

Jews and Blues

A Cincinnati Museum Center and Online Exhibit

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Ohio Social Studies Standards Correlation:

History	Grade 10	Point 1
People in Societies	Grade 9	Point 3

Introduction

Al Jolson, the Jazz Singer, Bob Dylan, Adam Sandler - what do these performers have in common? What does it mean to be American? What does it mean to be American and Jewish? Jeffrey Sandler, author of the “American Jewish Popular Culture” chapter in the Library of Congress edition of From Haven to Home: 350 Years of Jewish Life in America suggests that Jews returning from 350 years ago might find contemporary Jewish life to be very familiar. “Jews have become one of the most viable and widely discussed of the nation’s many minority communities... Examining American Jewish popular culture affords an opportunity to understand how this small and distinctive people, never much more than 3% of the nation’s population, relates to what has constituted the ‘popular’ in America over the course of the last century” (Shandler, 2004). For many, popular culture plays an important role in understanding what it means to be Jewish both for Jews and non-Jews.

In recognition of the 350th anniversary of the first Jewish settlement in America in 1654, the Library of Congress has developed a special exhibit as part of the permanent collection of American Memory and has designated three special exhibits at selected sites across the country as part of the anniversary celebration. Hebrew Union College with The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, Ohio is one of those selected sites and will host an exhibit including a series of prepared lessons made available to teachers and their classes. The Cincinnati Museum Center in conjunction with Hebrew Union College will house artifacts, materials, learning labs and complete lesson plans to assist teachers who chose to take advantage of this unique opportunity to learn and teach about this most fascinating and dynamic people. Jews and Popular Culture and specifically Jewish artists contributions to music during the 1920s through 40s is the focus of this particular lesson plan. The plan includes an introduction of background information, themes to be raised in the lesson plan and learning objectives for students. The plan calls for a pre-exhibit activity in which students can access some of the materials via the web, and for activities to use with students as they experience the exhibit followed by a post-exhibit activity. Several choices are included to accommodate different learning styles and interests of the students with an emphasis on interactive experiential learning.

During the 20th century between 1880 and 1914 two million Jews immigrated to the United States from Eastern Europe. New York City became the home to one of the largest Jewish populations in the world. In their former homes, immigrants, many of

whom had escaped from the repression of the old Russian Empire, were suddenly faced with freedoms they had never known. With so many immigrants arriving with similar backgrounds and experiences, American Jewish identity was naturally compared with experiences families had shared in Eastern Europe. These new freedoms were evidenced in a variety of ways. Yiddish, the language of home, was also the public language. Yiddish theater flourished and was a forum for public debates about moral and political issues. New York and other cities with large Jewish populations such as Chicago and Los Angeles experienced Jewish culture through mass media, leisure activities and activities of daily life in photographs, home movies and cooking. Bilingual broadcasts were on popular radio stations. In 1927 the Jazz Singer was the definitional Jewish myth. The central conflicts included (1) tradition vs. modernity, (2) familial and community vs. personal artistic self-realization.

After World War II and the restrictive immigration quotas of the 1920s, American born children of Jewish immigrants began to redefine the public profile of Jewish identity. English was the primary language and Yiddish the alternative. At the same time, Yiddish memorialized victims of Nazism and recalled Eastern European heritage.

The non-Jewish population adopted Yiddish but often as a language of excess emotion and appetite. Just as Ways of Seeing by John Berger demonstrates how women are the objects of the culture's gaze, Jews began seeing themselves in the "gaze of popular culture. '...seeing oneself in the imagined gaze of others has become an important component of self-realization for many American Jews' (Shandler, 2004)." Popular culture of film and music provided a public gaze. One example of this is the argument that Superman symbolizes the American Jew. His story is of an immigrant who cannot return to a former country and adopts a white Anglo Saxon Protestant identity in Clark Kent from Kansas.

After Bess Myerson won the Miss America contest in 1945 and Hank Greenberg and Sandy Koufax claimed their Jewishness publicly on the baseball field, there began to be a Jewish dynamic sense of self. In the 1950s and 60s comedians began to reflect the sense of reasserting differences rather than the former quiet assimilation. Silence to anti-Semitic attacks which was the norm before WWII changed to a post war response of education and acknowledgement of Jewishness to combat anti-Semitism and prejudice. Jewish popular culture is more than a list of works, films, and famous people. It is a means of learning about what it means to be an American Jew for both Jews and non-Jews.

Theme/Goal: To examine popular culture particularly the music of blues and jazz and the intersection of African American and Jewish music in the 1920s – 40s, to begin to understand through this music what it means to be a Jew and an American in the United States.

