

POP SONGS FOR A BETTER WORLD

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There are loads of topical subjects and messages in the lyrics of pop songs now and before. These messages can change our hearts and minds about the big issues the world is facing nowadays: drugs (John Lennon, "Cold Turkey"), environment (Tracy Chapman, "Short Supply"), unemployment (Peter Gabriel, "Don't Give Up"), racialism (The Cure, "Killing an Arab"), immigration (Genesis, "Illegal Alien"), war (Bruce Springsteen, "War. What is it for?"), etc.

Selected chunks of the lyrics make a good stuff for reading for scanning

I live on the second floor
I live upstairs from you
If you hear something late at night
Some kind of trouble, some kind of fight
They only hit you until you cry
And after that you don't ask why
You just don't argue anymore
(Suzanne Vega, "My Name is Luka")

What is the subject of this song?

1. loneliness
2. child abuse, home violence
3. being a woman

She calls out to the man on the street,
"Sir, can you help me? It's cold and
I've nowhere to sleep. Is there
Somewhere you can tell me?"
(Phil Collins, "Another Day In Paradise")

What is the subject of this song?

1. crime in city life
2. unemployment
3. homelessness

A more challenging task is that of matching twenty song titles (with twenty different topics) with the selected lyrics of those songs. Bruce Springsteen's "Sinatola Cowboy" is a touching song about illegal immigration of Mexicans in the States. After listening to this ballad, the teachers can ask their students to read the words of the songs carefully and find parallel settings in Spain ('wetbacks'= pateras, Miguel & Luis= Ahmed & Yunes, dangerous jobs in the tin shack = dangerous jobs at building sites or factories...). After answering a number of questions intended as a string to guided composition

How old was Luis when he died?
How did the two brothers come into the USA?
What kind of work did they find in the fields of the San Joaquin?
What was made in the "small tin shack"?
How did Luis die?

the students can turn the story of the song into a newspaper report

<i>THE FRESNO STAR</i>	
\$ 1.25	Tuesday, February 10, 1998
WETBACK KILLED IN A SHACK BLAST	

Current pop stars are now borrowing and remaking oldies that tell of important issues. Let's consider a couple of songs that deal with Apartheid. Sting made popular again the melody and the powerful message that lies behind "Strange Fruit", first sung by Billie Holiday in the late 1930s. Here is a teaching tip to approach this wonderful poem

"Strange Fruit" (Billie Holiday / Sting)

Read this song and the sound clues for the last word in each line.

Southern trees bear a strange _____	/u:/
Blood on the leaves and blood at the _____	/u:/
Black bodies swinging in the southern _____	/i:/
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar _____	/i:/
Pastoral scene of the gallant _____	/au/
Bulging eyes and the twisted _____	/au/
Scent of magnolia sweet and _____	/e/
And the sudden smell of burning _____	/e/
Here is the fruit for the crows to _____	/ʌ/
For the rain to gather, for the wind to _____	/ʌ/
For the sun to rot, for the trees to _____	/o/
Here is a strange and bitter _____	/o/

Here are the twelve missing words. Put them where they belong:

pluck, crop, fruit, trees, mouth, suck, drop, root, flesh, fresh, breeze, south.

Following this reading task aimed at catching the sound and the colour of the song, the big question: What is the song about? "Strange Fruit" was the first protest song in the history of modern music. It bitterly depicted the lynching of a black man in the deep south of the States. It opened the way to more Apartheid songs like Peter Gabriel's "Biko", also arranged and performed by Sinead O'Connor. The story of Stephen Biko in South Africa can be outlined in a listening task for guessing and anticipation

"BIKO" (Peter Gabriel / Sinead O'Connor)

Guess the answer to these questions before you listen to the song. Listen and check.

