

Music As Literacy: “Why’d you turn the music off?”

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Charlie Says

(During a background lesson to Jon Krakauer’s Into the Wild, one of my students Charlie chimes in and makes a quantum leap. The discussion that follows is good.)

And Charlie says that’s like this punk band I know,
making cultural connections Hirsch hasn’t heard:
Thoreau wrote his walking essays, his civil disobedience,
the problem with tax and toll.

And Charlie says the punk pen lyrics to two-minute riffs of rebellion
against those in power, of nonconformity, of the problem with
racism when we are all created equally.

Thoreau tended his garden and Walden Pond
The punks preach in city clubs to straight-edge youth
Thoreau spent his night in jail
when he felt “freer than the free townfolk”
The punks sleep at a rest stop off I-25
in the van living the Black Flag dream.

And Charlie says can you imagine the punks quoting Walden
and Thoreau in a mosh pit?

Nadia walked into the classroom, a trailer behind the high school, on the first day of class in 1994. I had a small AM/FM cassette radio on a table by the chalkboard. Nadia asked if she could turn it on. “Sure,” I said. She turned it to her favorite radio station and said, “No teacher ever let me play music in class.”

“Why not?” I wondered. I was fresh out of college, a first year teacher with the national teacher corps, Teach For America. No one had said this wasn’t allowed. The

only guideline my principal gave me was to do my best to keep my students out of his office.

Nadia and I started talking: “You ever heard this band?” “What music do you listen to?” “Can I bring some music in?” A conversation started naturally, and I was afraid I wasn’t going to know what to talk about. The playing field was leveled; more students walked into class with puzzled but, more or less, smiling faces because Tupac was on the radio. The bell rang and I turned the radio up loud, then off. I instantly had everyone’s attention. Dead silence. Standing in front of the classroom, all eyes on me for first time. First impression, I kept thinking, must make a good first impression. A student, Victor, beat me to it. “Why’d you turn the music off?” My response to his question has driven much of my thinking and research over the last six years regarding learning environments and literacy. “It’s time for class to start, but don’t worry, the music will be on again. It’s going to play an important role in our class.” And so began, on a whim, music in the classroom, music of the week, music as text, music as literacy.

Music grabbed their attention and it grabbed mine. My research for a rationale to incorporate music into the everyday English classroom has led me to Howard Gardner, Dr. William Glasser, E.D. Hirsch, John Dewey, Randy Bomer, and Jeffrey Wilhelm. Music in the classroom seemed to make sense to me. My students introduced me to Tupac Shakur and Rage Against the Machine and I introduced them to the Beatles and Beethoven. There was an opportunity for an exchange of interest and ideas that might not otherwise exist.

In *Control Theory in the Classroom*, William Glasser writes that all people have five basic needs: power, security, fun, freedom, and belonging (23). He believes that only when these needs are met can a person lead a healthy, fulfilled life. Since teaching involves assisting the development of a healthy, fulfilled student, it stands to reason that we must strive to address these needs in the classroom. I have found that an awareness of Glasser’s needs can lead to producing a productive and positive learning environment; specifically integrating the musical intelligence into the English/literature classroom can help address these needs.

Music should not only be examined in a peripheral and managerial sense. It is also an important and intricate academic component of the classroom. It helps create the

foundation of what Randy Bomer calls a “literate environment” (Bomer, 1995, 191). When popular music (Metallica, Norah Jones, or the Doors) is played as an introduction to a lesson, an environment is created where students have things to say and their lives outside of school are valued; all essential elements of Bomer’s “literate environment” (1995, 191). This claim is most difficult to dispute when the music is student selected. Lyrics in these lessons are provided for all students. They are read before the song is played, followed as the song plays, and are used to reference specific quotes during discussion. This creates what Ellin Keene and Susan Zimmerman call “text to self” or “text to world” connections in *Mosaic of Thought* (55). These connections allow students to relate to a text, and in turn, allows the student to comprehend the concept at a level previously unreached. All of this helps establish the foundation of power. It is a vital belief that students realize there is knowledge in power (Glasser 20). Allowing students to weave “their own topics and agendas...in response to the world they walk through everyday” into what is taught in the English classroom empowers them (Bomer, 1999, 2). Bomer might add that this would help create a social agenda, rather than just “the topic I am writing for English” (2).

