Arguments surrounding public issues are not always expressed in writing; they often take visual and auditory forms. In recent years, scholarship encouraging teachers and students to think deeply about songs—music and lyrics—has increased. Historical analysis of songs from the past can help students develop critical listening habits useful for interpreting contemporary songs. We share an inquiry-based, research-into-practice lesson centered around the following question: Was the US justified in pursuing nuclear weapons following the conclusion of World War II? We highlight a public issues approach where students use historical content and analysis as evidence to defend a chosen public policy.

**Key words:** Public Issues, Music Literacy, Historical Thinking, Inquiry-Based Instruction, Civic Competence

Like many living in America, we grew up playing instruments and listening to an eclectic mix of music: jazz, hard rock, pop, hip-hop, country, etc. In the searching times of adolescence, we were drawn to musicians who used their considerable artistic abilities to comment on social issues. Metallica’s *One* (Hetfield & Ulrich, 1989) invited us to explore returning home mangled from war, Arrested Development’s *Mr. Wendal* (Todd, 1992) compelled us to consider homelessness in our communities, and Nirvana’s *Smells Like Teen Spirit* (Cobain, Noroselic, & Grohl, 1991) challenged us to rethink conformity and social acceptance.

Students of all ages are likely to have similar experiences, with an important exception: today, songs are far more accessible. Whereas we had to wait for a song to cycle through its rotation on the radio or visit a store, students can now access almost any song within seconds. Music stars release singles via well-known multimedia software applications and amateur singer-songwriters upload high-quality original creations on social media. Digital music is available for near-instant download across multiple platforms, all of which are available at students’ fingertips. This availability may partially explain why teenagers (and tweens) now listen to music an average of 2.5 hours per day, an increase of nearly 40% from a decade ago (see Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010).

Students tend to listen to songs delivering powerful messages and providing commentary on popular culture (Buckingham, 2003; Luke, 2000), and it is often through listening to those songs that students construct opinions on social issues (Mangram & Weber, 2012). It seems reasonable, therefore, that independent participation in our increasingly digitized democracy requires increased media literacy to help establish a healthy distance from powerful influences (Silverblatt, Smith, Miller, Smith, & Brown, 2014). Competence in media literacy would afford citizens agency to choose which media to access, the ability to interpret their selections, and the reflective judgment to evaluate them (Brkich, 2012; Wineburg & Reisman, 2015). In this article, we describe how thinking deeply about the powerful messages found in songs from the past can help students develop critical listening habits useful for interpreting contemporary songs. We
also suggest situating the analysis of songs from the past in the context of a persistent public issue (Saye & Brush, 2004) increases the likelihood students will grasp the modern significance of their analytical findings.

In contrast to their lives away from school, adolescents in social studies classrooms rarely explore social commentaries built from music and lyrics (White & McCormack, 2006). Teachers’ classroom practices tend to exclude potentially powerful instruction featuring songs as primary sources (Root, 2005). We believe students can develop the disposition to transfer skills of critical audio consumption (e.g., sourcing, contextualizing, constructing arguments) by interpreting historical and contemporary music (White & McCormack, 2006, see also Wineburg, 2003) within the context of persistent social issues that intersect both time and space (Saye & Brush, 2004). Historical music, in particular, may create much needed cognitive space for students to explore questions about the past while recognizing artists’ assumptions about the world. Historical songs can 1) present opportunities for students to question truth claims, 2) add contextual depth to help students make sense of the past, and 3) help students recognize that tone and rhythm often buttress social arguments made through lyrics.

A Public Issues Framework

Social studies approaches that implement songs as historical artifacts tend to develop students’ interpretive skills or students’ understanding of under-represented perspectives (see Heafner, Groce, & Bellows, 2014). Surely, these goals should be considered. We seek to tie the examination of historical songs to a public issues framework, thus aiding students in developing civic competence (see Oliver & Shaver, 1966). Research over the past 30 years has consistently suggested teaching social studies within a public issues framework can help students refine the skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed for a productive civic life (Hess, 2002; Oliver, Newmann, & Singleton, 1992; Parker, 2006; Saye & Brush, 2004). Active democratic citizenship requires an understanding of cultures, politics, economics, and attempts to manipulate one’s personal decisions (Peck 2005). Students who develop the skills associated with civic competence—the knowledge, intellectual processes, and democratic dispositions required of students to be active and engaged participants in public life (National Council for the Social Studies, 2010)—may be better prepared to critique information regarding complex issues and act according to their well-informed consciences.

