Springsteen’s *Born in the U.S.A.*: Promoting Historical Inquiry through Music

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Music elicits emotions and acts as a cultural definer of class values, political beliefs, and economic life. Students are intrinsically drawn to and possess an innate ability for interpreting music. Music, moreover, activates learning in ways other content sources cannot; yet, it is utilized infrequently in social studies classrooms as a historical inquiry tool. Harnessing its emotive and seductive power, music as a primary source naturally scaffolds understanding of the zeitgeist through sensory engagement and lyrical analyses. Focusing on *Born in the U.S.A.* (Springsteen, 1984), authors demonstrate how examining music can impart views often absent from mass media portrayal of historical events and eras. A music listening and analysis tool is employed as a heuristic for critically interpreting music to explore the past. The historical thinking processes presented offer an inquiry-oriented curricular model for integrating music and social studies.

Keywords: music, historical thinking, close reading, contextualizing, corroborating, sourcing, lyrical analysis, text chunking

**Introduction**

A 2010 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found youth spend over 7½ hours daily engaged with media (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). While multi-tasking, these children packed over 10 hours of media consumption into that timeframe, including 2½ hours devoted to listening to music. In contrast, they spent approximately 30 minutes reading. Comparing these data to social studies time research (Heafner & Fitchett, 2013), students spend significantly more time, on average, listening to music than they typically spend in social studies classes. Despite its popularity, students are infrequently given opportunities to listen to music as a curricular activity (Mangram & Weber, 2012; Root, 2005; White & McCormack, 2006). This is not to say music is not played in schools, rather, music rarely serves as the central focus of historical inquiry. The propensity with which students gravitate to music makes this media form an underutilized tool for developing historical thinking skills (Brkich, 2012; Medina, 2014; Pellegrino & Lee, 2012; Sousa, 2011).

Music is considered the language of emotion as a creative form of human communication, and is “one of the most powerful elicitors of subjective emotion” (Logeswaran & Bhattacharya, 2009, p. 129). Messages conveyed by artists are encumbered with socio-political criticism and activism, emotionally laden themes often prevalent in history (Brkich, 2012; White & McCormack, 2006). Unlike text-based sources, however, music is personally
accessible to all students (Logeswaran & Bhattacharya; Lovorn, 2009; Zukas, 1996). It has the
capacity to improve empathy skills while boosting cognition (Medina, 2014; Sousa, 2011).
Social studies teachers can harness this multimodal benefit as well as its socio-political and
historical value, when they integrate music into student learning experiences (Pellegrino & Lee,
2012).

What differentiates music from most primary sources is that it has a life of its own; one
that stands apart from time and yet remains within its time. Music’s power to affect mood and
generate connections exemplifies its contemporary learning value, but it also serves as a source
of historical memory both of lyrical descriptions of events as well as emotional tones embodying
feelings of earlier generations. Music is both an emotional and educational experience. As a
primary source, “music makes a great deal of sense. Music not only opens a window to the past,
but carries with it emotions and sentiments—feelings that were incorporated into the music when
it was composed—that can be shared by all” (Whitmer, 2005, p. 5). Music is expressive,
unifying, and personal; it is a cultural definer. Embodying the zeitgeist, the spirit of the time,
music has the capacity to create feelings that can lead to empathic understanding. It provides
students with “direct commentary, attitudes, and emotions expressed by real people in particular
historical periods” (Binkiewicz, 2006, p. 516) in an intimate and entertaining manner (Lovorn,
2009). When students can empathize with the people they study, content is more meaningful and
relevant. Music, hence, is a compelling tool for engaging students in historical thinking
(Mangram & Weber, 2012; Martens, 1925; Pellegrino & Lee, 2012; Root, 2005; White &
McCormack, 2006), an act well documented as critical to learning social studies (Barton, 2005;

Using Music as an Historical Inquiry Tool

In this article, we demonstrate how music as a primary source allows students to
understand the zeitgeist by sourcing, contextualizing, and corroborating evidence through close
reading and close listening lyrical analysis. These skills align with the contemporary
expectations for learning articulated within the College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework
for Social Studies State Standards (C3 Framework) (NCSS, 2013) and the English Language
Arts Common Core State Standards for History and the Social Sciences (National Governors
Association Center for Best Practices & Council of State School Officers [NGA & CCSSO],
2010). Critical analysis of 21st century media, like music, is a critical skill recommended for
learning in social studies classrooms (Framework for 21st Century Learning, 2009).

Students are expected to independently and to proficiently interpret complex primary and
secondary sources texts as well as exhibit discipline-specific skills. These inquiry skills include:

- evaluating evidence,
- supporting interpretations,
- recognizing central ideas,
- questioning the accuracy of information,
- critically examining multiple points of view across sources,
- filtering text for the complex meaning of words and language usage within texts,
- determining and challenging the sources informing the argument within the text, and
- creating a coherent interpretive, integrated view across sources.

