieved success in the early 1960s. Spector employed different production methods and, at first, worked primarily with “Girl Groups,” such as The Ronettes and The Crystals. Play Clip 4, Soundbreaking - Phil Spector and the Wall of Sound. Ask your students:

• What instruments does this clip suggest Phil Spector used in many of his recordings? What do we hear Spector’s production technique called in this clip? (Students should recall that Spector created massive bands which one commentator described as an “enormous orchestra.” His technique became known as the “Wall of Sound.”)

• The “Wall of Sound” is said to have created music that resonated with teenagers’ “heightened sense of emotion” in this clip. In what ways do you think the teenage years might make one have a heightened emotional state, and how do you think using such large ensembles might have helped Spector make what to some felt like a soundtrack for this time period of their lives?

• This clip opens with The Ronettes, who were part of the “Girl Group” genre, performing “Be My Baby.” Why do you think The Ronettes were called a “Girl Group”? Are they a complete band? In what ways would you contrast The Ronettes as a “band” with The Beatles? Who is playing the music that they are singing with? (The Ronettes were all vocalists and they depended on Spector to organize their musical accompaniment whereas The Beatles performed instruments and sang.)

• In this clip Chuck Granata suggests that Phil Spector represents the “possibility of production,” and we also hear that Phil Spector is the first “Rock star producer.” In what ways do you think Spector might reflect these comments? (Encourage students to consider that even though Spector is not a performer on the recordings we hear, he is almost completely responsible for their existence. He has used all of his available resources—writers, musicians, studio technology—to bring them into existence.)

• As this clip opens we hear Phil Spector described as “the opposite of George Martin.” Reflecting back on this lesson, in what ways do you think Spector and Martin differ?

5. Think-Pair-Share activity: Break your students into groups of two. In each group, give one student Handout 1A and the other student Handout 1B. Have students read their handouts and respond to their questions individually. Then, have the pairs of students summarize what they’ve read to each other. Finally, discuss the following questions as a class (the questions are also on the individual handouts):

• What are some of the differences in the production styles of George Martin and Phil Spector?

• In what ways do you think these different approaches to recording music affected the musicians with whom each producer worked? (A good way to discuss this could be to ask about the different groups the producers worked with. Were your students previously aware of The Ronettes or The Righteous Brothers? Were they aware of The Beatles? How does the lasting power of these groups reflect the approach and guidance of the producers with whom they worked?)

• How would you describe the goals of each producer?

• Do you think that the early Beatles would have
PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

prospered if Phil Spector was their producer? Why or why not?

• If you were a songwriter and had a set of completed songs, which producer would you rather employ?

6. Distribute Handout 2: The Decade of the Feminine Mystique and Handout 3: Lyrics and Agency. Read the two paragraphs of Handout 2 out loud as a class and ask your students:

• How would you explain the “mystique” about which Friedan writes? Do you think such a thing exists today?

• How do you think this “Feminine Mystique” might have been reflected in music?

• In what ways do you think a book like The Feminine Mystique might ultimately have an influence on the music industry in the 1960s?

7. Have a student read the lyrics to The Ronettes’ “Be My Baby” from Handout 3. Ask your class:

• In what ways might the lyrics of “Be My Baby” reflect a connection with Betty Friedan’s analysis of how women were represented in popular culture at the time? (Encourage your students to consider who is singing and what she is expressing. What does the singer want, who does she want it from, and why does she want it? Also, discuss what The Ronettes’ role within Spector’s music might have been. Were they in charge of the music they performed? How much control do you think they might have had during recording sessions at Spector’s studio? What do the lyrics of the song suggest about the singer?)

8. Show Clip 5, Soundbreaking - Singer/Songwriters and Self-Production and have your students take notes about why some artists chose to use minimal production or none at all. Ask your students:

• In this clip, for what reasons is it suggested that Singer-Songwriters began to eschew large-scale productions?

• How would you contrast Joni Mitchell’s approach to recording with that of Phil Spector? In what ways do you think the goals of Mitchell and Spector are different? (Students should recognize that while Spector was making grand statements with large ensembles, Mitchell believed that she alone could properly represent the music she was writing and therefore chose to perform solo or with minimal accompaniment.)

• What reasons does Joni Mitchell give for her desire to produce herself? In what ways do you think Mitchell’s decisions reflect ideas Betty Friedan put forth in The Feminine Mystique? (Encourage students to discuss the connections between the “Mystique” Friedan suggests has been created by men and Mitchell’s feeling that she could not find a male producer who would listen to or understand what she was attempting to express with her music.)