In advocating for the examination of historical songs within a public issues framework, we sought to provide students with experiences in reasoning through social issues and conflicts typical of democracies. Students need practice analyzing the competing perspectives and evidence inevitably arising when working through controversial public issues in a democratic society. Students also need practice making and defending reasonable resolutions to these issues. We suggest music and lyrics hold educative potential beyond making social studies classes more engaging (White & McCormack, 2006) or helping “students learn to think like historians” (Library of Congress, 2015, para. 1). Songs can be used as resources to develop and hone powerful analysis tools for negotiating auditory data (i.e., music and lyrics), weighing value-conflicts, and deriving solutions to public issues.

We featured a lesson employing historical songs as evidence that students analyzed and used to address a public issue. We situated the lesson within a post-World War II unit asking an authentic question upon which reasonable people of good will disagreed: Was the US justified in pursuing nuclear weapons following the conclusion of World War II? The question’s pedagogical significance hinges on the word justified; rather than asking students to explain how,
it asks whether the nation acted justly. The question required students to identify and explore historical evidence as a means to an end: making value judgments as to the justness of foreign policy decisions immediately after World War II. The authentic question is also a manifestation of a larger, more enduring societal concern: What actions are justified when securing the welfare or security of a community? (Newmann, 1970; Saye & Brush, 2004). We suggest the use of this persistent question within our curricular materials brings more contemporary significance to the examination of Cold War era historical songs. By calling for students to justify actions, both questions encouraged reflective inquiry that moved beyond transmitting historical content or practicing the tools of inquiry embedded within the social science disciplines (see Barr, Barth, & Shermis, 1978). The questions also asked students to explore justice-oriented themes by analyzing collective strategies that attempted to resolve social issues (see Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

We also designed an advanced organizer (Appendix A) to carefully scaffold students’ interpretation of historical songs. To create the handout, we synthesized research-based suggestions for 1) recognizing, deconstructing, and “evaluating” an argument (see NCSS, 2013, C3 Framework, Dimension 3, p. 18), 2) thinking critically and historically about evidence from the past (see Wineburg, 1991; Wineburg, Martin, & Monte-Sano, 2013; Wineburg, & Reisman, 2015), and 3) thinking deeply about songs’ “unique artistic characteristics” (Library of Congress, 2015, para. 1). Appendix B is a completed scaffold that may be a useful resource for teachers as they facilitate students’ historical thinking.

**An Exemplar Lesson: Reactions to Nuclear Proliferation following World War II**

The lesson featured below was nested within a unit designed to help students decide if the US was justified in pursuing nuclear weapons following the conclusion of World War II. Each of the unit’s lessons worked to assist students in developing the knowledge and skills required to answer the unit central question in a culminating activity. At the end of the unit, student-groups prepared and delivered a persuasive presentation to the American people within the historical context of SALT I negotiations taking place between the United States and the Soviet Union. Throughout instruction, we used technology to address anticipated obstacles students would encounter related to studying history within a public issues framework. In the lesson below, for example, we added contextual hyperlinks within our digital presentation of each historical song to provide historical expertise and metacognitive aides to students’ thinking (see Land, 2000; Saye & Brush, 2004).