Collectively, these are cognitive abilities needed for historical reasoning and historical thinking.
In *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, Sam Wineburg (2001) used three key information processing concepts—sourcing, contextualizing, and corroboration—to explain how historians think as they read historical documents. Historians source information about the document and author. Sourcing is used to identify the author, the intended audience, and the time in which it originated. Sourcing, additionally, leads readers to examine the document’s purpose, the author’s perspective, and the fidelity of both. Historians contextualize by placing the document within events associated with a specific time period, place, and culture. They then, corroborate information by comparing facts across multiple sources and by examining differing points of view. They look for inconsistencies and disagreements in evidence across documents and work to resolve conflicts by determining what information appears to be most reliable. These three habits of the mind describe ways historians view accounts and question evidence found within texts. From more recent work, *Reading Like a Historian*, Sam Wineburg, Daisy Martin and Chauncey Monte-Sano (2013) have added a fourth dimension, which is referenced as, close reading. Close reading is also a prominent method for comprehension touted in literacy circles and purported in the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA & CCSSO], 2010). Close reading draws readers into the text and leads historians: to evaluate the purposeful use of language, to identify the evidence authors reveal as well as assertions made, and to use this text-based information to make inferences about the author’s point of view. Figure 1 visually...

*Figure 1. Facets of Historical Thinking*
displays the four attributes of historical thinking as well as the questions historians would ask for each heuristic.

Tapping into Wineburg’s (2001) model for historical thinking, we nurture music inquiry through close reading and close listening. To scaffold this process, we integrate visualization and imagery to support cognition and narrative formation. Visualization is an active process in which the reader creates images in their mind as they read or listen (Massey & Heafner, 2014). This is a way for students to connect with existing schema in order to personalize content in the text. Images are unique to the cultural assets and identity of each reader. Imagery provides opportunities for students to experience vicariously what they read and hear. Visual-spatial thinking that result from visualization and imagery are cognitive processes associated with music-enhanced learning (Medina, 2014; Sousa, 2011). These skills, furthermore, are highly effective reading comprehension strategies in which information recall is both increased and more accurate (Readence, Bean, & Baldwin, 2004; Vacca & Vacca, 2008). Narrative formation is the learning outcome produced by historians. It is the story they create about the past from text-based evidence. Figure 2 organizes music inquiry and historical thinking skills into an integrative process.

Applying close reading and close listening to slow down and dissect an artist’s use of language, tone, and musical emphasis can initiate student curiosity. As an inquiry process, exploring the meaning of words within lyrics and developing inferential thinking beyond the text are processes, which support cognitive skill development in sourcing, contextualizing, and corroborating. Together, teachers listen closely with students to how the artist presents words and collaboratively examine feelings experienced as they hear the song. Focusing on visualization, students are asked to recall the images evoked by the sounds and compare these to the imagery associated with word meanings. Shared talk about their multi-sensory understanding becomes a class activity. Weaving together these thinking phases, teachers guide students in articulating their interpretations into a cohesive narrative. In this article, we model these learning processes and demonstrate how music develops students’ inquiry skills and historical thinking abilities. Examining deeply our application with a single song will help teachers scaffold students’ thinking more purposefully about music and lyrics in order to equip students with knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to make more thoughtful decisions in the present and the future.

We recommend the use of music to actively impart views regularly absent from the mass media portrayal of historical events and eras. Songs are a colorful way to describe “lifestyles and experiences of eyewitnesses of history. They enable teachers to effectively teach cultural concepts such as civic ideals, activism, economics, strife, struggle, nationalism and regionalism, and empathy” (Lovoran, 2009, p. 177). Juxtaposing pop culture music with the dominant cultural views allows us to present a counter narrative of history; one that has the propensity to intuitively (Logeswaran & Bhattacharya, 2009; Zukas, 1996) engage disenfranchised learners (Brkich, 2012; Epstein, Mayorga, & Nelson, 2011; Hess, 2009; White & McCormack, 2006) and effectively integrate digital sources (Brush & Saye, 2009; Harris, Mishra, & Koehler, 2009). Although the primary focus of this article is one song, the lyrical inquiry format is a replicable process to be utilized with other songs as a tool to challenge and critically evaluate topics within a text-dependent curriculum. We purposefully chose to examine *Born in the U.S.A.* by Bruce Springsteen to model close reading and close listening strategies recommended in the Common
Core Standards. To aid educators in replicating our musical inquiry process, we shift attention to describing instructional steps for scaffolding historical thinking through interpreting song lyrics.

Figure 2. Music Inquiry and Historical Thinking

**Critical Music Literacy and Historical Inquiry**

To say the breadth and diversity of music that captures American experiences, events, and beliefs is sizeable would be a gross understatement. Several songs, for example, provide a recognizable narrative of working class experiences akin to the personal stories Bruce Springsteen describes in his lyrics. Unraveling the human experience through song requires students to develop critical music literacy to discern meaning. To promote this level of historical inquiry, we recommend playing music in the classroom and suggest listening be accompanied by a structured analysis. Closely listening to music is a skill that transcends time, making songs unique primary sources that are cognitively accessible to all learners (Heafner, Groce, & Bellows, 2014; Mangram & Weber, 2012; Pellegrino & Lee, 2012; Root, 2005; White & McCormack, 2006; Whitmer, 2005). Utilizing a multi-sensory approach to music interpretation, we share a lyrics analysis framework (see Figure 3). This music listening and analysis tool can be employed as a heuristic for interpreting the past and as an inquiry strategy to explore the contradicting views of this era as well as resource to inspire curiosity.

