

“God Bless the Child”

The Basics

Time Required

1-2 class periods

Subject Areas

American History

The Great Depression and World War II, 1929-1945

Skills

Song analysis

Author

Antoinette Bianco (2011)

The Lesson

Introduction

“God Bless the Child” is a song written by Billie Holiday and Arthur Herzog Jr. in 1939, first recorded on May 9, 1941 under the Okeh label. Holiday’s version of the song was honored with the Grammy Hall of Fame Award in (1976). It was also included in the list of Songs of the Century, by the Recording Industry of America and the National Endowment for the Arts. In her autobiography *Lady Sings the Blues* Holiday indicated an argument with her mother over money led to the song. She indicated that during the argument she said the line “God bless the child that’s got his own.” The anger over the incident led her to turn that line into a starting point for a song, which she worked out in conjunction with Herzog. In *Jazz Singing* Will Friedwald indicates it as “sacred and profane” as it references the Bible while indicating that religion seems to have no effect in making people treat each other better. The lyrics refer to an unspecified Biblical verse: “Them that’s got shall get, them that don’t shall lose, so the Bible says, and it still is news. . . .” This likely refers to Matthew 25:29.

(http://www.last.fm/music/Billie+Holiday/_/God+Bless+the+Child)

Guiding Questions

What was the Great Depression?

How do economic conditions affect the lives of children?

Learning Objectives

Students will analyze the effect of the Great Migration on the “migrators”

Preparation Instructions

Song used in the lesson: “God Bless the Child”

Lesson Activities

1. On the Smartboard (or on Chart Paper) put the word OPPORTUNITY. Invite the students to brainstorm its meaning. Discuss their answers.
2. Introduce/review vocabulary: migration, education, occupation, industry, homeschool, agriculture, sharecropper, plantation, shoeshine, waterpump, and washboard.
3. Share the overview of The Great Migration from the website: (<http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aah/great-migration-1915-1960>). The economic motivations for migration were a combination of the desire to escape oppressive economic conditions in the south and the promise of greater prosperity in the north. Since their Emancipation from slavery, southern rural blacks had suffered in a plantation economy that offered little chance of advancement. While a few blacks were lucky enough to purchase land, most were sharecroppers, tenant farmers, or farm laborers, barely subsiding from year to year. When World War I created a huge demand for workers in northern factories, many southern blacks took this opportunity to leave the oppressive economic conditions in the south.
4. Play the song “God Bless the Child” by Billie Holiday. Ask the students to think about the meaning of the song.
5. Hand out lyrics to the song. Read them aloud.
6. Separate the class into groups of 2-3. Using a graphic organizer, invite the students to Plot the Story of the Song.
7. Replay the song
8. Have students share their responses with the class.
9. Regroup the students. Explain that each group will look at depictions of life in the 1900’s, pre and post migration. (ie: Home, Work, Transportation, Play) Hand out the graphic organizers as well as the sets to the groups. Invite each group to compare and contrast the 2 pictures given to them. (Model the activity using the comparison of the homeschool/city school depictions)
10. Ask students to share out their observations. Create a class chart of their responses.

Assessment

Students will write a paragraph about the pictures they analyzed. They will include details from the paintings as well as words/phrases from the song.

Resources

Lyrics

“God Bless the Child” available at

<http://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/g/godblessthechild.shtml>