



Westward Expansion and Country Music's Hispanic Influence

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What was Westward Expansion, and what effect did it have on American Popular music?

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will investigate Westward Expansion and the role it played in developing Country music by watching video clips, listening to music, reading personal testimonies, and comparing the lyrics and form of Mexican corridos and Country music.



On February 2, 1848, in the Villa de Guadalupe Hidalgo, the countries of the United States and Mexico signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The treaty signaled the end of the almost two year war between the countries. As part of Mexico's surrender, the United States annexed what is today most of Arizona, Nevada, and California.

Just a month before the treaty was signed, carpenter James W. Marshall discovered traces of gold in a stream while constructing a mill in Coloma, California. Word inevitably spread of Marshall's discovery, and Northern California, newly acquired from Mexico, was inundated with fortune seekers—and following them, laborers from China and Mexico. Thanks to the Gold Rush, San Francisco grew from a settlement of 1,000 to a bustling city of 25,000 residents in just two years. Thus began a half-century period of Westward Expansion, as American citizens in the East began moving further west.

To reach California, fortune seekers crossed what was then known as "The Great American Desert"—the land east of the Rocky Mountains and west of the 100th meridian. Yet, as the California Gold veins dried, this seemingly barren "Great American Desert" became a new site for exploration and agricultural development.

With fortunes to be made from agricultural products rather than gold, the U.S. Government enacted the Homestead Act of 1862, which permitted U.S. citizens to buy plots of 160 acres for small fees, if they lived on them for five years. By 1878, these allotments increased to 1,280 acres of land.

Westward Expansion was not only spurred by economic incentives. Journalists, novelists, and showmen such as Frederick Jackson Turner, Horace Greeley, John O'Sullivan, Owen Wister, and Buffalo Bill Cody helped romanticize Westward Expansion. This romanticization reached its peak

with the concept of Manifest Destiny, which insisted it was the U.S.'s God-given destiny to cultivate the West.

The period of Westward Expansion in the second half of the 1800s radically changed the demographics of the American West — largely because it led to the forced migration of Native Americans from their ancestral lands. Through a long history of broken treaties and outright violence, the U.S. Government forcibly relocated Indigenous people throughout the West onto reservations. Native American leaders such as Little Crow, Black Kettle, Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, and Geronimo resisted, and remain symbols of Indigenous resistance against efforts by the U.S. Government to eradicate native lands, people, and traditions.

The American West was also home to people of Mexican descent, and much of the romanticization of the West was inspired by Hispanic culture. The cowboy—perhaps the exemplary symbol of the romantic, dangerous life in the west—was in fact a translation of the Spanish *vaquero*, a horse mounted livestock herder. So too was the music often termed “Western” (later “Country Western” and then simply “Country”) a product of Hispanic culture. The common form of the “Cowboy Ballad” in Country music carries deep connections to the Spanish corrido—a ballad form traditionally sung to share news and preserve history in Mexico. By the 20th century, iconic Country and Folk music singers such as Woody Guthrie, Linda Ronstadt, Marty Robbins, and Townes Van Zandt paid homage to corridos in their music, while groups such as Los Tigres del Norte and Arsenal Efectivo keep the tradition alive.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The timeline for Westward Expansion, from the 1840s to the early 1900s
- Country music is inspired in part by corridos, a centuries-old singing tradition in Mexico
- The annexation and purchase of territory after the Mexican-American war led in part to Westward Expansion
- The Homestead Act of 1862 further incentivized citizens to move and develop agricultural land in the Western United States.
- The process of Westward Expansion was justified by the philosophy of Manifest Destiny
- Westward Expansion resulted in close and often violent contact with Hispanic and Native peoples, which influenced American musical culture

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to describe Westward Expansion, what made it possible, and its effects on popular music in the United States.

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Play the video clip “Lolo Felix” by Arsenal Efectivo at <https://youtube.com/clip/UgkxJDewCpNzghIZ-rzVmUPhbiW-3UPIZfrR?si=25g3ihXJbU0YzX78> (*Note to teacher: this link will open to the official video on YouTube, we recommend preloading the content to avoid showing advertising in the classroom. Anything outside in the video outside the specified clip may be inappropriate for the class*). Ask students
 - Does this music sound like anything you have heard before? If so, what?
 - Do you recognize any of the instruments? If so, which?
 - What language are they singing in? What might this tell you about the music they are playing?
 - When and where might the performance take place? What might this say about the band?
 - What sorts of audiences might the band be popular with?
2. Inform students that the song they just listened to comes from the group Arsenal Efectivo, who have coined a music style labeled “Trap corridos.” Ask students:
 - Have you ever heard the term or listened to Trap music? Who are some of the artists you know who play Trap music?
 - Have you heard the term “corridos” or listened to any corridos? What are corridos?
3. Explain to students that in this lesson they will be learning about the long history of corridos, and the role they have played in American history and culture for hundreds of years. To do that, they will be looking into the historical period known as Westward Expansion.