During an initial introductory lesson grabber concerning value conflicts surrounding a modern military dispute, we emphasized that the skills to be sharpened during the unit were essential for thoughtful 21st century civic life. We reminded students there are people or groups who intentionally use auditory messages (e.g., songs, anthems, jingles) to influence their decision-making. We shared with students that they would soon think deeply about songs, using them as evidence to hypothesize about the past. We stressed our hope was for students to develop the disposition to transfer those newly honed skills and use them to improve their lives away from school. We then introduced an authentic, real-world scenario framing the unit’s culminating activity: student-pairs had been hired by an U.S. special interest group to develop an evidence-based, persuasive speech to convince the public of their position on the question of nuclear weapons following the conclusion of World War II. We emphasized that persuasive speechwriters usually address their opponents’ arguments; therefore, analysis of multiple perspectives was crucial.
Next, we provided foundational knowledge of the early Cold War years through an interactive lecture. Topics we covered included: the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan, post-World War II peace conferences, the Marshall Plan, NATO, the Warsaw Pact, the nuclear arms, the space race, and a very brief overview of several Cold War proxy conflicts.

Then, we directed student-pairs to complete an online song analysis activity using four Cold War songs as historical sources. We selected songs based on their 1) musical and lyrical richness, 2) human interest, and 3) ability to provide divergent views on the question of nuclear proliferation. Two songs supported U.S. efforts to develop and use nuclear weapons following the end of World War II; two different songs highlighted the dangers of nuclear proliferation. Because of space limitations, below we feature and discuss only one song from each perspective.

Our unit was conceptualized using the unit framework advocated by the Persistent Issues in History (PIH) Network (see Saye & Brush, 2004). The PIH Network is a community of skilled teachers who engage their students in problem-based historical inquiry (e.g., critically weighing evidence for historical claims, using content knowledge generated from sound historical analysis to inform decisions about enduring societal questions). The PIH unit framework encourages teachers to plan backwards by identifying a persistent issue question and a related topic-specific, unit central question before then conceptualizing an authentic performance assessment that creates opportunities for students to defend answers to both questions. We created this lesson online within the PIH Network website (Persistent Issues in History, 2015) and used the site’s authoring tools to assist students in their analysis. We provided hyperlinked scaffolding to accompany each song’s lyrics. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate scaffolded web-interfaces we created for students. We also distributed to each student an advanced organizer (Appendix A).
Just before encouraging students to begin their analysis of the historical songs, we reviewed the following logistical steps. We asked students to:

1) plug in their headphones and independently listen to the songs while reading along with the lyrics,
2) pay careful attention to the tone, melody, and word-choices (lyrics);
3) re-read the lyrics with their partner, making use of the embedded scaffolding; and
4) complete the advanced organizer as they worked through each song and after analyzing each set.

Students first analyzed the songs opposed to nuclear proliferation following the end of World War II: Atom and Evil (Zaret & Singer, 1947) and Atomic Sermon (Hughes, 1953). Here, we feature Atom and Evil, performed by The Golden Gate Quartet, an African-American gospel group. The song is metaphorically grounded in the Judeo-Christian allegory in which Eve convinced Adam to eat fruit from the forbidden tree against God’s will, resulting in humanity’s fall from grace and the origination of sin in the world (Genesis Ch. 3, New Revised Standard Version). The song portrays Atom (i.e., the atomic bomb) as innocent, but warns humanity
would be destroyed if Atom were to unite with an unspecified Miss Evil. In this sense, the bomb is portrayed as an amoral object by itself, yet dangerous and evil when placed in the wrong hands. By the conclusion of the song, the quartet calls for society to prevent the atomic bomb from getting into Evil’s hands because doing so was the only way to prevent human destruction. Musically, The Golden Gate Quartet uses a jubilee style with close harmonies and restrained singing but with strong musical technique. It seems the singer-songwriters wanted to appeal to a broad audience and thus juxtaposed the serious, almost spiritual, lyrics with a playful tempo and tone. Students who analyze Atom and Evil should grasp its warnings against nuclear proliferation and infer that the song likely reflected the sentiments of the quartet’s similarly concerned contemporaries (see Appendix B for a complete analysis of the song with anticipated student responses).

Figure 2. PIH Network scaffolded interface design for “When They Drop the Atomic Bomb.”