Music of the Week came about as a result of how I answered Victor on that first day of school. How would music play an important role in our class? And also, why should we even have music in the classroom? First of all, on that first day of school and the hundreds of days since, my students and I have had fun as a result of the music. *Fun* listening to music and reading the lyrics from Robert Johnson and Billie Holiday to Linkin Park and Prince. *Fun* selecting theme music for the Hunters in *Lord of the Flies*; should it be Johnny Cash’s “Don’t Bring Your Guns to Town” or the Beatles’ “Piggies”? Cash has the fitting line to describe the physical transformation the Hunters have gone through, “He changed his clothes and shined his boots and combed his dark hair down.” Then there is the Beatles song which fits like a theme song to the novel. “Have you seen the little piggies crawling in the dirt? And for all the little piggies life is getting worse, always having dirt to play around in” (Harrison).

In regards to the question how, I knew that in order for to work it needed a structured and systematic approach. Each week I select a group or artist that becomes the *Music of the Week*. A short mini-lesson on Monday introduces the artist: dates,

geography, genre, influence, and a sampling of the music (video if it is available). For example:

Bob Marley

2/6/45-5/11/81, born: St. Ann, Jamaica (capitol Kingston)

Singer, Songwriter, Guitarist, Political Activist

Genre: Reggae, Ska, Rock Steady, Roots Reggae

“Redemption Song”, “No Woman, No Cry”

Catch a Fire: Life of Bob Marley by Tim White

The mini-lesson is discussed in a historical, geographic, and literary context. *Where is Jamaica located? What literature do we think of when we think about the Caribbean? What was happening in the last decade of Marley’s life?* This information then becomes part of the *Music of the Week* display along with an album cover or picture. This display becomes a collage of the kinds of music we’ve listened to throughout the year. Showing off these high interest pictures and images in the classroom adds a sense of belonging for the students. “A strong sense of community emerges as individuals, aware of others’ interests, passions, and expertise, contribute to one another’s learning,” Harvey writes in *Nonfiction Matters* (16). The nonfiction is hanging on the wall. Part of their world, the music that represents their world, is on display next to the schedule, dress code, and homework board. This is teacher-controlled for the first part of the year with the expectation that after the first quarter students will be responsible for the *Music of the Week* selections along with a rationale (persuasive essay), mini-lesson, and a copy of the music to play.

Giving students an opportunity to share music on Fridays as part of a reward system made me realize my musical literacy was a bit dated. I subscribed to popular music magazines (*Spin, Vibe, Rolling Stone*) which served two purposes. My students had access to magazines they liked and I had a chance to re-educate myself on what was hip and popular. The magazines also became a source for information and clippings for the music display. The lesson for me was that I didn’t necessarily have the same background knowledge my students had; music helped me gain some of this information. E.D. Hirsch writes about this background information in *Cultural Literacy* more from the perspective of a competent reader rather than from the point of view of the struggling reader:

It is this background information, stored in their minds, that enables them to take up a newspaper and read it with an adequate level of comprehension, getting the point, grasping the implications, relating what they read to the unstated context which alone gives meaning to what they read (2).

If we allow our students to bring their musical background, a musical (and inherently cultural) literacy, into the classroom for discussions, projects, and presentations it will add meaning to the lessons we dedicate time to in our classrooms and increase the opportunity for students to make connections. Wilhelm writes that “part of knowing how to teach good reading entails learning what techniques and what texts will work best with particular groups and particular individuals, and what books will be new, surprising, and challenging - helping the student to grow” (34). A step in this direction is the opportunity to bring examples of music in the classroom by the teacher as part of the *Music of the Week* or by a student as part of a project or presentation.

