

***Blue Holden: An Exploration into the
Musical and Cultural Contexts
in The Catcher in the Rye***

Overview:

Holden Caulfield is, of course, the original “Rebel Without a Cause,” and it is important for the students to understand the historical context of Salinger’s novel. As the unit progresses, we discuss how the novel was itself a small wave in the current of change that was occurring during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Listening to the music of the times provides a tangible comparison for the students so they can understand the drastic changes occurring at the time of the novel’s publication and its influence thereafter.

Arts Standards:

Students will be able to...

4.1 Articulate how personal beliefs, cultural traditions, and current social, economic, and political contexts influence the interpretation of the meaning or message in a work of art.

4.2 Compare the ways in which the meaning of a specific work of art has been affected over time because of changes in interpretation and context.

Materials:

- ◆ CD: Glen Miller Orchestra
- ◆ CD: Miles Davis, *Kind of Blue*, 1959

Lesson Activities:

(1) I play swing music typical of the 1940s, such as “Chatanooga-Choo-Choo” by the Glen Miller Orchestra, who is actually mentioned in Salinger’s novel. Holden Caulfield enjoys listening to this type of music. After listening to a few songs, the students respond in their journals and subsequently in discussion. The students always comment on the music’s upbeat rhythm, regular beat, and catchy tunes.

(2) I then play several songs from Miles Davis’ 1959 album, *Kind of Blue*. Once again, the students respond in their journals and in discussion. The students are instantly captivated by his unpredictable horn, the irregular patterns of rhythm, and the almost defiant quality of the songs. I lead the students in a discussion to compare Holden’s psychological state with that of the music we have listened to.

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Example discussion questions:

What did you imagine upon hearing the music? How might Holden Caulfield respond to such music? Keep in mind this album came more than eight years after the novel was published. What connections can be made between the novel and the album? How did life change in the 1950s, and how can we see these changes mirrored in these two works of art, the novel and the album?

Extension: This lesson serves as a bridge into the next, when we discuss how Salinger's 1949 novel served as a template for the "underground" rebellion of the Beat Poets, as well for as the more popular rebels such as James Dean and Marlon Brando. I bring in sunglasses, berets, and drums, and we sit on our desks, snapping our fingers and reading the works of Allen Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka, and Gregory Corso, aloud of course, and always with Miles Davis playing softly in the background.

Evaluation:

Students will choose between two essay topics:

OPTION ONE: Discuss what connections can be made between the development of jazz and poetry during the 1950s and Holden Caulfield's presence in the American psyche during that time.

OPTION TWO: Evaluate the influence that Holden Caulfield/the novel has had on modern-day American youth, culture and music. Incorporate a discussion of the jazz we listened to in class.