9. Return to Handout 3. Read the definition of “agency” out loud as a class and ask your students:

• In what ways do you think Betty Friedan felt women were seeking “agency” in the U.S.?

• In what ways do you think Joni Mitchell exercised “agency” in her musical decisions?

10. Read the lyrics to “Be My Baby” and “California” out loud as a class and ask your students:

• Compare and contrast the perspective from which these two songs are written. In what ways does Joni Mitchell write with personal agency? How is this different from the way agency is expressed in “Be My Baby”? (“Be My Baby” is a tale of the need of the opposite sex as told by a woman; “California” is a tale of travel, making connections and letting them go from the perspective of a woman.)

• How do you think the lyrics of “California” might express the perspective of a woman whose life has been affected by The Feminine Mystique?
SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

Ask your students:

- How would you now describe the role of a “producer” in the recording studio?

- Thinking of a current song you like, how would you describe its style of production? Is it closer to the approach of George Martin’s, Phil Spector’s or Joni Mitchell’s productions? Or, is it something else altogether?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY:

1. How did George Martin’s productions of The Beatles’ recordings change between 1963 and 1969, and how did those changes reflect wider cultural and social shifts? Write a two-page persuasive essay on the topic using specific recordings as your sources.

2. Choose a producer from the list below and research and listen to some of, his or her work. Write a short essay that responds to the following questions:

   - Is this person a recording artist and a producer, or just a producer?
   - With whom has this producer worked?
   - Can you identify any techniques or sounds which are this producer’s hallmark?
   - Has this producer worked primarily within a genre, or does he or she seem to work across styles?
   - Does this producer seem to work mostly with single artists, bands, large ensembles or all of them?
   - What is the length of this producer’s career? Did he or she have a short period of success, or was/is it ongoing?
   - Thinking of the spectrum of approaches to production you learned about in this lesson, where would you place this person’s work?

List of Producers:

- Rick Rubin
- Jimmy Jam
- Linda Perry
- Peter Asher
- Slyvia Robinson
- RZA
- WundaGirl
- Daniel Lanois
- Jerry Wexler
- Crystal Caines
- Nigel Goodrich
- Jimmy Iovine
- Dr. Dre
- Steve Albini
- Quincy Jones
- Slyvia Massy
- Jay Z
- Pharrell Williams
- Sheryl Crow
- Alex “Da Kid” Grant
- Joey Moi
- Max Martin
- Pete Rock
- Mark Ronson
- Prince
- Jeff Lynne
- Sam Phillips
- Berry Gordy
- J Dilla
- Teo Macero
- Brian Eno
- Nile Rodgers
COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

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

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 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

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

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

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 7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation

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

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

Speaking and Listening 6: Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate
Language 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking

Language 2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing

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

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

Theme 3: People, Places, and Environments

Theme 4: Individual, Development and Identity

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

**NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION**

*Core Music Standard: Responding*

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response. Describe how the elements of music and expressive qualities relate to the structure of pieces, including contrasting works and programs of music

Enduring Understanding: Response to music is informed by analyzing context (social, cultural, and historical) and how creators and performers manipulate the elements of music

Essential Question: How does understanding the structure and context of music inform a response?

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators’/performers’ expressive intent. Describe a personal interpretation of works or contrasting works and explain how creators’ and performers’ application of the elements of music and expressive qualities, within genres, cultures, and historical periods, convey expressive intent

Enduring Understanding: Through their use if elements and structures of music, creators and performers provide clues to their expressive intent

Essential Question: How do we discern the musical creators’ and performers’ expressive intent?
Core Music Standard: Connecting

Connecting 10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make music. Demonstrate how interests, knowledge, and skills relate to personal choices and intent when creating, performing, and responding to music.

Enduring Understanding: Musicians connect their personal interests, experiences, ideas, and knowledge to creating, performing and responding.

Essential Question: How do musicians make meaningful connections to creating, performing, and responding? Demonstrate how interests, knowledge, and skills relate to personal choices and intent when creating, performing, and responding to music?

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Resources

**Video Resources**
- Soundbreaking – Phil Spector and the Wall of Sound
- Soundbreaking – The Early Beatles and George Martin
- Soundbreaking – Yesterday
- Soundbreaking – Singer/Songwriters and Self-Production
- Soundbreaking – What Does a Producer Do?

**Handouts**
- Handout 1A: Phil Spector and Girl Group Excerpts
- Handout 1B: George Martin and The Beatles Excerpts
- Handout 2: The Decade of the Feminine Mystique
- Handout 3: Lyrics and Agency