This analysis tool scaffolds student close listening and content inferences as they begin to interpret meaning from songs. We included alignment with historical thinking skills in each sensory step. This exercise was intended to merge listening with reading to make this a seamless close analysis process that moves through sensory-oriented thinking. Notice we began with what is seen to initiate sourcing and contextualization. Transitioning to an examination of how students hear the song, students were asked to pay close attention to the musicality of the song. Next, we tapped into emotive responses in how students felt as they listened as well as how it
might have been experienced in the past. As an elaborative learning exercise, students talked and wrote about their thinking. We emphasized knowing is not enough to demonstrate learning. Students were expected to be able to convey articulately their thinking, in both: an oral and written fashion. Moving learning to new contexts, we asked students to look beyond the text for consistent and contradictory meanings. Throughout these steps, we pushed students to question, to wonder, to infer, to convey, and ultimately to confirm their understanding.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sensory Thinking</th>
<th>Historical Thinking Skill</th>
<th>Questions to Guide My Experience and Interpretation</th>
<th>I think... {My Interpretations}</th>
<th>I wonder... {My Questions}</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>See</td>
<td>Sourcing</td>
<td>Describe the cover to the music score, the record, or the album. What is the date? When was it recorded? Who is the composer, artist, and/or performer? Examine the lyrics. What people, places, and events from history do you recognize? Identify literary (simile, metaphor, parallelism, analogies) and poetic devices (rhyme, hyperbole, symbolism, beautiful language). Look at the music. What is the tempo? What instrument do you think was intended to play this music?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Contextualizing</td>
<td>Close Reading</td>
<td>Listen to a recording or play/sing the music. What is the tone, tempo, and melody? Is harmony used? What is the rhythm of the song? What mood does it set? Play the music again. Listen for the instruments and how they sound together or alone. Describe what you hear. Is this a familiar tune? Where was this recorded?</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hear</td>
<td>Close Listening</td>
<td>List the cover to the music score, the record, or the album. What is the date? When was it recorded? Who is the composer, artist, and/or performer? Examine the lyrics. What people, places, and events from history do you recognize? Identify literary (simile, metaphor, parallelism, analogies) and poetic devices (rhyme, hyperbole, symbolism, beautiful language). Look at the music. What is the tempo? What instrument do you think was intended to play this music?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feel</td>
<td>Visualization</td>
<td>What is your emotional response? Describe your</td>
<td></td>
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Feelings. What mental picture does it create?

Imagery

What did you imagine as you listened? What connections did you make as you heard the song?

What is the song about? Who was the intended audience?

Where would it have been performed?

How would listeners in the past have felt in comparison to your experience?

Talk

Sourcing

Generate meaning collectively. How do the words and music work together? What is the story that this is being told by this song? What is the artist and/or performer's purpose? What do you know was going on during this time period? What can you tell about what life was like as described in this song? How popular would this song have been in its time? From your experiences and interpretation of this song, how would you describe the culture of the song?

Contextualizing

Summarize and synthesize the meaning of this song; meaning within its time and in your time.

What do we know about the society that produced this music?

How does it fit (or not fit) with what we have learned about the culture or era that created it?

Research

Corroboration

Where do I go to seek answers to my questions?
While a multi-sensory approach in which students conduct an integrated close listening and close reading exercise is preferred, a variation in using this music analysis tool is to begin with a close reading of lyrics. For this modification, we recommend *Text Chunking* (Massey & Heafner, 2014), a technique in which text is sub-divided into smaller sections (verses and chorus) and distributed in increments. This method promotes complexity in learning by giving students time to process information and develop detailed interpretations without the distraction of gist seeking. For each chunked text section, interpretive purposes guide (i.e. questions from song analysis tool) student thinking. Students are given the lyrics prior to listening so they can slowly and closely read the text to infer deep meaning (e.g. skills encapsulated in Common Core and C3 Framework). Deliberate and purposeful reading allows students to explore word choice, complex inferential meaning, and literary and artistic aspects of music. After a close reading is conducted, students listen to the song. They focus their attention on feelings and imagery experienced as they hear the words and music together. They use close listening to verify and challenge their text-based interpretations. When close reading occurs prior to close listening, we recommend emphasizing skill development in sourcing, contextualizing and corroboration. The following content example demonstrates this music inquiry approach.

**Born in the U.S.A.: A Music Inquiry**

*Born in the U.S.A.*, the song we chose to highlight, is examined in light of the social, political and economic culture of the early 1980’s (Troy, 2005). We give special attention to the complexity and contradictions of the Reagan years. Our inquiry is guided by this question: Which vision of America was the most accurate in the 1980’s, the one articulated by Reagan or the one expressed by Springsteen? To initiate thinking, we begin with a historical context for examining *Born in the U.S.A.* (Springsteen, 1984). As Avishag Riseman and Sam Wineburg (2008) articulate, there is an absolute necessity for building background knowledge in order to help students contextualize and develop historical understanding. Given that many students’ lack of background knowledge can hinder interpretations and can lead to misinterpretations (Barton, 2005; VanSledright, 2011), we suggest providing context information prior to conducting a close reading lyrical analysis. The following section is an example of the type of information we recommend presenting to students to establish a historical lens for interpreting *Born in the U.S.A.* (Springsteen, 1984). We share suggestions for additional resources and links to content for further examination throughout the article.

