

The Theme of Rebellion in the 1950s as It Occurs in the Arts

The Basics

Time Required

9 class periods

Subject Areas

Grades 4-6 Music

Post WWII US, 1945-1970

Common Core Standards Addressed:

Writing Standards K-5

Author

Louise Gray (2004)

The Lesson

Introduction

The 1950s was a decade of prosperity, optimism, conservatism and conformity. But as the era neared its end, a counter-culture reared its head through American society along the lines of "Leave It to Beaver" meets "Twin Peaks." Rebellion and non-conformity were the reactions to the "white-bread" texture of American society. Various celebrities epitomized the defiance of youth—Marlon Brandon, James Dean, Elvis Presley, Jack Kerouac, and others. Eddie Cochran, composer and virtuoso guitarist, co-penned the teen-age anthem "Summertime Blues," which amplified the dissatisfaction and unrest that continue to trouble our youth even today. "Summertime Blues" served as a vehicle to explore the various trends present within 1950's society whose echoes are still felt more than 50 years later.

Eddie Cochran (1938-1960), killed in a fiery car crash in London in 1960 and thus propelled instantly to iconic rock-n-roll legend, was a song-writer/performer who was over-shadowed by Elvis Presley. In fact, Eddie coveted Elvis' fame and stardom saying, "I'm gonna be big. . .I can play guitar-he can't." Some say that his magnetism wooed more females than Elvis with his aggressive Rockabilly style of performance. "Summertime Blues" was composed in nearly one-half hour in 1958 and recorded that same year. It consists of a three-chord accompaniment with over-dubbed hand-clapping as performed by song-writer Sharon Sheeley. It took Cochran one hour to perfect the hand-clapping of Sheeley who was not an instrumentalist. The spoken lyrics which cap each verse are Eddie's impression of King Fish from Amos 'n-Andy, an African American radio show. "Summertime Blues" was Eddie's only Top 10 hit in America. It took two months to enter the charts and peaked at number 8 on the Billboard 100.

This success came at a crucial time when Eddie's career seemed to be at a low point. His management gave him the go-ahead to write, produce, and play his own material and still be creative. "Summertime Blues" encapsulates the rebelliousness of youth, the hypocrisy of politics, and the growing generation gap of the fifties. Although it is not a protest song, it anticipates those songs of the 1960's through its defiance to authority. Eddie Cochran proves himself to be an innovator rather than a re-creator in this dynamic paean to teenage freedom versus adult responsibility. "Summertime Blues" is one of rock's most covered songs with recordings made by the Beach Boys, Blue Cheer, T-Rex, Ritchie Valens, Dick Dale, The Who, Alan Jackson, Joan Jett, The Flaming Lips, The Flying Lizards, Olivia Newton-John, Buck Owens, the Ventures, and Motorhead, among others.

Guiding Questions

What do you know about the 1950s?

What does it mean to rebel?

Learning Objectives

The students will:

- identify several features of the historic/social/cultural background of the 1950s
- sing and perform a percussion accompaniment to "Summertime Blues" by Eddie Cochran
- name important personages of the 1950s
- write personal lyrics to "Summertime Blues"
- create an artwork in the style of artist Jackson Pollock
- describe salient features of rock-n-roll music
- perform a 1950's dance compose a poem in the style of Alan Ginsberg

Preparation Instructions

Song used in this lesson:

"Summertime Blues" by Eddie Cochran

Lesson Activities

"Summertime Blues" will serve as the instructional focal point of an interdisciplinary unit which will involve a minimum of nine teaching sessions of approximately 45 minutes each.

Session One

Students will become familiar with the fifties and the theme of rebellion through viewing photographs and excerpts of films and participating in a discussion. Students will become familiar with Eddie Cochran's "Summertime Blues".

- Students will view photographs of the 1950s and compare/contrast to the present.
- Students will discuss conformity/non-conformity and the pro's and con's of each.
- Students will name non-conformists of the present.
- Students will view excerpts from three films of the era which feature rebellious youth: *Rebel without a Cause*, *The Wild One*, and *Blackboard Jungle*.
- Students will listen to "Summertime Blues" and discuss how it may relate to their own feelings.
- Homework assignment: Interview someone who lived during the 1950s.

Session Two

Students will identify Eddie Cochran and “Summertime Blues” as parts of the 1950’s milieu.

- Students will view Eddie Cochran performing “Summertime Blues” on video and discuss the experience.
- Students will listen to samples of typical 1950’s rock-n-roll and identify key features of the music (i.e., the beat, the instruments, the speed, etc.)
- Students will follow the score to “Summertime Blues” and read the lyrics.
- Students will use percussion instruments and play rock-n-roll riffs on percussion instruments.

Sessions Three and Four

Students will define the term “icon” and identify several from the 1950s.

- Students will view portraits of celebrities from the 1950s as created by Andy Warhol.
- Students will discuss what makes someone an “icon” and will name several.
- Teacher and students will take turns reading excerpts from Stephen King’s story “They Must Have Had a Hell of a Band Up There.”