PROCEDURE

1. Distribute **Handout - Westward Expansion Graphic Organizer** (*Teacher Edition also available*). Explain that throughout the class students will be using the handout to make notes on important concepts and terms introduced in the class.
2. Play **Clip 1, Westward Expansion**, and encourage students to take notes on their graphic organizer as they watch the clip.
3. Work through the graphic organizer together as a class, filling in notes for all the terms on the handout. Use the Teacher Edition of the organizer to help spur thinking (*you may need to rewatch portions of the video with the class*).

If this lesson is split between multiple sessions this would be a good stopping point.

4. Explain to the class they will now be discussing music. Ask students:

- How might the history of the American West have contributed to how people performed music in the region? What sorts of cultures might have influenced the sound of music in this area?

5. Explain to students that they will be looking particularly at the way music from Mexico influenced American music—especially in the Country genre. To do that, they will be returning to the corrido, which they watched at the beginning of the class.

6. Pass out to students **Handout - Excerpts from Corridos in Migrant Memory by Martha I. Chew Sánchez**. Read aloud in class, in groups, or individually. Then ask students:

- Based on the reading, what is a corrido?
- What are some of the functions of a corrido?
- What might be some of the topics corrido lyrics are about?
- What kind of people perform corridos?
- Can everyone sing them, or only trained musicians?
- Are corridos important to Mexican culture? How do you know?

7. Show **Image 1, Linda Ronstadt Quote**. Tell students that Linda Ronstadt is a folk and country musician born in Tucson, Arizona, which is less than 100 miles from the Mexican border. For Ronstadt and many other Country

musicians, corridos and other forms of Mexican music were a large influence on the music they played.

8. Inform students that in order to trace the Corrido's influence on Country music, they will be comparing a corrido with a Country song. Pass out **Handout - Corrido Narrative Format Checklist**. Then, by either using a choice board or creating stations, have students compare one or more of the following document sets (this can be done individually or in groups):

- **Document Set 1:** Early Songs about Life on the Texas Border
- **Document Set 2:** Songs of Immigration and Labor
- **Document Set 3:** Songs Regarding Women
- **Document Set 4:** Songs About Crime and Criminals (*Teacher Discretion Recommended*)

9. After reviewing the document sets, ask students or student groups to share their observations. Then ask the class:

- Based upon what everyone shared, would you say corridos inspired Country music? Why or why not?
- Did the songs you examined all adhere to the corrido formula, or did they diverge from it? What might this say about the corrido as a style of music?
- In what way did the topics of the songs address life on the Mexican border? Are the stories and issues brought up in the songs still relevant today? Why or why not?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Display **Image 2, Scenario**. Ask students to read the instructions, and write an email or text message. Then, ask students to volunteer to share their answers.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Listen to the songs discussed in this lesson in this youtube playlist: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQXXISq_vcCb-POIOieua590iGp5mKn3h
2. Write your own Corrido using the following formula provided by the Kennedy Center: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1FlpPmWiAzUVNNc4zdfi17P4oDwiAOh1NQxQJCzG4jHo/edit>
3. Research the story of Gregorio Cortez, The Texas Rangers, or 1948 deportee plane crash in California, and compare the historical account with what is described in the song or corrido lyrics.
4. Conduct research on Johnny Rodriguez, Freddy Fender, or another Mexican-American popular music artist, and write a brief biography about them and describe how they influenced American Music.
5. Learn more about the figure of the cowboy in American history and how it is changing with the TeachRock Lessons **The Myth of the American Cowboy** and **The Reclamation of the American Cowboy**.



STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (K-12)

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity 10: Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing (K-12)

Text Types and Purposes 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Text Types and Purposes 2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Production and Distribution of Writing 4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)

Comprehension & Collaboration 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Comprehension & Collaboration 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Comprehension & Collaboration 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

Presentation of Knowledge 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.



College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language (K-12)

Language 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

Language 2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

Language 3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

Theme 9: Global Connections

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION – NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR MUSIC EDUCATION (NAFME)

Core Music Standard: Responding

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.



Core Music Standard: Connecting

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.



RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- Westward Expansion

HANDOUTS

- Handout - Westward Expansion Graphic Organizer
- Handout - Westward Expansion Graphic Organizer (Teacher Edition)
- Handout - Excerpts from *Corridos in Migrant Memory* by Martha I. Chew Sánchez
- Handout - Corrido Narrative Format Checklist
- Document Set 1: Early Songs about Life on the Texas Border
- Document Set 2: Songs of Immigration and Labor
- Document Set 3: Songs Regarding Women
- Document Set 4: Songs About Crime and Criminals