Hirsch doesn't have the Rolling Stones on his list of “What Literate Americans Know,” but he does list John F. Kennedy and Pontius Pilate; referenced in the Rolling Stones' song “Sympathy for the Devil.” Hirsch doesn't yet have Neil Young either, but does have Montezuma on the list; the subject of Young's “Cortez the Killer.” When we begin to see the use of music in the classroom in the context of an expanding world view and increasing cultural literacy, there are endless opportunities for connections to all aspects of the English classroom. It can be used to motivate students to social action, set a mood for reflective writing and thinking, and allow students to make sense of literature through their own experiences.

Music of the Week helps provide a predictable yet varied agenda of music and related activities. It helps create a sense of the security, another of Glasser's needs, in the classroom. Students are eager on Monday to learn what the music will be. They are especially interested after they have turned in a written request (an essay) persuading me to showcase their favorite artist. The music is played before school, between classes, and at lunch; the students know that when the music is turned up and then off that class has started. Their eyes then turn to the agenda written on the board.

The use of music in the classroom can help to satisfy all the needs Glasser lists. Power is clearly, for us as teachers, the most important to fulfill in the classroom. “If students do not feel that they have any power in their academic classes, they will not work in school” (Glasser 27).

Freedom, defined as having some control over your surroundings, is often absent from many classroom situations. Providing opportunities for students to present on topics they have discovered through writer’s notebooks or books they have chosen in a reading workshop setting with music provides them with an important sense of freedom.

An option for presentations which I have introduced to students is called the musical connection. This musical connection is something that I’ve modeled from the first week of school with the introduction of the first *Music of the Week* and accompanying text. The assignment involves developing a thesis statement about a classroom novel or reading workshop book and supporting it with three quotes from the text and a student-selected song. This five paragraph essay is then shared with the class along with the playing of the song. The student presenter is required to provide a hand-out with lyrics for the audience. This freedom might help disrupt the expectation, as Bomer calls it, “that their work is nothing but compliance” (Bomer, 1999, 2). The students have the opportunity to make sense of the text through ways which are meaningful to them, the music they listen to.

Where is the literature in all this music? This is a question that has been with me since Nadia first turned on the radio. From that day to the present I have worked with a learning different/ learning disabled population. I have always seen my first responsibility as a teacher to get my reluctant readers to read. I was less concerned with the literary canon than I was with just getting my students to read anything. Jeff Wilhelm writes about the transactional view in “*You Gotta BE the Book*”. This idea states that “a literary text is any text that provides a particular reader with a deeply engaging aesthetic experience” (33). I’m not suggesting we throw out Shakespeare for Santana or Beowulf for the Beatles, but I firmly believe that using the musical hook can lead to the literary canon and other meaningful reading. Music can increase the level of literacy and create a more meaningful experience for all involved.

In my 9th and 10th grade Reading Workshop we read assigned classroom novels at the same time students are reading their books of choice. This has allowed for the necessary ingredients of a literary environment, “A sustained conversation going on...where people work for long stretches of time on projects that matter to them...” (Bomer 191). During the first week of a new novel I introduce the project guidelines, requirements, and expectations that will supplement the novel. This includes the grading rubric and student examples of quality work. Each of the projects gives the students the option to create a musical connection. This connection might be made with the theme, a character, the setting, a message, leitmotif, historical context, or anything the student creates that will show an understanding of the text.

The musical connections and subsequent presentations by students amaze me each year. While reading Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, Noah explored the atmosphere of the novel through the Counting Crows’ song, “Daylight Fading.” He writes that he chose the song because, “I strongly feel it shows an excellent display of atmosphere which is quite relevant to *Night*.” Noah continues the essay with specific quotes connecting the song to the text in each of the supporting paragraphs:

Adam Duritz, the lead singer and songwriter, writes from personal experience. I agree with him because he shows true signs of emotions in his lyrics. For example, he explains relief that he’s surviving, “Waiting for the moon to come and light me up inside. And I am waiting for the telephone to tell me I’m alive!” (Duritz). Isn’t this how Elie is feeling? The moon from the Counting Crows is like God in *Night*. Elie experiences tremendous horrors. He sees a child hanged on the gallows and someone behind him groaned, “Where is God?” (Wiesel 62) Elie realizes he must be stronger than Him, and must save his own life. He’s waiting to escape from Auschwitz...so perhaps he can send a letter, meet, or even make a phone call to contact his friends. Adam wants to do the same, only instead of looking for God, he is trying to locate the moonlight to illuminate the darkness.

