

Dylan's Hero: Woody Guthrie and Topical Songwriting/Union Activism

Overview

During his career, Woody Guthrie wrote hundreds of songs in support of the working class and unionized labor, and he often performed at labor rallies. A voracious reader, he often wrote songs based on stories he saw in the newspaper. The songs "Ilsa Koch" and "Ferguson Brother Killings" were both based on contemporary news stories. Guthrie's topical songwriting became a model for Bob Dylan.

The following lesson introduces students to the process of topical songwriting and will enable them to use these tools to create topical songs of their own based on current events.

Objectives

Upon completion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Understand the influence of Woody Guthrie on Bob Dylan's development as a folk singer.
- Explain and demonstrate the craft of topical songwriting, inspired by the stories in the daily news.
- Describe the significance of the labor movement on Woody Guthrie's music.
- Communicate using verbal and written means.

Materials

- CD player
- Music from Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan
- Internet Access (optional)
- Learning Journal

Introductory Exercise

Topical songwriting is the process of creating songs that reflect reality. Often the inspiration for these songs is found in the newspaper or from the political climate of the time. Woody Guthrie epitomized this approach as an activist for unionized labor and progressive politics. Samples of his lyrics can be viewed at <http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Lyrics.htm>.

Begin by asking students to share what they know about unions. Explain that unions were formed to protect workers from exploitation by their employers and help them to bargain for their needs and rights. Unions were formed because groups often have more power than individuals to make a difference; the unions often faced opposition by the employers who did not want their workers to become empowered.

In the 1930s, farm workers were particularly in need of unions because the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl had put so many people out of work. Due to the fact that there were more workers than jobs, employers often took advantage of their laborers. Ask students to share their knowledge of this period in American History.

Music has been a large part of the political movement to organize labor unions. Woody Guthrie was one of the pioneers of this kind of political activism through music.

Have students listen to some of Guthrie's songs about the 1930s labor movement while reading the lyrics and discuss what they think the lyrics mean. The following songs are examples:

- Pastures of Plenty
- Do Re Mi
- Goin' Down the Road Feeling Bad
- I Ain't Got No Home
- Ludlow Massacre
- 1913 Massacre

Conclude this exercise by having students discuss and then write a response in their journals to the following questions:

- What kind of results do you believe Guthrie was seeking through increasing awareness about the rights and mistreatment of laborers?
- Have these results been achieved? Explain your answer.
- Do you believe his songs made a difference in this movement? Explain your answer.

Journals can be exchanged with classmates to provide peer response.

Focus Exercise

Bob Dylan helped to popularize topical songwriting in the 1960s. His music addressed important social causes such as desegregation and anti-nuclear proliferation.

Ask students to choose a song by Bob Dylan from the following list and research its story. Have them complete the graphic organizer (next page) about how the song's lyrics tell the story of a real-life event or situation. The lyrics to all of these songs can be found on www.bobdylan.com.

- The Death of Emmett Till
- Talkin' John Birch Paranoid Blues
- Ballad of Donald White
- The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll
- Who Killed Davey Moore?
- Let Me Die In My Footsteps
- A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall
- The Times They Are A-Changin'
- Oxford Town
- Only a Pawn in Their Game

Follow up

Ask students to each find a story in the newspaper that inspires them to write their own folk lyrics. Engage students in a creative writing exercise where the product is a topical folk song. This exercise can be completed as individuals or in pairs. Songs can either follow a pattern of a traditional folk song of their choosing, or students can create original tunes to which to put their lyrics. Share the songs in groups, either read aloud or sung.