Music and Messages from the Past: Tuning into History

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For many students, studying history is a boring and irrelevant endeavor. Traditional, teacher-centered teaching strategies contribute to this unfortunate reality. While the lecture method and textbook readings can and should be used in the teaching of history, these methods should not be used to the exclusion of student-centered, engaging strategies. One strategy which has been theorized to motivate and instruct students is the use of popular music in the classroom. The following paper examines the use of popular music in the history classroom and the various ways in which its use can engage, motivate, and instruct students. It is suggested that the use of popular music can serve to capture students’ attention, create a positive classroom atmosphere, introduce and illustrate a time and place, generate interest in history, and enhance students’ knowledge and understanding of history, specifically that of the Vietnam War and the era surrounding it.

Introduction

Sad truths known well by social studies educators is that students of all ages find social studies to be dull, boring, and of no use to them personally, and they are uninterested in studying and learning about social studies (Chapin, 2006; Gallavan, Putney, & Brantley, 2002; Harris & Haydn, 2006; Hawkins, 1997; Lounsbury, 1988; Schug, Todd, & Beery, 1984; Shaughnessy & Haldayna, 1985; Wheeler, 2007). In addition, and perhaps consequentially, anecdotal and empirical evidence alike have shown that students know very little about social studies in general and history specifically (Bradley Commission on History in the Schools, 1988; Finn, 2003; Ravitch, 1989; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). Research has also shown that problems of negative student attitudes toward the study of history and the history illiteracy prevalent among students are oftentimes a consequence of the use of ineffective teaching methods in history classrooms (Grant, 2001; Stoskopf, 2001; Wheeler, 2007). The teaching of isolated dates, names, and facts along with excessive, exclusive, or ineffective dependence on textbooks, and over-reliance on and/or poor use of the lecture method are routine teaching practices in history classrooms. Each of these methods has been found to contribute to students’ passivity toward and disinterest and disengagement in learning about history (Cuban, 1991; Finn & Ravitch, 1988; Romanowski, 1995). If students are to be motivated to learn and enjoy learning about history, engaging, student-centered instructional strategies that promote meaningful and relevant study of history are needed (Brophy 1987; Governale as cited in Zhao & Hoge, 2005; Grant, 2001; Hope, 1996; Hootstein, 1994).

To ascertain what strategies teachers can use to teach students to appreciate and learn about history, classroom-based research that focuses on effective teaching practices is needed. For years, it has been widely theorized that the use of popular music in history classrooms may serve to interest and instruct students (Binkiewicz, 2006; Chilcoat, 1984, 1986; Chilcoat & Ligon, 1992; Cooper, 1981, 1983, 1985, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1999, 2007; Cooper & Walker, 1990; Fain, 2004; Harris, 2004; Lane, 2005;
Lipscomb, Guenther, & McLeod, 2007; Moore, 2007; Perone, 2004; Sweeny, Monteverde, & Garrett, 1993; White & McCormack, 2006; Whitmer, 2005). Research examining the impact of using popular music in the history classroom, however, has been limited. This paper examines the use of popular music in a college-level history classroom and the impact its use had on student interest in and learning about history.

Methodology

With an interest in assessing how and why popular music might be used in a history classroom, the researchers who conducted this study identified a history professor who regularly used popular music in his teaching. The history professor, henceforth referred to as Dr. Tunes, is an experienced history instructor who uses the music in a college-level course he teaches about the Vietnam War. Dr. Tunes and the 34 students enrolled in the Vietnam War course were invited to become participants in this study, and all agreed to participate. The students were university juniors and seniors who elected to take the course. Because an intensive and comprehensive examination of the use of popular music and its impact on the students’ attitudes toward and learning about history was desired, the case study method (Merriam, 1988) was employed for the research.

