

Lesson: Smashing Boundaries: The Multicultural Development of the Electric Guitar

Overview

In this lesson students learn how different ethnic and racial groups in the United States have contributed to the development of the electric guitar. Students read a short essay and discuss the appropriateness of the electric guitar as a symbol of American culture. Then students suggest their own symbol of American culture and compare and contrast it with the electric guitar. This lesson builds on the **Introduction to the Electric Guitar** lesson and alludes to the technological innovations covered in **Innovation & Inspiration**. This lesson complements themes from U.S. History, civics, and music classes.

Ages: High School

Estimated Time: 30–45 minutes

Objectives: Students will be able to...

- Describe the contributions of different racial and ethnic groups to the development of the electric guitar.
- Evaluate the electric guitar as a symbol of the United States.

Washington EALRs:

- The Arts: 4.2, 4.4

Materials Provided by EMP

- “Smashing Boundaries: The Multicultural Development of the Electric Guitar” essay
- Liner Notes

Materials Provided by Teacher

- Playlist (see below)

Playlist

- All-Star Hawaiian Band, “Aloha Oe”
- Charlie Christian, “Solo Flight”
- Bo Diddley, “Bo Diddley”
- Bill Haley & His Comets, “Shake, Rattle, and Roll”
- The Shins, “Gone for Good”
- The Sir Douglas Quintet, “She’s About a Mover”
- Speedy West, “Railroadin’”
- Big Joe Turner, “Shake, Rattle, and Roll”

Procedure

1. As a class, ask students to generate a list of symbols of the United States. Have them explain the symbols. What symbols are familiar? Which are controversial? What makes something an appropriate symbol? What traits make something “American?” Students will probably start by listing common patriotic symbols, like the bald eagle or the American flag. Ask students to think more abstractly, if they can. What foods could be symbols? What articles of clothing? What characters from books or film? (10–15 minutes)
2. If it doesn’t come up in discussion, ask students to consider the electric guitar. Based on what they know, is it an appropriate symbol of American culture? Why or why not? Does it represent all of the people of the U.S.? (5–10 minutes)
3. Tell students that they are going to read about the multi-cultural development of the electric guitar and then evaluate whether it really is an appropriate symbol of American culture. Pass out the essay “Smashing Boundaries: The Multicultural Development of the Electric Guitar.” Have the students read it, either independently or taking turns reading aloud. As you read, “illustrate” the essay with selections from the playlist and share details from the Liner Notes. After reading, ask a few questions for understanding and analysis: What groups contributed to the electric guitar’s development, and how? What information was new? Were students surprised to learn about the guitar? How did the electric guitar “smash boundaries?” (15–20 minutes)

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4. Working independently or in pairs, have students propose a list of new symbols for American culture. Each student should choose one thing from their list and write a short essay (3–5 paragraphs) explaining why it was chosen and then comparing and contrasting it with the electric guitar. They should consider the questions that the class has discussed in the course of this activity. This essay can be completed in class or completed for homework (depending on the amount of time allotted for the lesson). (varies)

Extension Activities

1. Have students select another common symbol of American culture (think about the cowboy, the car, apple pie, amusement parks...be creative!). Have students research the myths versus the reality of that symbol, and trace the ways it has been used as a symbol of the United States. Have students write a short essay, modeled on "Smashing Boundaries," that details their findings. A further extension would be to have students read each other's essays and vote on who makes the strongest case for why their icon is a symbol of America.

Smashing Boundaries: The Multicultural Development of the Electric Guitar

Could the electric guitar have been invented anywhere outside America? Technological, social and cultural factors make it a good candidate for the defining American icon. The electric guitar would not have been possible if not for the technology of the Industrial Revolution. It probably would not be as popular if not for America's obsession with youthfulness. One historian, citing Alexis de Tocqueville's observations in the 1830s, speculates that American democratic ideals means they like to entertain themselves by making their own music, rather than going out for formal performances. Yet another facet of the electric guitar makes it an appropriate symbol for the nation: its development was truly multicultural--relying on contributions of black, white, Asian and Latino innovators, subject to tastes affected by successive waves of immigrants and migrants.

When Spanish explorers arrived in the Hawaiian Islands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they brought the acoustic guitar with them. Later Mexican and Portuguese cowboys, brought in during the 19th-century cattle boom, disembarked with guitars in hand. Native Hawaiians took the instrument and made it all their own. The Hawaiian steel guitar lies flat on the performer's lap and is played with a slide. It produces a very melodic, almost wailing sound. In the 1920s and 1930s mainlanders, fascinated with all things Hawaiian, started incorporating this sound into their own music. The slide became ubiquitous in blues and country-western music. (The ability to play steel guitar proverbially separated the men from the boys in classic country line-ups.) The steel guitar, in addition to producing different sounds, was also louder than traditional acoustics. The slide and improved volume later contributed to the development of the electric guitar.