Students next analyzed the two songs supporting the development or use of nuclear weaponry following the end of World War II: When They Drop the Atomic Bomb (Howard, 1951) and Dawn of Correction (Madara, White, & Gilmore, 1965). We feature When They Drop the Atomic Bomb. Very little is known about the song’s singer, Jackie Doll. He recorded only
six songs before disappearing from the music scene. The song, however, calls for the destruction of America’s communist enemies, using any means necessary, including nuclear weapons, and is among the clearest appeals for the use of nuclear weapons during the Cold War (i.e., the Korean conflict). The song champions General Douglas MacArthur, commander of UN operations on the Korean peninsula. It describes an U.S. atomic first-strike that would destroy the communist North Koreans while simultaneously sending a strong message to Joseph Stalin that he would not be allowed to expand Soviet influence. Musically, the song has an upbeat, country-western tempo and tone that one might expect to find at a barn dance (a genre popular at the time). In this sense, the musical setting seems to minimize the overtness with which the singer-songwriters call for preemptive use of the atomic bomb to stop the spread of communism. Students who analyze *When They Drop the Atomic Bomb* should conclude that it represents a more conservative Cold War perspective and that the song was likely intended to strengthen the position of those U.S. citizens who favored strong action in North Korea (see Appendix B for a complete analysis of the song with anticipated student responses).

Throughout students’ efforts to analyze the songs, we worked to scaffold their understanding by prompting student pairs for more details, by problematizing trivial thinking, and by providing students with additional historical context to consider. During these spontaneous conversations, after students had first independently considered each song’s music and tone, we used soft scaffolding to introduce additional details about the musical genres reflected in each song. We also identified gaps in students’ advanced organizers, corrected ahistorical assumptions, and invited students to revisit the songs for additional details. After the student-pairs analyzed and discussed the songs, we asked them to tentatively address the unit central question. We encouraged students to pool their foundational knowledge from the lecture and song analysis, then offer evidence-based answers to: “Was the US justified in pursuing nuclear weapons following the conclusion of World War II?” We facilitated a whole-class discussion that encouraged students to draw from their contextual knowledge of the time period presented in the lecture and the competing historical perspectives embedded in the songs. To close, we reiterated how the media literacy skills practiced in the lesson (i.e., thinking critically about auditory data) had great value in students’ everyday lives as democratic citizens. We also reminded students of the culminating activity and indicated that their speech would require them to recognize perspectives (Barton & Levstik, 2004) before arguing their evidence-based view on the unit question.

**Conclusion**

Arguments surrounding public issues are not always expressed in writing; they often take visual and auditory forms. In recent years, encouraging students to think deeply about the latter expression, in the form of music and lyrics, has increased (see Brkich, 2012; Heafner, et al., 2014; Heafner, Groce, & Finnell, 2014; Mangram & Weber, 2012; Pellegrino, Adragna, & Zenkov, 2015; Soden & Castro, 2013). While many social studies teachers use music to engage students, they tend to underutilize songs as powerful pedagogical resources (Heafner, et al., 2014, p. 265). The Cold War lesson we presented offers the opportunity for students to use information from the past to better understand an enduring societal concern. Students’ efforts were scaffolded to include critical and historical analysis of songs from the era in order to construct a more robust understanding of the context surrounding the use of nuclear weapons. In particular, the analysis of Cold War songs provided students with an understanding of multiple
historical perspectives that students are to first assess and then use in support of a position on an overarching authentic, public issue.

We contend that analysis of historical songs within a public issues framework encourages students to question truth claims while adding contextual depth to help students make sense of the past. In our lesson, students analyzed songs presenting competing perspectives on a public issue: whether the US was justified in pursuing nuclear weapons following the conclusion of World War II. Students were not given a single, celebratory narrative covering U.S. Cold War actions but were asked to use historical evidence to take a position on an important policy issue from the past that emerges even today. The competing perspectives built into the lesson were offered by musicians and represented important attempts by artists to persuade the wider U.S. public on the appropriateness of developing and using nuclear weaponry. We argue the musicians’ efforts to persuade or inform were made more palatable for the public through their use of easily recognizable tones and rhythms. In the songs featured, for instance, we suggest that the songwriters used popular country-western and jubilee musical settings to appeal to a wider public audience even as they sung about serious societal concerns.