Learning Objectives:

1. How does the Eastern European Jewish immigration impact American entertainment, theater, music, radio and film?
2. How does this define what it means to be American and Jewish?
3. What are some of the conflicts between immigrants and their children?
4. Are these generational conflicts? Cultural conflicts?
5. How are different media forms influenced by the Jewish experience?
6. How does the Jewish experience interpret the African experience for the white majority?
7. Why did Jews feel they had to deny their heritage at times, while at other times they took pride in their heritage?
8. What do we mean by intersection of African-American and Jewish music?

Activities

A. Link to Inside Out “Jews and Blues” www.wbur.org/special/jewsandblues/default.asp

The story of African Americans and Jews in the United States includes a shared history of prejudice and segregation. Both groups have used music to share their experience of subjugation, dislocation and prejudice (WBUR, 2001). The WBUR website listed above is an excellent resource to understand the links between African American Blues and Jewish folk songs. “The story of whites, and blacks in this country is a painful one, with segregation and prejudice playing a predominate role. Within this larger social history is the special relationship of Jews and blacks. Often at odds, they nonetheless share a common experience of subjugation, dislocation, and prejudice, and both came to express their plight in song,” (M.Goldfarb, “Jews and Blues”).

The “Jews and Blues” site includes a section on origins and the roots of the blues music of slaves and chain gangs and the Jewish folk music of shtetls or ghetto settlements in Eastern Europe. There is a section which features several artists and their histories and one on venues for information about the Cotton Club, Café Society and Tin Pan Alley. The documentary itself is available as an audio documentary with music from the show.

Using links to the WBUR website of the documentary “Jews and Blues,” have students select two artists, one African American and one Jewish. Read the biographies and listen to music by the artists. Have students pay attention to the sound of the music and listen to the words.

Assignments:

1. Discussion Questions and/or Paper
 - a. What are the themes in the songs?
 - b. Analyze the similarities and differences in the language and the music. What similarities can they identify? What are some of the differences?
 - c. Name present day songs and artists that remind students of these selections.
 - d. Compare and contrast songs in the documentary with similar present day songs.

2. Song writing

- a. Have students write a short song using one of the identified themes.
- b. What questions did they answer to determine what should go into the song?
- c. Why is this an appropriate theme for this assignment?

B. Link to Library of Congress Haven to Home Exhibit.

www.loc.gov/exhibits/haventohome/

Use as many of the artifacts in the Library of Congress online exhibit as appropriate for the following exercises:

1. Have students imagine themselves as immigrants. Using documents at the exhibit, have them write about arriving in America. Jews are a part of mainstream American life including but not limited to culture, science, sports, and politics. Anne Roiphe writes in her book *Generation Without Memory: A Jewish Journey in the Christian America*:

“If one leaves the tight world of one’s ancestors, if one abandons the synagogue, the High Holy Days, the Sabbath Queen, the Torah, the Talmud, the Midrash, what replacements are made in the building of the soul? How are the crises of life marked: birth, marriage, death? How are festivals managed? Men and women need ways of living within ethical frameworks, ways of passing on to their children their morality and their lifestyles. What do we do – we who once thought only of abandoning the ways of our parents and parents’ parents and gave no heed to the necessary replacements, substitutes we would need to make – what do we in our empty apartments do to make furniture and fabric for ourselves?”

What do selected documents reveal about the old lifestyle and how it influences the new?

What type of document is it?

When was it written? By whom?

What is the purpose of the document?

What is the bias of the writer?

What is the tone of the document? How do you know?

2. Your Life as a Movie Poster!

Look at the poster of Al Jolson advertising the Jazz Singer or the poster, A Boychik Up to Date.

What are the posters advertising?

What made the poster effective?

What is the tone of the poster?
What can you tell about the story being advertised?
What is unique about either of these characters in the poster?
Is there any indication of the ethnicity of the character?
Are there images that show the interest of the character?
What about color?
Lettering?

After examining the poster and discussing the information students are able to discern about the character, ask students to design a poster of their life. They will need to think again of what goes into designing the poster to hide or reveal information they want to tell about themselves. Now look at the exhibit posters again and note additional information noticed about the figures.

3. Map – Sense of place

Compare the map of New York City (e.g. Tin Pan Alley) and students' neighborhoods in Cincinnati. What are the key elements in the neighborhood known as Tin Pan Alley, e.g. music stores, groceries, schools? What are similarities/differences in students' neighborhoods today? How is the music the same or different? How does music in these neighborhoods reflect the lives of the people living there?

Extension Activity

Now that students have had time to do some research about American Jewish history and discuss the theme “Jews and Blues,” there is a post-exhibit assignment to reinforce and enhance the learning from pre-exhibit and exhibit experiences.