**Historical Context: Reelection, Recession and Reality of an Era**

In the summer of 1984, patriotic and political overtones filled the air. The United States was preparing to host the Olympic Games in Los Angeles, Apple™ introduced the first Macintosh™ computer, and portable CD players had just been introduced to the marketplace. President Reagan, already deeply engaged in his reelection bid against Walter Mondale, used campaign commercials to suggest a recovering and rising nation.
Entrenched in an apprehensive posture many Americans, circa 1980, were anxious to see if President Reagan could pull America from the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Goods-producing industries like mining, construction, and manufacturing had been hit hard. At that time, nearly eight million people were unemployed, which equated to 7.6 percent of the population; most of them were blue-collar workers (Westcott & Bendarzik, 1981). By the end of 1983, 9.2 million people were unemployed (Becker & Bowers, 1984). Governmental policies were slow in easing the burden, especially for blue-collar workers, who also faced government cuts in welfare programs. As unemployment rose, some sensed the President was insensitive to the economic struggles facing the working class, a point illuminated in his comment to a reporter from The Daily Oklahoman, “Is it news that some fellow out in South Succotash someplace has just been laid off, that he should be interviewed nationwide, or someone’s complaint that the budget cuts are going to hurt their present program?” (Weisman, 1982, para. 3)

Bruce Springsteen was also making news in 1984. His Born in the U.S.A. (Springsteen, 1984) album debuted in June and quickly climbed the charts. The album cover pictured Springsteen from behind wearing tattered Levis, a white t-shirt, and a faded red baseball cap tucked into his back pocket. In spite of his All-American working class image and the perceived surface level patriotic message of the album, Born in the U.S.A. (Springsteen, 1984) was not a jingoistic anthem, and Springsteen certainly did not echo the president’s thoughts on the welfare of the nation. Springsteen, America’s working class hero, now represented the sociopolitical cultural zeitgeist for the 1980s. He sang about unemployment, heartache, hard times, and about a nation that too often failed to support those who had given abundantly to their country. His songs depicted the conditions for workers in every “South Succotash” (Baker, 1982, p. 12A) across America who would not be in line for a new Macintosh™ or Sony™ Discman. In a direct response to the President’s television ads, questioning his perception of the economic conditions within the nation, Springsteen penned: “‘It’s morning in America’…it’s not morning in Pittsburgh. It’s not morning above 125th Street in New York. It’s midnight, and like, there’s a bad moon rising” (Loder, 1984, para. 9). These two opposing views on sociopolitical thought would soon meet as the President’s reelection campaign and Springsteen’s Back in the U.S.A. 1984 tour crisscrossed America simultaneously.

The Born in the U.S.A. (Springsteen, 1984) album was a phenomenal success. Seven of the songs eventually made it to number one on the Billboard chart and the album sold 20 million copies. Most nights on tour, Springsteen and his E Street Band played to sold-out crowds packed into professional football stadiums and other enormous venues. The shows, described as “equal parts rock concert, spiritual revival, and nationalist rally” (Cowie & Boehm, 2006, p. 353), featured a huge American flag serving as a backdrop for Springsteen who nightly led the crowd in a fist-pumping, chorus chanting rendition of Born in the U.S.A. (Springsteen, 1984). The portrayal of the song is not without ambiguity. The song was originally titled Vietnam, and was inspired by Born on the Fourth of July (1976), a memoir of paralyzed Vietnam veteran Ron Kovic. The song is narrated by a Vietnam veteran searching for work while he carries the pain of losing his brother in the battle of Khe Sahn. Turned away from his hometown refinery as well as the local Veterans’ Administration Office, his reality is, despite serving his country and being born in a perceived land of opportunity, he is faced with “nowhere to run and nowhere to go”
Social Studies Research and Practice
www.socstrp.org

Volume 9 Number 3  127  Winter 2014

(Springsteen, 1984). Even Springsteen’s portrayal of the song with a patriotic backdrop and flag waving sing-alongs, heightened its ambiguity and misinterpretation.

Close Reading: Interpreting Born in the USA (Springsteen, 1984) as a Primary Source

Historians use close reading to examine the nuances of language and words within sources. They slow down to closely scrutinize the author’s use of language and the meaning of words in the context of time and place. Historians connect information, make inferences, compare and contrast ideas, and formulate hypotheses, which lead to plausible conclusions. They employ thinking heuristics of sourcing, contextualizing, and corroborating as they engage in close reading. These discipline-specific inquiry skills fit well with digital media, specifically music. Music, likewise, is an interactive, multi-modal learning tool that is effective in teaching historical inquiry. Questions we like to ask when close reading lyrics are: Who created the song? What is the song’s structure? What is going on during the era in which the song was released or gained popularity? What does the song mean? What can songs tell us about people and society? The following chart (see Figure 4) models historical thinking heuristics with evidence-based interpretations as derived from Text Chunking (Massey & Heafner, 2014) and a close reading of Springsteen’s lyrics.