Dr. Tunes was purposively selected because of his experiences with using popular music in the history classroom. The researchers learned that when the professor initially began to plan for teaching the Vietnam War course, he resolved to make it more than just a military history. Because the war and its era had many facets, he was determined to approach the war and era in a comprehensive and candid way. While preparing to teach the course the first time, Dr. Tunes said he talked to people who lived during the 1960s and 1970s. His intent was to ascertain how best to address political, social, and cultural issues associated with the period and the war. In discussions with people who had experienced the era, he was advised that the number one way — perhaps the only way — of effectively getting at the real issues of that time was through the music of the period. Dr. Tunes was told that it was simply impossible to teach about the era and the war without teaching through and about the music. He said he learned that things that could not or were not said in other ways were said through the lyrics of the music. He came to realize that “the music, more than anything else, was a real signpost of the era.” In an effort to learn about the authors’ messages within the music, he listened to the lyrics of the songs from the period and began to appreciate the war and the era in a way he had not experienced them before. He explained to the researchers:

_When I began to hear the music, it began to explain or began to give you a feel for the stuff that you cannot get from books and stuff you can’t even get by talking to people. It would almost put you there. It's almost a tangible piece of history. You can almost pick it up and touch it._

Dr. Tunes explained that after he experienced firsthand the effect the music had on his understanding of the period, he decided to begin using the music daily in his course on the Vietnam War. For this reason, Dr. Tunes and his students were chosen for this investigation.

The researchers who assessed Dr. Tunes’ pedagogical use of music utilized four elements for the collection of data. The first element included five, semi-structured interviews of Dr. Tunes. As advised by Knodel (1993), the number of topics explored during the interviews was kept to a moderate number so that each topic could be explored in detail. Each interview spanned 45 minutes-to-an-hour in duration. Questions were scripted to achieve an understanding of why and how Dr. Tunes incorporated popular music into classroom instruction. This element of instrumentation
also included focus group interviews of the 34 students. As recommended by Morgan (1988), the focus groups were kept small, with a range of four to seven members each, resulting in seven groups. The focus group interviews, as suggested by Seidman (1991), lasted approximately 90 minutes each. The interviews were conducted near the end of the semester of study to ascertain the final impressions of the students. Using a pre-constructed protocol, students were asked open-ended questions designed to generate group discussion concerning how the students perceived, experienced, and responded to the use of the popular music in the classroom. As Morgan (1993) recommended, the number of target questions was limited to 12 with additional impromptu probing and follow-up questions asked as needed.

A second element of the data collection entailed six observations of Dr. Tunes’ class while in session and when popular music was being used. Sherman and Webb (1988) maintained that observations are essential to “gather data about the ‘lived’ experience of participants” (p. 125). Each observation was approximately 50 minutes in duration. The classroom observations provided opportunities to examine what transpired in the physical context of the teaching-learning environment. Copious notes were taken during the periods of observations.

The third element of data collection involved the completion of a written survey by the students. The survey consisted of 20 closed-ended questions related to Dr. Tunes’ effectiveness, five demographic questions, and one open-ended question related to the use of the popular music by Dr. Tunes. The final element of data collection was a review of the music-related instructional materials used by Dr. Tunes. These documents included lists of songs, musicians, recording dates, lyrics, and commentaries for each. This information was compiled for each day of the semester when music was used with corresponding topics of study noted.

In preparation for analyzing the data, audiocassettes of the interviews were transcribed verbatim; the field notes were refined, and the survey responses were compiled. Coding and indexing were among the analytical tools utilized to reduce and catalog the data collected. Classifications were inductively developed as themes emerged from the analysis. Categorical matrices were used to succinctly organize the data for subsequent synthesis and interpretation of meaning.

**Results**

After the data were collected and analyzed, the results of the study were isolated. The results indicated that a variety of positive impacts on the teaching and learning of history resulted from the use of the music. Dr. Tunes spoke to three effects the music had on the teaching of history. Based on his years of experience using music in his classroom, he contended that popular music can be used to (a) capture students’ attention, (b) introduce and illustrate a time and place, and (c) teach effectively about the Vietnam War. Having experienced the use of the music for a semester, Dr. Tunes’ students maintained that the music impacted their learning of history as it (a) created a positive classroom atmosphere, (b) generated interest in history, and (c) enhanced their knowledge and understanding of the Vietnam War.

