
In their new book, Let the Music Play! Harnessing the Power of Music for History and Social Studies Classrooms, Anthony M. Pellegrino and Christopher Dean Lee deliver a volume that (re)introduces the usage of music to teachers wishing to diversify their classroom tools. Music fits the criteria of what Parker (2003) calls a “powerful text,” a resource that can “arouse in participants challenging and perhaps liberating ideas, issues, and values” (p. 135). Pellegrino and Lee seek to engage all students in such powerful texts and offer teacher’s replicable and amendable lesson plans, teaching strategies, and historical narratives that incorporate music genres such as blues, hip-hop, jazz, and punk rock. Such engagement will assist students in organizing their understandings about songs used in the classroom, thus facilitating the deepening of student knowledge.

As recently found (Mangram & Weber, 2012), some teachers use music in different ways; however, many teachers rarely include music at all as a primary source in the classroom (Russell, 2010). In the standardization era (see, e.g., Au, 2009), teachers tend to rely upon traditional styles of teaching (Cuban, 1991; Russell, 2010), do not practice a variety of the instructional methods (Henke, Chen, & Goldman, 1999), and use less music at the secondary level (White & McCormack, 2006) when its inclusion is most appropriate. Due to these recurring troubles, Pellegrino and Lee seek to remind educators of a long lost friend, music, and offer some suggestions to get strong student engagement.

Let the Music Play! offers excellent resources and strategies for teachers to implement immediately in any social studies class. The introductory chapters substantiate the connection between music and social studies and then offer a model, the preparation for listening and analysis (PLA), for using music in classrooms. This model is universally applicable and structures class time around questions when using a song as a primary source. The PLA presents a series of questions that help analyze songs from different time periods, guiding students to see songs as an informative primary source. The PLA consists of two parts. First, students respond to pre-listening reflective questions, setting the context for a song. Second, students conduct an analysis during and after listening to a song. Within this analysis, students digest themes of the song, analyze techniques of tone and imagery, and report their opinion about the song’s message as a listener. The PLA continues to serve as a guide in later chapters that discuss history and teaching strategies.

The book emphasizes two major areas: racial inequalities and the struggles of labor and class in America. Each area comprises of two parts. The first part offers a brief history surrounding race and/or labor and class issues in America, respectively. The second part of each major area weaves narratives of music throughout the history given in the previous chapters. For example, on the chapter about racial inequality, Pellegrino and Lee present ways in which hip-hop and rap grew out of African traditions, such as rhythmic vocal delivery, and was later shaped by African–American historical experiences of racism and inequality. The authors then go on to offer lesson plan strategies utilizing the PLA model and playlists that span multiple generations. The final chapter of the text summarizes how music can serve as a powerful tool for “addressing social problems commenting on events and otherwise being part of history and issues within the social studies” (p. 156).

Even while reading sections explicitly addressing history, I found myself weaving my knowledge of period music throughout the text only to have that knowledge enriched in the next complementing chapter. The book then ties each described social phenomenon explicitly to music from the time period (primary resources) or addressing previous time periods (secondary resource). For example, the history of American labor exploitation is chronicled in the book and traces the formation of social classes through the industrialization of America. Exploitative actions by powerful people created the hierarchical class system that still exists to this day in the United States and also inspired many songs of strike and protest across a full century, from sources like the Knights of Labor in the 1880’s all the way to 1980’s punk band, Black Flag. Within labor exploitation, songs were written that captured a portrait of the time and the sentiments felt by working people. Let the Music Play! offers such stories and songs as far back as the 1830’s until present day from multiple social movements such as racial inequality, worker rights, the Civil War, and more up through the Reagan years, which heavily inspired the foundation of two socially-irritated genres, hip-hop and punk rock.
The real gems in this book, though, are to be found in the playlists about the two major areas “struggle for racial equality” followed by “labor and class.” In Let the Music Play! Pellegrino and Lee provide playlists of songs from different time periods, which can serve as “powerful texts.” Songs include notables such as “A Change is Gonna Come” by Sam Cooke, “What a Wonderful World” by Louis Armstrong, and one of my personal favorites from my adolescence, “Merchandise” by Fugazi. While listeners can enjoy each of these songs, without the guidance offered in the PLA, they may miss a depth of understanding about the messages and moods found in the music. With the added support offered by the PLA, students can be moved by Cooke’s slow melody addressing the injustices of racial discrimination, come under a hypnotic happiness while listening to Armstrong croon in his gravelly baritone about remaining hopeful, or decide to boycott Black Friday shopping mayhem through listening to “Merchandise.”

Another gem is the website that supplements the book. Within each chapter, the authors provide QR codes that can be used by anybody with a smart phone. Following the QR code, I was pleasantly surprised to be directed to http://www.letthemusicleplay.org, the website complementing the book. The website is to be updated regularly by the authors. While the website appears to be under construction, the authors intend for it to be a location of open discussion forums where readers and the authors can engage in dialog related to the teaching of powerful texts, as well as add to the playlists.

As both a teacher educator in social studies and a music lover, this text lead me to seek out different renditions of songs from the playlist via the internet and other media, which provided me even more music resources. For example, I came across a cover version of “A Change is Gonna Come,” by Al Green. After listening to “Crossroads Road Blues” by Robert Johnson, I found a comment online that suggested I read the book Deep Blues by Robert Palmer (1981), which is a history of blues music. Let the Music Play! offers tools like the PLA to give meaning to songs students perhaps never would find on their own, and may also lead to complementary historical texts and other new resources. What were once obscure and old songs become content for interpretive analysis and opportunities for learning.

The practitioner nature of this book makes it an ideal selection for teachers and teacher educators. Pellegrino and Lee provide pedagogical tools for all teachers and offer background histories that can be used as reinforcing knowledge in classroom discussions. This book should be recognized as a complementary piece to musical history literature, such as Palmer’s Deep Blues or American Hardcore by Steven Blush (2010). Music, when properly scaffolded by models such as Pellegrino and Lee’s PLA, can assist students in learning about multiple histories and drawing interpretations of historical events that highlight advocacy, complex meanings, and in developing historical empathy for often marginalized communities as they struggled for advocacy and justice.

As a teacher of undergraduate social studies methods courses, I actively share any useful tools, such as the PLA and lesson activities, with my pre-service students and social studies colleagues. Indeed, since the release of the book, some of my students have thoroughly enjoyed using the preparation for listening and analysis and adapting it within their own planning. Pre-service teachers have communicated to me that they find the PLA exciting since it supports students to understand music as a primary source, as well as the fact that when used as an attention grabbing activity, the PLA works marvelously. This book helps to bring a wonderful art form to life in social studies.

References


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