

Writing Lyrics

Summary

In this activity, students will learn about the themes and structure of a bluegrass song, then will get a chance to try their skill at songwriting by rewriting the lyrics of “Oh! Susanna” as a bluegrass tune.

Objectives

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- describe some of the common themes of bluegrass music
- identify the verse and refrain of a bluegrass song
- compose a song by creating original lyrics for a traditional tune

Time

1 period

Background

The themes of bluegrass music reflect the difficult lives of the rural Americans who originated the musical style as a form of entertainment and storytelling. The stories in bluegrass music most often are told through a series of verses, while the overall theme is often presented in the chorus, or refrain, of the song.

Stephen Foster originally wrote the music and lyrics to “Oh! Susanna” in 1848. From early on, many people adapted new lyrics to the original tune, beginning with the forty-niners of the California Gold Rush, who created many new lyrics to entertain each other on their way west. Now, in this lesson, your students will get the chance to create new lyrics that reflect their lives and time.

Teacher’s Notes

When discussing the songwriting activity, you may wish to help students make connections between the art of songwriting and the art of writing poetry. The activity suggests that students rewrite the lyrics to “Oh! Susanna,” but if a student prefers to use a different song, the activity could work just as well and provide more artistic freedom! Links to useful related websites with lyrics and music files (including one of “Oh! Susanna”) are available in the Resources section at the end of this guide.

Vocabulary

ballad, baritone, chorus, lyrics, refrain, tenor, verse

Materials

Access to the sitesALIVE! website, copies of the *Traditional Song Lyrics* (**provided**), paper and pencils

Procedure

1. Have students read this week's online essays on the subject of bluegrass songs and singing. When students are done, have a class discussion about the common themes of bluegrass music, writing down students' responses on the board.
2. Pass out copies of the *Traditional Song Lyrics* to each student.
3. Have students identify the verses and refrain within "Oh! Susanna."
4. Have a quick sing-along to make sure all students are familiar with the tune of "Oh! Susanna." You can also access one of the websites mentioned in the Resources section to play an electronic version of the song for students.
5. Next, tell students that their task is to rewrite the "Oh! Susanna" lyrics so that they reflect a new bluegrass theme while keeping the tune the same. Some students may find it easier to simply extend the song by adding new verses. Others may prefer to rewrite all of the lyrics to reflect an entirely new theme. Students may work independently or in small groups to complete this assignment.
6. Conclude the lesson by asking students to share their original songs with the class. Students could sing their versions solo, or pass around copies of their new lyrics for everyone to sing.

Extend the Experience

Challenge students to set the traditional lyrics of their chosen song to a new or different melody. For example, students might try to adapt the lyrics of "Oh! Susanna" to the tune of "She'll Be Coming Around the Mountain." For an even greater challenge, ask students to compose a *new* melody for the traditional lyrics. Then, by combining their newly created lyrics from the first exercise with their new melody, students will have written and composed an entirely new song!

Traditional Song Lyrics

Oh! Susanna

by Stephen Foster

I come from Alabama with my banjo on my knee;
I'm going to Louisiana, my true love for to see.
It rained all night the day I left, the weather it was dry;
The sun so hot I froze to death—Susanna, don't you cry.

Oh! Susanna, don't you cry for me;
I come from Alabama, with my banjo on my knee.

I had a dream the other night, when everything was still;
I thought I saw Susanna dear, coming down the hill.
The buckwheat cake was in her mouth, the tear was in her eye;
I said, I'm coming from the south—Susanna don't you cry.

Oh! Susanna, don't you cry for me;
I come from Alabama, with my banjo on my knee.