The post-exhibit exercise is to have students engage in a debate. This is a group activity in which students will be divided into two teams to prepare and participate in a debate about Jewish influence in introducing blues and jazz to the American public and how this is important in understanding what it means to be American and Jewish. American Jews have established an identity that is both American and Jewish as an easily identifiable minority. American Jews have achieved this identity by becoming mainstreamed into American popular culture through success in many highly visible areas of American life, including mass media of music, radio and film, leisure activities and active family life activities of cooking, photographs and personal collections. American Jewish influence in music has helped define American Jewish identity. This is important because identity is a key issue in thinking about ethnic literature, music and cultural studies. The question of Jewish identity apart from religion is a central issue in understanding what it means to be American and Jewish.

Debate Assignment:

Suggested debate topics:

1. The Jazz Singer is an important film in understanding Jewish identity. Using the Library of Congress website for “From Haven to Home,” debate some of the key issues of Jewish experience that influence being American and Jewish.
 - a. Immigrant parents vs American children;
 - b. Religious vs secular identity

2. Al Jolson sings in blackface because the American public could only accept “black” music if sung by a white person dressed as a black. Was Jewish influence necessary to popularize Black rhythm and blues with the general public?

Questions teams might consider:

The documentary Jews and Blues suggests that there is an intersection of African American blues and Jewish versions that is critical to the introduction of jazz to the American public. Why did the public not already have direct experience listening to this music? How were the audiences different for Jews and Blacks at this time? Did Jews hide their identity as Jews? Both Blacks and Jews share an immigrant heritage, Jews as willing immigrants and Africans as unwilling immigrants. What common experiences might the ancestors of today’s Jewish and African American communities have shared? Differences? Did it influence their ability to work together in music?

Debate Guidelines for Academic Debates

Divide the class into two groups. Use a format for a formal academic debate.

1. The usual academic debate is one hour long.
2. Two teams argue opposite sides of a “proposition.” The affirmative team argues in favor of the proposition and the negative team argues against the proposition or in favor of the current position or situation.
3. Proof can be in the form of either logical reasoning or evidence.
 - Logical proof is based on common sense and common knowledge.
 - Evidence includes facts and statistics from reliable sources.
4. Roles
 - a. Time Keepers – Keeps track of each person’s speaking time and the time given for teams to prepare arguments and rebuttals during the debate. Time keepers should have cards to hold up to let debaters know how much time has passed. For instance, if the speaker has eight minutes to speak, the time keeper holds up cards counting down from the time allotted (eight minutes, seven minutes, six minutes, etc.)
 - b. Judges – determines the winner of the debate based on proof provided by the teams and effectiveness of their arguments and presentation. Judges may be a panel of teachers, guests and/or class members.
 - c. Speakers – student selected to speak for the team and argue the position. Teachers decide whether this will be one speaker representing the team or a panel of students

- d. Preparation team – students researching and preparing materials supporting the team position.
5. Debate Procedures
- a. Standard debate format

1 st affirmative constructive	8 minutes
1 st negative constructive	8 minutes
2 nd affirmative constructive	8 minutes
2 nd negative constructive	8 minutes
1 st negative rebuttal	4 minutes
1 st affirmative rebuttal	4 minutes
2 nd negative rebuttal	4 minutes
2 nd affirmative rebuttal	4 minutes

Preparation time can be set at either one or two minutes between speakers. By using a team or group as the speaker more students can be active in the process. To insure that more students get to speak the sections might be divided so that each part is shared. For example 1st affirmative could be two different students presenting, each for 4 minutes.

Alternative format

- b. Cross examination debate

1 st affirmative constructive	8 minutes
Cross examination	3 minutes
1 st negative constructive	8 minutes
Cross examination	3 minutes
2 nd affirmative constructive	8 minutes
Cross examination	3 minutes
2 nd negative constructive	8 minutes
Cross examination	3 minutes
1 st negative rebuttal	4 minutes
1 st affirmative rebuttal	4 minutes
2 nd negative rebuttal	4 minutes
2 nd affirmative rebuttal	4 minutes

- c. Arguing the Affirmative
 - Point out problems with the current belief
 - Convince the audience that the problems are significant
 - Point out benefits of change
 - Find reliable experts to back up claims
 - Predict what opposing arguments will be and develop counter arguments before the debate
 - Plan for a logical flow in the presentation of arguments

- d. Arguing the Negative
 - Develop arguments in defense of the current belief.
 - Convince audience that any problems referred to by the affirmative are insignificant
 - Develop reasons for opposing the affirmative position
 - Find reliable experts to back up the argument
 - Question the affirmative team's proof.

Sample Assessment

Rating scale: Excellent – 5, Very Good – 4, Good – 3, Fair – 2, Poor – 1

Category	Rating	Comments
Preparation		
Organization		
Presentation		
Analysis of issue		
Evidence		
Rebuttal		
Challenge to opponents		
Response to questions		

Debate guidelines from: Mowbray & George, 1992, pp. 67-68.
 (<http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/comm20/mod7.html> - Module 7: The Art of Debating.)