The acoustic guitar had been imported to America long before the massive flood of European immigrants arrived in urban centers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. By the early 1920s, nearly 13 million Americans had been born in another country. Skilled immigrant craftsmen would apply their skills to forming a louder guitar; Italian and Czech violin makers crafted better guitar heads; Swedish and German cabinetmakers knew what sort of woods would produce the purest sounds and how to fit parts together tightly and beautifully.

New immigrants' tastes also affected the electric guitar's development. Because they often worked long and tedious jobs, they preferred cheap and exciting entertainment in their leisure time. Music was especially popular because one did not need to speak English to understand or enjoy it. Many new forms of entertainment evolved in urban immigrant communities—vaudeville, nickelodeons, social dances, radio, Broadway shows, and eventually Hollywood movies. In short, this was the birth of American pop culture.

Coinciding with the arrival of immigrants was another great migration of people, the movement of millions of African Americans from the rural south to the urban north and west. Between the two world wars, nearly 10 million black people fled the sharecropping and Jim Crow laws of the cotton fields for the chance at industrial jobs, better education, and political power afforded by cities like Chicago, Detroit, New York, Los Angeles and Seattle. This wave of black composers and performers would transform American popular music. Their music reflected both their southern roots and their new experiences in the urban north. The syncopated rhythms of ragtime and jazz represented the frenetic pace of life in urban America. Early rock and roll incorporated southern sounds like blues-y slide guitar and country twang. Even the theatrics of performers like Chuck Berry and Little Richard were inspired by the tent revival preachers of southern childhoods.

Smashing Boundaries: The Multicultural Development of the Electric Guitar

Even though today the electric guitar is strongly associated with rock and roll, many early proponents of the instrument were jazz musicians like Charlie Christian. Christian, who moved from Texas to Oklahoma as a boy, became famous covering old blues standards in jazzy electric guitar in the late 1930s. At the time, jazz was played by large ensembles in crowded clubs and dancehalls. The acoustic guitar simply couldn't hold its own, so guitar-makers started experimenting with pick-ups and amplifiers. As Christian toured he generated interest in the unfamiliar instrument. Although guitar had traditionally been used to play rhythm, Christian brought it out front and popularized the idea of a guitar solo.

Christian's influence grew when he became one of the first black musicians to be hired by white bandleader Benny Goodman. Goodman's acceptance of black musicians and his integrated band set him apart from most of American society in the 1930s and early 1940s. Institutions from baseball, to schools, to the Army were still strictly segregated and civil rights groups were years away from *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the March on Washington, and the Voting Rights Act. As historian Charles McGovern notes, "Southerners, especially African Americans, staked their claims to respect even as American politics resisted their demands for civil rights or economic justice." Jazz and rock guitarists defied societal norms as they pioneered the electric guitar. No doubt part of what made early rock and roll taboo, controversial, and exciting was that teenagers of all races and ethnicities were enjoying the same music and often hanging out together in order to hear, learn, and play it.

Music played on the electric guitar reflects the diversity of its contributors. Sometimes we can hear this in one song. Take The Sir Douglas Quintet's song "She's About a Mover." This infectious song is the product of the fertile cross-fertilization of the San Antonio music scene. The lead singer, Doug Sahm, grew up listening to white country-western, black blues and Mexican-American conjunto in his San Antonio neighborhood. He and his Latino band mates adopted a look and name reminiscent of British Invasion bands like the Beatles and the Dave Clark Five in order to cash in on that style's popularity, but their music could only have come from South Texas. "She's About a Mover" features a blend of Cajun two-step beat and conjunto polka swing, blues-y electric organ, and maracas!

Latinos in the Southwest had long experimented with the tuning of the Spanish acoustic guitar. American popular music is practically inseparable from the cha cha and mambo rhythms introduced by Latino migrants and immigrants. In addition to contributing the sound of the electric guitar, early electric guitars were also manufactured by Latinos. Latino workers performed the highly skilled and critical job of wiring and winding electromagnetic pickups for the Fender company.

The electric guitar represents the fusion of varied people and their musical styles. The twang, slide, wail, backbeat, or strum of the electric guitar are the soundtrack of immigration, migration, assimilation, and acculturation. At times when law and custom strictly segregated society, musicians strode across color lines and social boundaries to experiment with, improve, and play the instrument. Today the electric guitar represents this history and American popular culture in a way that no other object can rival.

¹ McGovern, Charles, "The Music: The Electric Guitar in the American Century," in *The Electric Guitar: A History of an American Icon*, A.J. Millard, ed., (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), p. 19–20.