**In the Words of Dr. Tunes …**

*Capturing students’ attention.* Interviews with Dr. Tunes revealed that he was initially drawn to using popular music in the classroom because he had a strong desire to begin class in an atypical fashion. He stated he always tried to start his classes differently than what is normally expected by students. He said he used the music “to lesson the tension, to get their attention, and to perk them up a little bit.” Dr. Tunes discussed at length his determination to have a “hook” at the beginning of class to draw
students into a lecture. While he sometimes used interesting introductions, quotes, or jokes to begin a lecture, experimenting with music had convinced him that music was the most effective hook he had tried. In fact, according to him, “it was the perfect hook.”

In the best instances, Dr. Tunes selected music that related to the lecture of the day. Oftentimes, the lyrics played would entice his students to look at an issue from a different standpoint. He found that the music could get his students thinking about the topic, thereby engaging them in the lesson that would follow. According to Dr. Tunes:

Most people teach history in a boring manner, which I find to be reprehensible. Every interesting, fun, funny, tragic thing ever done is history. If you focus on the boring stuff or teach it in a boring manner, the students will find history to be boring. Lectures that are done well are always interesting and compelling on many different levels, and the music proved to be another tool to make a lecture more exciting. It was another facet to use to make history interesting rather than making it something that they’ve always thought it was, which was “here’s a bunch of facts, a bunch of dates which I have to vomit back up on a test.” They found out that history was all that stuff plus all of the music that they liked. Maybe now they won’t find it to be boring after all.

The feedback he receives from his students confirms what he believes to be true. Dr. Tunes revealed that it is not uncommon for students to approach him after class and tell him they appreciate his innovative use of the popular music; they enjoy it, and they hope he will continue to use it. Dr. Tunes stated that in addition to students enjoying and looking forward to the music, it “got them thinking or got them laughing or got them mad, and whatever the individual effect, it woke them up.” The students paid attention and they asked questions, and they would even suggest songs they thought he should add to his play list. Dr. Tunes said it became clear to him that the students got something out of the music, and that something was special.

Introducing and illustrating a time and place. Dr. Tunes found that his students responded enthusiastically to the use of the popular music from the 1960s and 1970s. Interestingly, he discovered that many of the songs were recognizable to most of the students. He said he found this to be true for a number of reasons. Some of the songs have been recycled (i.e., appeared on television commercials or re-recorded by contemporary artists). Additionally, many of the traditional-aged students grew up with baby-boomer parents who had familiarized music of their youth to their children. A number of nontraditional-aged students in his class were also familiar with the music because they had personally experienced the period. He also learned that many of his students had cultivated a personal interest in the music of the era as a result of the music being played in movies such as Forest Gump and on classic rock radio stations that have perpetuated the genre and introduced it to today’s college-aged generation.

Dr. Tunes found that listening to and analyzing the songs got the students to look at the issues surrounding the era in ways they otherwise would not have. He found that the music oftentimes spawned discussions in unplanned, unexpected, and invaluable ways. Rather than treating topics in scripted and cursory fashion, discussions developed naturally as topics were introduced in the lyrics of songs played. The music led to in-depth discussions the students likely would not have had were it not for the prompts from the music. According to Dr. Tunes, “The music reflects the culture of the era, and it can be kind of this instant caught in time that is a window to what people were thinking then.” He became convinced that using popular music to teach
about a time and place in history can offer students a vicarious learning experience. He defined the songs as primary sources, as tangible history, as “voices from the past that are just as valuable as a book.”