Born down in a dead man's town
The first kick I took was when I hit the ground
You end up like a dog that's been beat too much
Till you spend half your life just covering up

Born in the U.S.A.
I was born in the U.S.A.
I was born in the U.S.A.
Born in the U.S.A.

The song begins with a description of life in the narrator’s decimated and gritty hometown where he fought for everything he had. Since the 1970s, the United States has lost manufacturing and industry jobs, working-class positions that vanished without a chance for return. As unemployment rose, downtowns became ghost towns, and communities that were built around the local industry began to slowly dissolve.

Born in the U.S.A.
I was born in the U.S.A.

The patriotic fervor that characterizes the chorus is often cited as the reason for the song’s frequent misinterpretation. Being “Born in the U.S.A.” seems to imply perceived benefits of American citizenship, a birthright of sorts. In a 2005 interview, Springsteen offered listeners some insight to his songwriting, “If you look at all my songs…the spiritual comes out in the choruses…and then the blues and what the song is…are almost always contained in the verses” (Davies, 2009).

Got in a little hometown jam
So they put a rifle in my hand
Sent me off to a foreign land
To go and kill the yellow man

In this verse, the narrator ends up on the wrong side of the law and joins the army in lieu of going to jail, a common option offered by the criminal justice system during the Vietnam period. The nebulous references to “foreign land” and “yellow man” appear to reflect the sentiment of the nation at that time, that America was fighting an ill conceived war against an undefined enemy, a world away from home.

Born in the U.S.A.
I was born in the U.S.A.

The chorus continues as a constant protest; deeming the cries of “I was born in the U.S.A.” insignificant due to a
I was born in the U.S.A. 
I was born in the U.S.A. 
Born in the U.S.A. 
Come back home to the refinery 
Hiring man says "Son if it was up to me" 
Went down to see my V.A. man 
He said "Son, don't you understand"

This “damning assessment of the entire war’s futility” (Kirkpatrick, 2007, p. 122) implies his brother’s death was a worthless sacrifice because even though many gave their lives, the North Vietnamese remained in power after the war, in opposition to the Domino Theory espoused by Eisenhower and subsequent administrations.

*Most military historians agree the People’s Army of Vietnam (the North Vietnamese Army) fought at Khe Sahn, not the Viet Cong.

He had a woman he loved in Saigon 
I got a picture of him in her arms now 
Down in the shadow of the penitentiary 
Out by the gas fires of the refinery 
I'm ten years burning down the road 
Nowhere to run ain't got nowhere to go 
Born in the U.S.A. 
I was born in the U.S.A. 
Born in the U.S.A. 
I'm a long gone Daddy in the U.S.A. 
Born in the U.S.A. 
Born in the U.S.A. 
Born in the U.S.A. 
I'm a cool rocking Daddy in the U.S.A.

Born in the U.S.A. paralleled the experiences Kovic and other veterans lived following their return home. Their country often shunned them instead of welcoming them back as heroes like their World War II brethren. The returning Vietnam soldiers were a constant reminder that America had been involved in a complicated and controversial war that ended without victory for the United States. In the end, the song “questions the morality of the war as well as the country’s treatment of its working-class veterans” (Garman, 2000, p. 212).

Figure 4. Close Reading Lyrical Analysis of "Born in the U.S.A."
Music, which is both simultaneously representative of the past and present, can be closely read to dive deeply into connotations within and beyond the text. Helping students understand the cultural and historical context of a primary source through close reading and listening, in this case, a politically charged song from the 1980s is an important inquiry process, which incorporates sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration (Barton, 2005; Barton & Levstik, 2004; VanSledright, 2011; Wineburg, 2001). In the next sections, we unravel our application of historical thinking to source, contextualize, and corroborate our close reading of Born in the U.S.A. (Springsteen, 1984).

**Sourcing: Understanding Misinterpretations**

Even a cursory review of the lyrics listed above yields a clear and concise predicament of the despair and anguish the returning veteran feels after putting his life on the line for his country. Although the narrative is presented in a straightforward manner, Born in the U.S.A. (Springsteen, 1984) has been one of Springsteen’s most misinterpreted songs. Springsteen and his band enjoyed widespread success from performing Born in the U.S.A. (Springsteen, 1984), but Springsteen’s songs are about the message, and he wants listeners to understand the meaning behind the music. He explains, “A songwriter writes to be understood” (Springsteen, 1998, p. 164). Sourcing divulges important evidence listeners need to avoid misinterpreting artistic motives.

Surveys have revealed most listeners fail to listen to the lyrics in their chosen music (Massaro, 2008, p.20). Listeners may simply enjoy how a song makes them feel without regard for the message within the lyrics. As Elizabeth Bird (1994) notes, “The overwhelming appeal of rock music is not cerebral, but emotional; lyrics may be the key for some listeners, but for many others appreciation is simply a matter of emotional response” (p. 45). Emotional appeal alone is not enough when using music in the classroom; while valuable, listening to music coupled with historical inquiry scaffolds more accurate interpretations. This is described in Bruce VanSledright (2010) as “the constant interrogation of documents and their authors” (p. 114).