AC/DC, "Back in Black"

Gibson Les Paul

Electric

The Les Paul model, introduced in 1952 as a response to Fender's Telecaster, represents a design collaboration between Gibson Guitar Corporation and the pop star, electronics inventor, and accomplished guitarist Les Paul. In 1957 Gibson introduced the "humbucking pickup" which revolutionized the sound of the electric guitar, and eliminated electronic interference (hum) which had previously plagued amplified guitars. The humbucker also provided a thicker, more sustaining tone that became very popular with rock guitarists like AC/DC's Angus Young, Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page, and Guns N' Roses' Slash. Models from 1959, considered the Holy Grail year by many collectors, often fetch in the hundreds of thousands of dollars at auction.

All-Star Hawaiian Band, "Aloha Oe"*Hawaiian steel (lap) guitar*

This sweet love song, often played in the background of movies or TV shows to set a Hawaiian scene, was composed by the last queen of Hawaii, Queen Liliuokalani. The story goes that while taking a horseback ride around Oahu in 1878, she witnessed a passionate embrace between two lovers. The title translates to "Farewell to Thee." This is just one of many examples of the classic Hawaiian steel guitar songs played in the style perfected by native Hawaiian Joseph Kekeku.

Chet Atkins, "Yakey Axe"

Gretsch 6120 (Hollow-body Electric)

Electric

The Gretsch 6120 is a hollowbody electric guitar. As opposed to a solidbody Les Paul or Stratocaster, the 6120 is constructed much like an acoustic guitar. This model comes equipped with the distinctive Bigsby Tremolo bridge, a device used to modulate the pitch of the guitar strings. In 1954 Gretsch followed the Gibson-Les Paul partnership by signing Chet Atkins, a well-known country artist, to endorse Gretsch guitars. Gretsch manufactures a wide range of guitars that have been used by rockabilly and country artists ranging from Eddie Cochran to Brian Setzer.

Charlie Christian, "Solo Flight"*Electric*

During his short career, Christian had a huge effect on the spread of the electric guitar. Jazz ensembles, which played loud music in crowded dance halls and clubs, drowned out traditional acoustic guitars. Thus guitars were usually relegated to playing rhythm, since guitar soloists couldn't project the same way horn or percussion players could. Musicians turned to electric guitars, but it took pioneers like Charlie Christian to popularize the unfamiliar instrument. Christian, who could play classics as well as improvise, caught the attention of white band leader Benny Goodman. Goodman's popular orchestra toured extensively, and along the way Christian spread the gospel of the electric guitar. Though today rock music is almost unimaginable without the guitar solo, Christian was among the first to bring the guitar out of the rhythm section and put it out front. Christian died of tuberculosis at age 24, but he had vast influence on future electric guitarists.

Eric Clapton, "Lay Down Sally"

Fender Stratocaster

Electric

Introduced in 1954 and still in production today, the Stratocaster is perhaps the most recognizable guitar ever made. Much of the popularity of the Stratocaster can be attributed to its versatility. The three pickup layout provides a wide range of tones. The name 'Stratocaster' was intended to evoke images of then-new jet-aircraft technology (such as the Boeing B-52 Stratofortress) and to express Fender's modernistic design philosophy. Some of the famous guitarists who have played it include Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Stevie Ray Vaughn, and Buddy Holly.

Bo Diddley, "Bo Diddley"

Custom-made Gretsch

Electric

Bo Diddley, who grew up in the blues community of Chicago's south side, is credited with creating one of the most famous rock-and-roll beats, heard in this song. (It was widely imitated by everything from The Who's "Magic Bus" to the Strangelove's "I Want Candy.") This and Bo Diddley's other songs featured a strong rhythm played on the guitar as opposed to using the instrument to play the melody. This quality is attributed in part to African American musical traditions that emphasized beat over melody. The innovation became a hallmark of rock music. Diddley designed the square "cigar-box" guitar in 1958, which Gretsch manufactured.

Bill Haley & His Comets, "Shake, Rattle, and Roll"

Electric

The Comets' cover of the R&B hit "Shake, Rattle, and Roll" was one of the earliest and biggest rock and roll hits. Unlike Big Joe Turner's version, which was also released in 1954, this version made it to the top of the Billboard Pop charts—which largely tracked white audiences' tastes. "Shake, Rattle, and Roll" is one of a number of early rock and roll hits that were written and performed by black artists and then covered by white musicians. By this process, rock and roll was introduced to and then loved by white teenagers in what was still a strictly segregated society. Haley himself, like many early white rock and roll stars, grew up in the country-western tradition which had embraced the electric guitar beginning in the 1930s. Such hits have often been labeled "rockabilly" to refer to the distinct combination of country and R&B sounds into a new genre in the 1950s.