**Teaching about the Vietnam War.** When using the music in the classroom, Dr. Tunes said he discovered that although many students were familiar with the Vietnam era music, rarely had they recognized the songs’ political or social statements as being related to actual events in history. As the course unfolded through the music, he discovered the students were oftentimes surprised to find that groups they were familiar with sang songs with a “real message.” Discovering that the songsters dealt with the era in a passionate and oftentimes critical fashion was enlightening to the students and served a particularly significant instructive purpose. Dr. Tunes noted that students “are amazed that all of these popular bands were actually saying something rather than just playing the music.” To illustrate this point, a song called “Happy Christmas, the War is Over” by John Lennon was cited. Dr. Tunes stated that when he played this song, many students recognized it, but they recognized it as a Christmas-time song, not a wartime song. Dr. Tunes said the students were surprised to learn the song was more about ending the Vietnam War than having a happy Christmas.

Additionally, Dr. Tunes said the music was highly effective in setting a tone for learning about the Vietnam War. For example, some students experienced a stirring patriotism when “Ballad of the Green Beret” by Barry Sadler was played. On a day when the students were in a particularly somber mood, he played “The Air” by Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention to “snap them out of it.” On another day when the students had been unresponsive, he played “War” by Edwin Starr to “get them primed.” He said the students “got a kick out of that and lightened up.” Like “War,” most of the songs played during the class were protest songs. Dr. Tunes found that some students took issue with the strong antiwar messages. He pointed out, however, that he liked to use the music to “get us out on a limb and to push us off.” He found the emotions aroused in the students by the music served to do just that.

Finally, Dr. Tunes discovered that many of the students found the period and its music to be relevant to them in personal ways because they had relatives who had participated in the war. These students had a marked interest in both the war and the era, motivated by a desire to understand the period as their relatives had.

He reported that several students shared stories about conversations they had with their parents, conversations initiated with a question about a particular song played in class. Students told Dr. Tunes that discussing the music of the period with loved ones opened dialogue about personal experiences and memories, an unintended yet important ancillary result of using the music.

**In the Words of Dr. Tunes’ Students …**

*Creating a positive classroom atmosphere.* Dr. Tunes’ students found that the use of the music enhanced the classroom atmosphere as it was a refreshing novelty. One student noted he was surprised because he had never had a teacher who played music in the classroom. This same student also said that he had “expected the professor to talk from the beginning to the end like most history professors do.” When he realized that music would be a part of the regular classroom routine, he found it to be very unusual, and he “knew the class was going to be different.” Another student recalled her class’s reaction to the use of the music: “I remember the first time he played it, everyone was like ‘Whoa! What is he doing?’ We couldn't believe it.” Another student shared her initial thoughts about the use of the music:

*It was like wow! You could see what he was talking about and how much he cared about it. It let you know from the*
start that he was going to be a good history teacher because he cared a lot about his subject and wasn't just standing there doing the motions.

Several students said that Dr. Tunes’ class was an interesting class because he made it that way with the music. The general consensus of the students was that Dr. Tunes and his teaching were different from what was typically experienced, and, not only different, but different in a good way.

Dr. Tunes’ students agreed that using the music was a good way to begin class, that it took “the edge off” and “set the tone.” Described as “an icebreaker,” they reported the music had a calming effect as it “settled everybody down,” causing students “to quiet down quickly” when they entered the lecture hall. Some of the students pointed out that the first few minutes in most classes are wasted while waiting for everyone to take their seats and get quiet. Beginning class with the music was described as a “good touch” as it controlled for this problem. When the music started, “people quit talking, and there was dead silence.” Students reported that the songs would get them relaxed and ready for the lesson.

The students said the music created a positive atmosphere for learning. Numerous references were made as to how the music grabbed the students’ attention, got them thinking, and focused them on history. Students said it got the class “going” and put everyone in the “mood” for listening to a lecture by bringing variety to the class. Of the music, it was said, “It will get your attention a lot faster than if someone just got up there and gave a lecture.” As articulated by one student, “It wasn’t just ‘put your face in the book.’ It was ‘here’s another way to open your eyes.’” The students reported they enjoyed, liked, and even loved having the music in the classroom. Adjectives they used to describe the use of the music included nice, neat, fun, cool, exciting, interesting, entertaining, impressive, insightful, and informative.