1. The story happened in...
 - a. 1946
 - b. 1977
2. An important city in South Africa is...
 - a. Port Elizabeth
 - b. Saint Elizabeth
3. The weather in South Africa in September is...
 - a. chilly and snowy
 - b. fine

4. Biko was in police custody in room...
 - a. 619
 - b. 690
5. How do you say in Zulu “the man is dead”?
 - a. Yihla Moja
 - b. Ngise ‘Khaya
6. At night the singer can only dream in ...
 - a. black and white
 - b. red
7. The world outside is...
 - a. black and white
 - b. bright
8. What can't you blow out?
 - a. a candle
 - b. a fire
9. What will blow the flames higher?
 - a. the wings of peace
 - b. the wind
10. Who / What is watching the trouble in South Africa now?
 - a. the eye in the sky
 - b. the eyes of the world

Pop songs provide the playground for many classroom activities: **vocabulary builders** (picking ‘war’ and ‘peace’ song titles: “ I Don’t Wanna Be a Soldier”, “If I Were a Weapon”, “Sunday Bloody Sunday”, “Gates of Eden”, “Heaven’s Here on Earth”, “No More Trouble”, etc.), **letter-writing** (real letters to Fan Clubs of Sting, Paul McCartney, Madonna, Bruce Springsteen, REM, Yusuf Islam, U2...), **speaking & acting** (a chat between Esther –Madonna- and Yusuf Islam –Cat Stevens- talking about peace and war and why they changed their beliefs to Cabbala and Islam). A task which is not demanding and works just fine as a listening game which creates an intriguing atmosphere is the following

ANTI-WAR SONGS:

THE GREATEST TOP TEN EVER

Some of these hits have dashed up or down this month. Listen and write the ranking number for each song now. The first song you will hear is No 10, the last No 1.

Last month	This month	Song title	Singer / group
1		“The Last Straw”	REM

2		"Who'll Stop the Rain?"	Creedence C.R.
3		"Universal Soldier"	Donovan
4		"Blowin' in the Wind"	Bob Dylan
5		"Brothers in Arms"	Dire Straits
6		"Radio Baghdad"	Patti Smith
7		"Russians"	Sting
8		"War (What is it for?)"	Bruce Springsteen
9		"We Shall Overcome"	Joan Baez
10		"Peace Train"	Cat Stevens

The Iraq trouble has been the target of quite a few pop lyricists. Some pop and rock stars have supported George Bush Jr (Britney Spears, Alice Cooper, Toby Keith) but many more have fought his policy (Bruce Springsteen, R.E.M. Patti Smith, Eminem, Sheryl Crow...). The songs of the latter stock are worth while dealing with. Some are recorded in the challenging albums *Revolution Starts Now* or *Rock Against Bush*.

Two beautiful and interesting songs to work with in the class are Patti Smith's "Radio Baghdad" and "Gandhi" (with *Trampin'*). A good example of pop interculturalism is that of Lenny Kravitz and Kadim Al Sahir singing together "We Want Peace" (with *Unity*, The Official Athens 2004 Olympic Games Album). Again new versions of classical peace/war songs are available: Yusuf Islam (Cat Stevens) has remade "Peace Train" (1971,2003) introducing some lines in Zulu, Avril Lavigne (within the *Unity* album, 2004) has given a new drive to Bob Dylan's "Knockin' On Heaven's Door" (1973), also performed in between by Eric Clapton or Guns N' Roses

Mama, put my guns in the ground
I can't shoot them anymore.

But not only war is hitting our world. There is disease, famine, lack of political freedom, new forms of human bondage... It is a good sign that pop stars are not turning their back on these issues. The role of some of them (U2 leader Bono in particular) is so active and influential as that of the UN secretary. They have become the new ambassadors of a global world. U2, Sting, R.E.M, Pearl Jam and others joined their angry voices recently in an album dedicated to freeing Myanmar's democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi (*For the Lady*). There has been a remake of "Do They Know it's Christmas?" intended to collect funds and aid the people in Dafur (Sudan). Even Spanish pop stars / Catalan musicians (Dover, La Oreja de Van Gogh, Lluís Llach, Montserrat Caballé) have made their contribution to the Intermón Oxfam campaign for a "fairer trading" around the world: *Cosecha de esperanza* (December 2004).

Music on its own is not strong enough to fight off the world's most troublesome issues but it can help enhance our educational motivation and power to cope with them. We can use this sort of pop songs in the classroom to keep faith up. In the meanwhile we can grow crops of hopefulness by writing school papers full of headlines like the following

Sharon to pull down wall
No more famine in Sudan
Oil in Iraq runs out
New drugs against Aids and malaria found in BCN's labs
Green Belt Wangari Maathai planting more trees in Africa

and by calling back into our minds from time to time Peter Gabriel's hymn of battle
(from "Fourteen Black Paintings" lyrics)

From the pain come the dream
From the dream come the vision
From the vision come the people
From the people come the power
From the power come the change