Jimi Hendrix, "Little Wing"

Fender Stratocaster

Electric

Jimi Hendrix combined great technical ability and creative drive to push the limits of electric guitar playing. Because he was left-handed he played right-handed guitars upside down, which he restrung to have the lower-pitched strings on top. He was so fond of the whammy bar that his guitar was often out-of-tune; he frequently asked his audiences to wait while he re-tuned. Hendrix often used the Stratocaster, helping to make it both the iconic and most popular electric guitar model. He occasionally wrote poems or prayers on his guitars and then smashed or burned them at the end of performances.

Les Paul and Mary Ford, "Alabamy Bound"

Gibson Les Paul

Electric

Les Paul and his wife Mary Ford were popular performers in the 1940s and 1950s, but Les Paul is probably better known for co-creating the solid-body electric guitar which solved the problem of the hollow-body vibrations of early electrified acoustics. The solid-body guitar gave players the clear, crisp sound of acoustic guitars but, finally, at louder volumes! In addition to designing the Gibson Les Paul, Paul is also credited with recording innovations such as tape delay, overdubbing, and multi-track recording.

Joe Pass, "How High the Moon"

Acoustic archtop

Acoustic

The archtop guitar is a steel-stringed guitar with a distinctive curved, or "arched," top and back. Its sound is most closely associated with jazz. The arching of the top and the f-holes on the body are both similar to the violin family. Often considered the epitome of guitar construction because of the incredibly exacting standards required for a quality tone, handcrafted archtop guitars typically cost much more than their six-string relatives. Jazz greats Charlie Christian and Wes Montgomery both played an archtop.

The Rolling Stones, "Honky Tonk Women"

Fender Telecaster

Electric

The Telecaster debuted in 1950; its simple yet effective design and revolutionary sound broke ground and set trends both for the manufacture of electric guitars and the sound of popular music. The Telecaster was popular with blues and country players as well as rock musicians like Bruce Springsteen and the Rolling Stones' Keith Richards. Leo Fender's simple and modular design allowed the Telecaster to become the world's first mass produced electric guitar.

Andres Segovia, "Guitarreo"

Classical nylon string acoustic

Acoustic

The classic stands apart from other guitars in that it is played almost exclusively without a pick. Instead, musicians pluck or strum notes with their fingertips or fingernails. A descendant of stringed instruments dating back 5000 years, the oldest surviving example of the six-string guitar was made in 1779. Three- and five-string guitars are descended from Middle Ages and Renaissance instruments such as the lute, gittern, guitarra, and vihuela.

The Shins, "Gone for Good"

Featuring steel guitar

By the mid-1960s, the steel guitar was so closely associated with twangy country music that most avoided it. A generation later, it even sounded trite for country music. The Shins are among a number of indie rock and alt-country performers to revitalize the use of traditional instruments and stylings in their music. The moody steel guitar playing in the background of this song evokes the classic country-western sound of the 1950s and 1960s.

The Sir Douglas Quintet, "She's About a Mover"

Electric

This infectious song is the product of the fertile cross-fertilization of the San Antonio music scene. The lead singer, Doug Sahm grew up listening to white country-western, black blues and Mexican-American conjunto in his San Antonio neighborhood. He and his Latino band mates adopted a look and name reminiscent of British Invasion bands like the Beatles and the Dave Clark Five in order to cash in on that style's popularity, but their music could only have come from South Texas. "She's About a Mover" features a blend of Cajun two-step beat and conjunto polka swing, blues-y electric organ, and maracas!

Big Joe Turner, "Shake, Rattle, and Roll"

Electric

Big Joe Turner had been shouting blues songs in Kansas City juke joints for years before his biggest hit, "Shake, Rattle, and Roll," hit the #1 spot on the Billboard R&B chart. The R&B chart tracked the tastes of black audiences. Turner's version, which reflects his blues background, is raunchier than Bill Haley and the Comets'; many of its lyrics were omitted or changed in the Comets' version.

Doc Watson, "Deep River Blues"

Martin flattop

Acoustic

Acoustic guitars can be heard in practically every musical genre. Spruce wood is often used for the top; mahogany for the neck, sides, and back; and rosewood for the fretboard. A native of North Carolina's Appalachian Mountains, Doc Watson reportedly built his first banjo with a cat's skin for the body. He is best known for playing the acoustic guitar with a fast-picking style popular among bluegrass musicians.

Speedy West, "Railroadin'"

Pedal steel guitar

Nicknamed "the Jimi Hendrix of steel guitar," West is one of the most prolific country session and solo steel guitar players. Like Hendrix, West was largely self-taught and his music is marked by wild flourishes and rapid finger work. West and other country musicians were drawn to the slide and wail of the Hawaiian steel guitar but needed a more versatile instrument. They adopted the pedal steel guitar, which features one or more guitar necks on a stand, rather than attached to a hollow body. The pedal steel guitar allows players to control the length of the strings with foot pedals, imitating the way standard guitar players adjust notes by pressing strings on a fretboard.