We hope the research-based lesson presented further encourages wise use of songs: framed by disciplined-inquiry, contextualized within a public issue, and marked by critical and historical thinking. We believe this lesson will help further develop the skills necessary for students to become active citizens.

References
Howard. (1951). When they drop the atomic bomb [Recorded by Jackie Doll and his Pickled Peppers]. On When they drop the atomic bomb / Get me a ticket on the Wabash Cannonball [LP]. Mercury Records.


**Web-based References**


**Appendix A**

**Advanced organizer for students to complete during the lesson**

**Your Tasks:** Listen for common conventions artists use to convey their message: pace, volume, tone, and mood as well as its use of alliteration, imagery, simile/metaphor, parallelism, repetition, rhyme, hyperbole, symbolism, and choice of language. Remember we are making sense with songs to help answer the central question: *Was America justified in pursuing nuclear weapons following the conclusion of World War II?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>The Golden Gate Quartet (1947). <em>Atom and Evil</em></th>
<th>Jackie Doll. (1951) <em>When They Drop the Atomic Bomb</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What does the song’s Date suggest?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who are the song’s Creators and why might they be unable or unwilling to be fully objective (Bias)?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What important allusions or connotations are found in the Title?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Context
- List **three aspects** of the song that seem important.
- What role does the **music** play? Is it loud, soft, flowing, clunky?
- After experiencing the song, how is the audience supposed to **feel**?
- What do the above findings suggest to you about the song’s purpose?

### Corroborate & Think Deeply
- How do these songs **work together**?
- Why are there similarities or differences?
- How they help us begin to answer the **central question**?

### Appendix B
**Completed Advanced organizer for teacher**

*Was America justified in pursuing nuclear weapons following the conclusion of World War II?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>The Golden Gate Quartet (1947). <em>Atom and Evil</em></th>
<th>Jackie Doll. (1951). <em>When They Drop the Atomic Bomb</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The song was released after World War II but <strong>before</strong> the Soviets developed their own nuclear bomb.</td>
<td>• The song was released during the Korean War, a Cold War conflict. America was at war.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The song was sung by a popular Black quartet. They may have been most interested in selling records.</td>
<td>• Little is known about the performer but as a country-western artist, he may have had traditional, or conservative views.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The title refers to the story of Adam &amp; Eve in the Bible. The whole song is grounded in that Biblical narrative.</td>
<td>• The title is “when” they drop the bomb, not “if.” The “they” is the United States so it seems like the title approves of using the bomb to root out communism.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Context | • The song warns that Atom and Evil should not be united – that the atom bomb should not get into evil hands. It is clear that humanity’s fate rests in ensuring close control of atomic bombs. The song doesn’t offer any way to ensure its aim.  
• The music is jubilee style with close harmonies and technical singing in the context of a spiritual with a rhythmic beat. The seriousness of the lyrics is made more palatable by using a playful tempo and tone that would resonate with broader audiences.  
• The song might have been intended to warn people against nuclear proliferation but in a way that didn’t scare the audience.  
• The song clearly supports General MacArthur and his fight against communism. The song paints communists as evil and violent who need to be destroyed, even with atomic weapons.  
• The song is upbeat and has a country-western theme. The playfulness of the music seems to soften the harsh tone taken against communists and its endorsement for preemptively using the bomb.  
• The song might have been intended to strengthen conservative support for MacArthur in Korea or as propaganda against the communists. |

| Corroborate & Think Deeply | • The songs provide opposite perspectives on the atomic bomb. These perspectives probably reflected two sides in American public opinion.  
• The similarities are musical – they both seem to soften the seriousness of the lyrics by using playful music. The differences are lyrical, which might be due to the intended audiences for each song.  
• The two songs work together to explore the pros and cons to developing nuclear weapons. On the one hand, the bombs strengthen America’s position against the communists. On the other hand, they kill innocent people and could destroy the world. |

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