As an ancillary benefit, the students revealed that the use of the music made Dr. Tunes more approachable and that they “were not afraid to go up and talk to him.” They felt they could relate to him better because “he was into something” they were. One student stated that the music “kind of connected the teacher and the students together.” Another said, “It gave a connection to the teacher and students because it was something we could relate to.”

An idea commonly expressed by the students was that Dr. Tunes and his students “clicked right away” because they “had something in common”: the music. Students believed Dr. Tunes used “his music” not just as a gimmick, but as something that “meant a lot to him, and he wanted us to maybe get a little piece of that.”

Generating interest in history. The students reported that the use of the music was an effective way of generating interest in history because music is an enjoyable and familiar medium to them. They said their generation is “tuned into music” and that they listen to it all the time — in the car, at home, and at social gatherings. According to one student, “It is on our minds all of the time.” The students said they found it interesting that Dr. Tunes brought that piece of their world into the classroom. They were impressed with how he brought “something that happened a long time ago” into the present by using music. They commended Dr. Tunes for approaching them with something they already related to and connecting it with history.

While a majority of the students acknowledged they were already familiar with the music from the era, they were generally unaware of the historical significance held by the songs. Several reported that they owned a number of the songs played, but they had never thought about the meaning of the lyrics or related the music to actual events in history. Students revealed they were surprised once they understood what the musicians were
actually saying. Before listening to songs like “Fortunate Son” by Creedence Clearwater Revival in class, they “had no clue” what the songs meant. According to one student, “Some of the songs you didn’t think had anything to do with the Vietnam War, but when we heard the words and listened to Dr. Tunes’ commentary, we saw how much they had to do with the war.”

Without exception, Dr. Tunes’ students reported that the use of the music in the classroom caused them to develop a new and different appreciation of the era’s songs as well as the era itself. Many students said that after listening to the songs in class, they would listen to them more carefully when they heard them on the radio. One student stated that when driving his father’s car, the Forest Gump soundtrack began to play. He said that as a result of the music being played in class, he listened to the songs with an interest in understanding their meaning. In reference to the playing of a song called “The Ballad of the Green Berets” by Barry Sadler, a student commented: “It made me think later that night. It made me think about history.” One student said that while history was typically not a very interesting subject to her, the use of the music made her more apt to go to class. Another student explained, “I actually never missed class because I wanted to be there and listen. I wanted to learn.” One young man stated he would have skipped classes and gotten notes from others but he did not because of the music. The students, it was clear, looked forward to class because of the music.

For many of the students, the music had a personal relevance because their loved ones had experienced events of the era firsthand. Several students said when they thought of the period, they did not “think about some poor guy in the book,” rather, they thought of the people they knew who were there. When talking about the music played during class, one student said her thoughts had been of her father-in-law who fought in the war, imagining what it must have been like for him. Another student spoke of his father and another about his uncle. Some said they had discussions with their parents about the music and the topics studied in class. According to one young lady:

“I got interested and started talking to my mom about it. My mom and I never talked history stuff; it’s just not a thing to do in my family. She and I were talking about the Civil Rights Movement. My mom knew this stuff! These were things my mom lived through! I was sitting there thinking, “Man, she could give us a lecture.” It was an interesting way of looking at a subject I had not been interested in before.

Another student observed that because the use of the music gets students interested, it “makes everybody’s job easier.”