The potential for misinterpretation was acknowledged by Springsteen when he released the pop hit: “In order to understand the song’s intent, you needed to invest a certain amount of time and effort to absorb both the music and the words. But that’s not the way a lot of people use pop music” (Springsteen, 1998, p.163). These comments advocate for time to slowly and carefully examine lyrics, a process similar to the close reading approach we recommend nevertheless, and Springsteen did not excuse those who failed to internalize the message within the lyrics:

> It’s not that people aren’t taught to think, but that they’re not taught to think hard enough. Born in the USA is not ambiguous. All you got to do is listen to the verses. If you don’t listen to the verses, you’re not gonna get the whole song; you’re just gonna get the chorus (Springsteen, 1993, p. 38).

His words make a case for teaching historical inquiry through lyrical analysis and close reading and listening. Exploring the ambiguity of his portrayal of the song in concert is yet another line of inquiry worth noting. Additional learning pathways, such as this, lead to student-initiated inquiry promoted in the C3 Framework, Partnership for 21st Century (P21) Skills, and CCSS.
Contextualizing: Yankee Doodle Springsteen and A Flag-Waving Political Campaign

The conservative *Washington Post* columnist, George Will, was one of the millions to see Springsteen and his E Street Band on the *Born in the U.S.A.* (Springsteen, 1984) tour. After attending the concert in late August as a guest of E Street drummer Max Weinberg, he reflected on the experience and wrote about it in his nationally syndicated column. His thoughts about the concert, entitled “A Yankee Doodle Springsteen,” were published on September 13, 1984 (Will, 1984, p. A19), just two months prior to the presidential election. His commentary began by recognizing the onslaught of sights and sounds around him, “For the uninitiated, the sensory blitzkrieg of a Springsteen concert is stunning” (Will, 2004, p.108). He continued with a prophetic and ironic addition, “For the initiated, which included most of the 20,000 the night I experienced him, the lyrics, believe it or not, are most important” (Will, 2004, p. 108). After describing interactions with some of the younger concert attendees, Will continued his misguided attempts to capture the essence of Springsteen’s message:

I have not got a clue about Springsteen’s politics, if any, but flags get waved at his concerts while he sings songs about hard times. He is no whiner, and the recitation of closed factories and other problems always seems punctuated by a grand, cheerful affirmation: ‘Born in the USA!’ (Will, 2004, p. 108).

Will had clearly missed the message. Although his misperception of Springsteen’s work was not uncommon, the American media illuminated it before the entire country.

A few weeks later, Mr. Reagan’s campaign contacted the promoter for Springsteen to inquire about appearing together at a campaign event. Springsteen’s camp politely declined the offer, stating he was unavailable during his tour. The Reagan campaign saw Springsteen as a useful political asset specifically because the “ethnic working-class constituency” from which Springsteen emerged, and chronicled in his music, served as the “keystone of Reagan’s electoral coalition” (Cullen, 1997, p.4). The campaign decided to invoke Springsteen’s name on the campaign trail anyway.

During a political rally in Hammonton, New Jersey on September 19, 1984, former President Reagan sought to connect his reelection campaign to the iconic native son:

America’s future rests in a thousand dreams inside our hearts. It rests in the message of hope so many young people admire: New Jersey’s own Bruce Springsteen. And helping you make those dreams come true is what this job of mine is all about. (Connell, 1985, p. 15)

The President wanted to connect his campaign to Springsteen “not just because he was a ‘local hero’ but because he was a pop culture icon who transcended localities – and voting-age demographics” (Kirkpatrick, 2007, p. 136). The incident appeared to make little difference in the fall election, producing a lopsided victory for the incumbent. This may have been because Reagan had already developed into the “Teflon President” (a term coined Congresswoman, Patricia Schroeder, c.f. Schroeder, 2004) who could successfully deflect negative press during his tenure in the White House. More likely it was because most of the American public also failed to understand Springsteen’s message within the song. Summing the irony of the situation using one of Reagan’s famous movie personas, Adam Aliano (2011) reported, “George Gipp had no clue that Bruce’s lyrics were about those whom the Reagan ‘revolution’ had left behind” (p. 14). U. S. citizens were so caught up in the rhetoric of the Reagan vision of America that they
were unable to see the fallacies of the cultural idealism and capitalistic individualism (Troy, 2005).

**Contextualizing: Understanding Springsteen through Cultural Influences and Experiences**

In the context of the George Will and President Reagan examples detailed above, the misperception of Springsteen’s lyrics could have been avoided if either of the men had taken the opportunity to research the subject before commenting publicly. They might have discovered what factors influenced Springsteen’s music. Investigations into what he read and how that formed his opinions and his vision for America could have provided necessary context for a more accurate interpretation. Sourcing, contextualizing and corroborating were essential skills overlooked by Springsteen's contemporaries.