Session Five

Students will become familiar with the life of artist Jackson Pollock and his “drip” style of painting.

- Teachers (art and music or otherwise) will provide the students with information about Jackson Pollock’s life and background about his unique style of painting.
- Students with teachers’ assistance will create their own “drip” paintings.

Session Six

Students will compose their own lyrics to “Summertime Blues”

- Students will analyze lyrics of “Summertime Blues.”
- Students will work in pairs and change keywords to personalize lyrics. (See rubric at the end of the unit.)
- Upon completion, groups will share their lyrics with the class.

Session Seven

Students will become familiar with a dance popular with 1950’s teens.

- Teacher and students will discuss social teenage dances in the 1950’s and the present.
- Teachers (physical education and music or otherwise) will demonstrate the steps to 1950’s dance and students will imitate.
- Students will choose partner, rehearse steps, and perform dance.

Session Eight

Students will become familiar with the poetry of Allen Ginsberg.

- Teacher will discuss “the Beats” with students and several of their basic ideas.
- Students will examine a poem by “Beat” poet Allen Ginsberg. For example, “To Lindsay” or appropriate excerpts of another poem.
- Students will write their own versions of a “Beat” poem.

Session Nine

Students will create an event which foreshadows the “Happenings” of the 1960s by presenting some of the art works that they created during the past nine (or more) sessions.

Assessment

Students will divide into groups:

- One group will dress as beatniks, wearing black berets, black tops, and sunglasses. These students will read their “Beat” poems to the entire group along with a bongo accompaniment.
- A second group, in appropriate 1950’s dress-poodle skirts, bobby sox, jeans, white shirts, etc. will perform a 1950’s dance.
- A third group will perform their original lyrics to “Summertime Blues”.
- The session will end with everyone singing Eddie Cochran’s lyrics to the “Summertime Blues.”

Extending the Lesson

Have students do interviews of family and neighbors who lived during the 1950s.

1950’s Questionnaire

1. What is your name?
2. When were you born?
3. Who are you in relation to the interviewer?
4. What age group did you fall into during the 1950’s?
___Elementary School Student
___High School Student
___College Student
5. What do you remember about the 1950’s?
6. Who was your favorite musical performer at the time?
7. What was the name of your favorite song back then?
8. Did you ever hear of Eddie Cochran and the “Summertime Blues”?

Resources

Lyrics

“Summertime Blues” available at

<http://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/s/summertimeblues.shtml>

Bibliography:

Bradley, Dick. *Understanding Rock “n” Roll: Popular Music in Britain 1955-1964*. Open University Press, Buckingham, 1992.

Cochran, Bobby with Hecke, Susan Van. *Three Steps to Heaven: The Eddie Cochran Story*. Hal Leonard:Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 2001.

Cochran, Eddie. "Summertime Blues" 1958: *Selections from 100 greatest songs of rock & roll*. Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 2002.

Colman, Stuart. *They Kept on Rockin':The Giants of Rock'n'Roll*. Blandford Press, 1982.

Crampton, Luke and Rees, Dafy. *Rock and Roll Year by Year*. DK Publishers, 2003.

Dasher, Richard T. *History of Rock Music*. J. Weston Walch, Portland, Maine, 1985.

Dean, Maury. *Rock'n'Roll Gold Rush: A Singles Un-cyclopedia*. Algora Publishing Co: New York., 2003.

Ewing, William A. *America Worked: Photographs of the 1950's*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989.

The Fifties: Photographs of America. Pantheon Books, New York, 1985.

Foreman, Joel, ed. *The Other Fifties: Interrogating Mid-century American Icons*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, c. 1997.

Gish, D.L. *Rock'N'Roll*. Smart Apple Media: Minnesota, 2002.

King, Stephen. *Dreamscapes and Nightmares: "They Must Have Had A Hell of A Band Up There"*. Signet: New York, 1994.

Livingston, James, Poland, Michael D, Simmons, E. Ronald. *Accountability and Objectives for Music Educators*. Educational Media Press:Costa Mesa, California, 1973

Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. *Andy Warhol and His World*. 2000.

Music Educators National Conference. *Performance Standards for Music Grades PreK-12*. Reston, VA: MENC, 1996.

Mundy, Julie and Higham, Darrel. *Don't Forget Me: The Eddie Cochran Story*. New York: Billboard Books, 2001.

Patterson, R. Gary. *Take A Walk on the Dark Side: Rock and Roll Myths, Legends, and Curses*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004.

Recordings:

Eddie Cochran: "Summertime Blues", 1988 EMI Records, Ltd., Liberty CD LC 0542

Rock'n'Roll: 50's and 60's Hits, 3 CD set; Quebec, Canada: Madacy Entertainment Group, Ltd, 2003.

Cinema on Video:

Blackboard Jungle. MGM Home Entertainment, 1955

Rebel without a Cause. Warner Home Video, 1955

The Wild One. Columbia/Tri Star Home Entertainment, 1954