Enhancing students’ knowledge and understanding of the Vietnam War. One student revealed that she could not decide at first if Dr. Tunes was actually going to teach using the music or if he was going to “be using music just to waste time.” She said she quickly came to see that the music was, in fact, going to be used in an instructive way. When asked about the instructional value of the music played, the students unanimously agreed that it was “easy to learn” through the music and that the music was highly effective in making them “stop and think” about the war. Several students indicated that the music served as a mnemonic device. They felt the music helped them associate things better, remember things longer, and recall information easily. When studying, they connected the songs played with what was discussed in class and that made it easier for them to study. Several students said they found they could “learn better” in Dr. Tunes’ classroom, in large part because of the music. One student proclaimed: “I learned more in this history class than I have in any other of my history classes, from high school on.”
Dr. Tunes’ students found that the music effectively communicated the attitudes and feelings of the era, and it provided insights into the war that textbooks and lectures do not. This, they explained, resulted in a greater depth of understanding. One student described the effect of the music as follows: “When you listened to it, you could almost hear bombs dropping and airplanes going by.” When speaking about the playing of Ray Charles’ song “A Rainy Night in Georgia,” a female student reflected, “I sat there and I could picture the jungle, I could see it. The music made it seem real.” The students said the music enabled them to “digest facts,” “visualize events,” and “get a visual aura.” The words of one young man exhibit illustrate the music’s impact:

*It clued you in to more of what was going on, because you were hearing somebody else say it: “We're being bombed; we're being killed; we're doing this for nothing!” You heard someone who has been there, telling you exactly what they were going through, something you could not possibly imagine or experience vicariously any other way. You could not imagine the depth of the sadness and the depths of their pain, physical pain and emotional pain, to go to someone else's country and watch their best friends get killed for land they were going to give up the next day. They were fighting a war they really didn’t want to be there for. You can hear that in the music.*

Another point the students made was that the melodies and messages of the music evoked emotions that enhanced their learning. One student pointed out, “Like in a textbook, usually there's nothing but facts. They don't give you the emotional ties.” The students said that bringing emotion into the classroom made the study of history more intriguing because “the songwriters were the experts serenading about the facts.” The students talked at length about how the music painted a clearer picture of the period and how it brought topics to a more personal level. As one student explained, “We can pick up emotions better through the music. That is something straight from the era you can experience again and again, which is great.” Another concurred: “Music goes inside of us. When we hear it, it really affects all of our nerves and fibers.”

### Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

The results of this investigation indicate that the use of popular music in the history classroom can impact the teaching and learning of history in a number of positive ways. Popular music can be used as hook to get students’ attention and as a complement to more traditional teaching methods and materials. It can be used as a springboard for discussions on political, social, and cultural issues. The use of period music can provide students a vicarious experience by exposing them to the past in ways that other resources cannot. The playing of songs from an era can set the tone for learning by telling the story of a time and place in relevant ways. Because of the plethora of music produced and preserved during the Vietnam War era, music from that period can be used especially well in the history classroom.

In spite of years of theorizing and discussing within the social studies education community about the potential uses of popular music in the classroom, use of the music is still a novelty in history classrooms, and because of this, students are mesmerized by its use. Popular music can be used as an effective icebreaker to help students focus on topics to be studied. Because students know and understand the medium of music, they are open to its use, enjoy learning from it, and learn easily via the medium. Popular music can be instructive in terms of helping students gain a deeper understanding of events, and it can also
help them retain what they learn better and longer. There is a strong effective value to the music that appears to rest in both its power of emotion as well as its function for entertainment. The emotions implicit in the lyrics have profound effects on students as they listen to the songs, and they add interest and excitement to the study of history. The use of the music can also serve as a foundation for a more productive student-teacher relationship.

Based on the findings of this study, history teachers would be well advised to examine their music libraries and to identify music that might be used in their classrooms. Students like music, popular music especially; however, while young people spend much time listening to songs, they do not typically understand or appreciate the meaning of the lyrics of songs. Once understood and appreciated, the lyrics and their meanings can enhance students' knowledge and appreciation of history. Introducing musical expressions of reality into the classroom brings students, popular music, and the study of history together in powerful ways. Using popular music can become a teaching practice that teachers utilize to counter the premise held by many students that history is boring and irrelevant. Because this research was conducted in a college-level elective course, however, further research should be conducted on the use of popular music in other instructional settings. The researchers who conducted this study recommend that studies be conducted to determine what, if any, impact the use of popular music might have at the elementary, middle, and high school levels as well as in history courses that do not focus exclusively on the Vietnam War era and in social studies subject areas other than history, including geography, economics, civics and government, psychology, and sociology.

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