Springsteen has mentioned several books that have influenced his song writing and his view of America. Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*, originally published in 1980, deviates from traditional American history texts, and shares the stories of those marginalized by government and often omitted from traditional texts. Springsteen commented on the book's influence:

> It gave me a sense of myself in the context of this huge American experience and empowered me to feel that in my small way, I had something to say, I could do something. It made me feel a part of history, and gave me life as a participant (Levy, 2007, p. 177).

Springsteen's words and music have the capacity to empower students to believe their voices matter, even if absent from the dominate culture textbook narrative (Epstein, Mayorga, & Nelson, 2011; Hess, 2009).

Another book mentioned by Springsteen is the biography *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (Klein, 1980), which he claimed to read, especially while touring. Springsteen discussed the book’s impact on him in concert, just before paying tribute to Guthrie by singing *This Land is Your Land* (Guthrie, 1956). It is easy to identify parallels between the two artists. Guthrie and Springsteen both suffered from misinterpretation of their music, [e.g., *This Land is Your Land* (Guthrie, 1956) and *Born in the U.S.A.* (Springsteen, 1984)], both traveled across America singing and serving as advocates for the common man, and each man had difficulties in his early life that affected his subsequent experiences. Other books often cited by Springsteen include *The Grapes of Wrath* (Steinbeck, 1939), the *Anthology of American Folk Music* (Raim, 1973), and *A Pocket History of the United States* (Nevins, Commager, & Morris, 1986), in addition to literature by Percy Walker and Flannery O’Connor. *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), Ron Kovic’s memoir detailing his startling experiences as a returning Vietnam veteran to an unwelcome nation, served as the impetus for his work with the Vietnam Veterans Association and for writing *Born in the U.S.A.* (Springsteen, 1984). Unraveling motives and influences makes the artist's thinking approachable and impactful.

Springsteen spoke openly of his upbringing in a working-class home in Freehold, New Jersey and about his father’s struggles to maintain steady employment. These childhood experiences, his non-traditional education from the aforementioned books, and the music of Hank Williams, Bob Seger, and others, shaped his view of America. In an interview with Ann Powers (2012) of National Public Radio, Springsteen shared his obsession with the American
Springsteen’s “American Dream” is woven into his music, attire, and political beliefs, and focuses on respect and equality. Unlike others who may espouse a capitalist driven perspective on success, he notes that the American dream is not about getting rich, “… it was that everyone was going to have an opportunity and the chance to live a life with some decency and a chance for some self-respect” (Springsteen, 1993, p. 86). Although The Boss (a nickname Springsteen earned from band members in the 1960’s) may have been the flag bearer for his generation, preoccupation with this societal malady has included a parade of advocates in our nation’s history. In the depths of the Great Depression, James Adams (1931) shared his vision for an America based on equality:

… a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position (p. 214-215).

Music with counter narrative messages, as we have demonstrated with Springsteen, opens dialog for confronting controversial issues while also creating space for a more inquiry-oriented, culturally inclusive curriculum.

**Corroborating: Relevance and Relationship to Present**

If students are to understand the music they readily consume, an effort is needed to comprehend the lyrics and historical context. The research base on *Born in the U.S.A.* (Springsteen, 1984) is substantial but many songs are rarely, if ever, mentioned in the literature. As 21st century learners and critical consumers of media, students must be able to organize and to authenticate messages portrayed in contemporary society. Studying song lyrics as well as the historical, socio-political, and economic variables of the time period (contemporary or historical) will allow learners to develop their research skills in a self-directed, critical thought-based project. The emphasis on close reading furthers discipline-specific thinking and has the capacity to initiate questions. As students are drawn closely into lyrics they will begin to infer meaning beyond the text. These inferences will need to be confirmed or challenged. This line of inquiry will lead them to other sources. This next stage of historical thinking is corroboration.

In a recent interview, Springsteen spoke of his mother’s inspiring work ethic and how his father’s intermittent employment caused problems within the household. He noted, “The lack of work creates a loss of self,” and “Work creates an enormous sense of self” (Leopold, 2012). The inability to either obtain or keep a job that can support a family and bring self-respect is a common theme within his music. In his more recent *We Take Care of Our Own* (Springsteen, 2012) song, Springsteen’s narrator asks, “Where’s the work that’ll set my hands, my soul free” and later, “Where’s the promise, from sea to shining sea” implying, as he did in *Born in the U.S.A.* (Springsteen, 1984), that there is a birthright, an expectation we should have as Americans for an honest day’s pay for an honest day’s work. These unresolved themes are pervasive in Springsteen’s most recent album, *High Hopes* (Springsteen, 2014). The chorus of the title song calls out for help, strength, and hope that life can be better than the oppressive
reality that smothers love, dreams and peace. Springsteen’s overtly political message pervades his songwriting and in part, contributes to his lasting popularity.

The theme of relocating industry and outsourcing jobs is a topic ripe for historical inquiry and filled with contemporary connections, well-articulated goals of the Common Core (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of State School Officers, 2010), C3 Framework (NCSS, 2013), Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2009). One recent publication noted, “Springsteen’s songs offer complex narratives of working-class experiences in a changing U.S. economy” (Poll, 2012, p. 245). The economy is shifting, and the victim in much of this restructuring has been the working class. Local economies are collapsing after industry leaves, and often Springsteen’s music is one of the only voices of the displaced workers who suffer due to the perceived greed of global capitalism. The expectation of being a company man like preceding generations at the local plant has been altered due to the shifting landscape. In the new postindustrial economy, workers are seen as disposable, local economies as interchangeable, and profitability as the definition of and motivation for success. With these changes, “the dream of economic stability, of a comfortable working-class life, of a future with promising possibilities, dissolves” (Poll, 2012, p. 250).