The chance for the student to use music and lyrics from his favorite band allowed him to make meaning of the text through his own literary interests. He explored an aspect of the novel that might not have been examined otherwise; it was not specifically assigned. The song allowed him to follow his passion and celebrate his individuality. Harvey writes in *Nonfiction Matters*, “Exploring passions, interests, and questions brings the world into

focus and opens the door for the broadest interpretation of ideas” (12). Noah was able to make a connection which I was skeptical of at first. He not only broadened his own understanding of the text through the song and lyrics, but also of the other students who listened to the presentation with lyrics and novel in hand. The project guidelines requested the student show an understanding of the novel through a musical connection. The NCTE standards suggest, “Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate text” (Crump). The musical connections allow the student to compare and contrast, bridge text with ideas with song, and draw on prior experience.

Another example comes from a connection Joe made during the reading of Jon Krakauer’s *Into the Wild*. Joe explored the motivation and reason behind the main character’s “awkward lifestyle of solo traveling”:

His parents never told Chris about what his father did and it made him turn on his parents. He felt they betrayed him. He decided that he never wanted to see his parents again so he hit the road. “And the road becomes my pride, I’m stripped of all but pride, so in her I do confide, and she keeps me satisfied, gives me all I need” (Metallica). This quote represents that his parents took away his pride and the only thing that gave him pleasure was traveling.

The lyrics and freedom of choice for this student opened the door to a previously untapped resource. All of a sudden, his music and his world is valued. It was welcomed in the classroom, one where there is a freedom for the students to choose as well as a sense of belonging in the collective sharing of each other’s music.

Alex is a student I don’t think I would ever have reached without music. I noticed I had only heard of one of the five bands he listed on his student survey at the beginning of the year. Through the letters we exchanged in his literary journal I learned about an entire genre of late nineties punk music. His letters prior to my asking him about his favorite music were three or four lines. After I inquired and encouraged him to educate me about his musical interests the letters became at least a page long each. Alex used a song by the band Goldfinger recently to show his understanding of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. The song title alone grabbed everyone’s attention, “Margaret Ann.” Alex often struggles with getting his ideas on paper. Here music helped him make the first step:

Goldfinger has a song on their new album that shows what Anne Frank was feeling and thinking while hiding from the Nazis. “I know sometimes you worry” (Goldfinger). Anne was always worrying about something. “I’m here to tell you that you’re doing fine” (Goldfinger). This might be Peter’s point of view or her diary talking to her. This was the best song to relate Anne Frank’s Diary that I could find.

The musical connection, part of his background knowledge, gave Alex the material to start writing with. Harvey writes, “Activating background knowledge when reading keeps them focused and increases deep comprehension” (73). I would add to this and say that this activation during the writing process greatly assisted Alex in creating the text and illustrating his understanding of the novel.

Allowing students to bring in their own music for projects and *Music of the Week* selections obviously demands some guidelines which each individual teacher must decide on. The music provides opportunity to get to know students and their interests. Wilhelm writes that the transactional view “implies a new role for the teacher as one who will help familiarize students with all kinds of stories in various forms and with various content, and who will validate the reading of these materials” (33). I think part of this familiarization could easily include music: teacher learns from student, student learns from teacher, and students learn from students about music, about each other, about the things that matter. “The story of the reader,” as Wilhelm calls it, “must be known before the story can be written about what sort of reading they might do and what sort of reader they might become” (34). What better way to find out a student’s story than by way of the music they listen to.

Speaking to a student today about music in the classroom and this article, I asked him his opinion on the subject. “Musical connections are better than writing papers.” I carefully responded, “You know, you are actually still writing a paper.” He paused and shook his head, “Yeah, but its different.”

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