A study of shifting American business practices and the effects they have on the economy—especially working class constituents—would allow students to create a useful context for evaluating and analyzing these and other lyrics related to the topic. Questions emerge from content explorations and questions lead to more questions. What rights do we inherently share as Americans? Who speaks for American workers? Is the American dream just an illusion? Springsteen’s music has addressed these questions in-depth over the years. Essentially, he asks, “What does it mean to be an American?” and, “Does it mean being born to birthrights of freedom, opportunity, equity and bounty? If so, then what does it mean that many of the country’s citizens never truly receive these blessings?” (Gilmore, 1990, p. 82).

Although Born in the U.S.A. (Springsteen, 1984) is a generation old, the themes embedded within the lyrics could be pulled from current headlines. The timeless quality of the music and the replication of some social and economic conditions easily allow educators to facilitate a discussion about competing historical narratives within the mid-eighties as well as contemporary society. The essence of this comparison is found in Jefferson Cowie and Lauren Boehm (2006):

The withering of the economic dimensions of class, the destruction and demoralization of the politics of place, the betrayal of institutions designed to protect workers, and the amplification and mobilization of cultural nationalism to make it all palatable, have only increased since the pop hit dominated the airwaves in the middle of the Reagan years (p. 373).

Examining the 1980s illuminates how contemporary society, political culture, and American culture have been and continued to be shaped and distorted.

“Morning in America”, Ronald’ Reagan’s television advertisement, which was also considered the legacy of the 1980s, was representative of an era of great idealism in which rhetoric created a perception of a thriving economy, patriotic nation, and capitalistic supremacy. Exploring how Reaganism trumped national myopia embodied in the working class songs of the 1980s, like Born in the U.S.A. (Springsteen, 1984), makes for an intriguing historical inquiry that promotes rigor, relevance and relational connections to the present. Reaganism is the
conservative ideology put forth by the Reagan administration promoting American nationalism, small government, reduced taxes, national sovereignty, and pride in America. Other songs from the 1980’s that portray American social and economic decline or characterize the voice of resistance on socio-political issues include Billy Joel’s *Allentown* (1982), John Mellencamp’s *Rain on the Scarecrow* (1985), *Bonzo goes to Bitburg* (1985) by The Ramones, and *Stop the Violence* (1989) by KRS-One. Lyrics from these tracks present a contrast to sources supporting the Reagan vision of America (see *Ronald Reagan’s defining vision for the 1980s—and America*. *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s* (Troy, 2005), provides a comprehensive source for educators. Similar historical inquiries to that of *Born in the U.S.A.* could easily facilitate corroboration of ideas that embody the dichotomy of working class experiences and the legacy of 1980’s American culture. These inquiry pathways lead to new questions and ultimately new quests for knowledge.

**Conclusion**

Social studies content is more meaningful when it is presented in a relevant, emotional and entertaining manner. As Whitmer (2005) suggests, “Using music as a means to communicate knowledge is particularly effective because the emotional content music carries will often ensure that the information will be remembered quickly and more completely” (Whitmer, 2005, p. 5). The sensory, seductive power of music can engage students in historical thinking (Mangram & Weber, 2012; Martens, 1925; Pellegrino & Lee, 2012; Root, 2005; White & McCormack, 2006) and engender multi-media skills (Framework for 21st Century Learning, 2009). Even political contemporaries of Springsteen would have benefited from taking the time to research the narrative of song.

Music is distinguished from most primary sources because music possesses a life of its own, one that stands apart from time and yet remains within its time. "Songs can illuminate our understanding of history of the American people better than any other vehicle because they carry with them sentiments that can be expressed in multiple ways” (Whitmer, 2005, p. 9). Music’s sensory appeal can bring to life socio-economic and class inequalities, controversial topics avoided in the social studies classroom (Hess, 2009). With music, students can learn to become critical consumers of information (Framework for 21st Century Learning, 2009) and recognize political-cultural influences inherent within media. Music harnesses emotive benefits (Logeswaran, & Bhattacharyya, 2009) and develops historical inquiry skills (Heafner, Groce, Bellows, 2014; Pellegrino & Lee, 2012). It intuitively engages all learners and is fertile ground for developing inquiry, exploring controversial issues, and creating culturally inclusive curricula (Barton, 2005; Barton & Levstik, 2004; Brkich, 2012; Epstein, Mayorga, & Nelson, 2011; Hess, 2009; Root, 2005; VanSledright, 2011; White & McCormack, 2006; Wineburg, 2001). Music is an interactive, multi-sensory learning tool that leads students to think more deeply (and historically) about content. The knowledge, skills, and dispositions developed through musically supported historical thinking effectively support the goals and purpose of the social studies.

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