

The Banjo, Slavery, and the Abolition Debate

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What is the relationship between the banjo and slavery, and how did music making by enslaved people influence the abolition debate during the 18th and early 19th century?

OVERVIEW

In many ways, the story of the banjo is the story of America. For two centuries, the plucking of banjo strings has accompanied the evolution of American popular music, from Minstrelsy to Blues to Dixieland Jazz. Then, just as these sounds began to fade before the electrified sounds of Rhythm and Blues and Rock and Roll, there was a banjo revival. In the hands of Bluegrass virtuoso Earl Scruggs and Folk Songster Pete Seeger, the banjo reasserted itself as the instrument of the common man. Today, the banjo remains essential to the sound of groups from Mumford and Sons to the Band Perry, who like musicians of the past, make the instrument their own.



Photo: Alan Lomax

But the significance of the banjo to American culture goes far deeper than its presence in popular music styles: it goes back to the tragic foundations of the New World. For the banjo was not invented in America, nor did it come in the hands of colonists and settlers. It arrived upon America's eastern shores through enslaved Africans.

Between 1500 and 1900, an estimated 10.7 million enslaved people arrived to North America, South America, and the Caribbean. Bought or simply taken from West Africa, they were delivered like livestock to the Americas. Packed into hulls of ships built to transport goods rather than people, many Africans reached the shores of America still shackled to the bodies of people who had succumbed to disease or starvation. Those that managed to escape from their bonds often jumped into the sea, preferring a watery grave over a life in servitude.

Upon reaching the shores, the enslaved Africans were sent to an auction block where, in the words of ex slave Fountain Hughes, "they would bid on you just the same as you bid on cattle." Their lives were thereafter determined completely by the temperament of the slave master. Some of the enslaved would be treated decently, even sent to school. Others would experience immeasurable cruelties, punishments, and tortures. But all lacked the rights engraved into the Declaration of Independence: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Perhaps the only comfort that was available to enslaved people was memories of their homeland, embodied through song and dance. Stripped of everything, enslaved people did what they could to rebuild the instruments of Africa using the materials available to them. Thus, the banjo was reborn in the Caribbean from a similar Ghanese instrument called the Akonting. In addition to playing the banjo and other instruments, enslaved people also continued to dance traditional dances, and sing work songs and spirituals intimately connected with their physical bondage and spiritual endurance.

This music making led to considerable consternation among colonists and settlers. The justification for slavery was often predicated on the idea that Africans were subhuman, and therefore not entitled to the same rights of freedom endowed to Europeans. But how could such a claim be made in the face of evidence of so much ingenuity, creativity, and humanity revealed through music making by enslaved people?

In this lesson, students discover how the banjo and music making more generally among enslaved people contributed to debates on the ethics of slavery. They listen to slave narratives, examine statistics, and read primary sources to better understand how slavery was conceptualized and lived through in the 18th and 19th centuries. Throughout the lesson, students return to videos created by Alan Lomax of pre-blues banjo player Dink Roberts as a way to imagine what music among enslaved people in the United States may have sounded like.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The African origins of the banjo
- The numbers of enslaved people who arrived to North America by region
- First-hand accounts of slavery by former enslaved people
- The functions music played for enslaved people according to the accounts of former enslaved people
- How the banjo and music making by enslaved people informed debates over the morality of slavery in the 18th and 19th century
- Banjo player Dink Roberts

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to better comprehend the institution of slavery in America by listening to music, hearing slave narratives, analyzing statistical data, and discussing historical documents that advocated for or against slavery.

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Tell students that for this lesson they will be taking on the role of ethnographers—social scientists who study people in their own environments. They will be watching a video of a musical performance, and as ethnographers they should take notes that describe the setting of the performance, as well as the performers' age, attire, body language, and anything else they notice.
2. Play **Clip 1, “Dink Roberts: Fox Chase/Old Rattler,”** and ask students:
 - What general observations did you have while watching the video?
 - Where does it seem like the video was shot?
 - How would you describe the singing? Does it seem more planned, or spontaneous?
 - What kind of audience might Dink Roberts play for?
 - Based on what you saw in the video, what generalization might you make about Dink Roberts' life?
3. After discussing the video in general, focus on the instrument Roberts is playing. Ask students:
 - Does anyone know the name of the instrument Roberts is playing?
 - Do any of you have any preconceptions of the banjo? What do you think of when you think of the banjo?
 - Where do you think the banjo might have come from? What instrument is does it look similar to?
4. Show **Image 1, “Stringed Instruments in America.”** Tell students that one of the four lutes on the right hand side of the image is the ancestor to the banjo. Ask students to examine each instrument and write on a scratch piece of paper which instrument they think the banjo evolved from. Guide students to observe the shape of each instrument in the image, the materials used, the number of strings, etc.
5. By a show of hands, ask students which instrument they wrote down. Have students volunteer to explain their reasoning: what similarities did you see between the banjo and the instrument you wrote down?

6. Tell students the answer: the banjo is the direct descendent of the *Akonting* from Ghana. Point out that both instruments have a circular body covered with a skin-like membrane, and on the membrane is a piece of wood called a bridge that holds up strings.
7. Ask students:
 - How might have an African instrument like the Akonting come to North America?
 - Who might have been the first types of people to play the Akonting in the Americas?

PROCEDURE

1. Tell students that in this lesson they will be looking at the origins of the banjo, and the ways the banjo and music making by enslaved people in general informed debates on the morality of slavery.
 - According to the historic evidence presented in the handout, when might have the banjo first appeared in North America?
 - Based on the titles alone, what might these historic documents be about?
 - Based on the titles alone, what part of the world do these documents discuss?
 - Why might have the earliest accounts of the banjo occurred in the Caribbean, rather than the United States?
2. Pass out **Handout 1 - “First Accounts of the Banjo in North America.”** Ask students to only read the headings (in italics) of each of the three pages, then ask:
 - According to the historic evidence presented in the handout, when did enslaved people arrive in Mainland North America? How many in the British and French Caribbean?
 - In total, what three regions did enslaved people arrive to at the highest numbers? How does Mainland North America compare?
 - What does this chart reveal about the Slave Trade, especially as it concerns the United States specifically?
3. Show **Image 2, “Slave Disembarkment Statistics.”** Ask students:
 - What does this chart show?
 - In the time period during which the accounts in the handout were written (approx. 1650-1750), about how many enslaved people during this time play and dance to music? For what purpose?
 - From what you can tell, what were the author’s opinions of this music? Did they appreciate it or were they dismissive of it?
4. Have students return to **Handout 1 - “First Accounts of the Banjo in North America.”**, and ask them to read each account. Warn them that they are looking at primary sources from hundreds of years ago, so some of the grammar and spelling may seem off.
5. Ask students:
 - According to the documents, when did enslaved people during this time play and dance to music? For what purpose?
 - From what you can tell, what were the author’s opinions of this music? Did they appreciate it or were they dismissive of it?

- How did the slave masters and overseers respond to this music making? (*If necessary, remind students of the third document, which notes that slave masters tried to keep enslaved people from dancing.*)
 - How is the life of an enslaved person described in these accounts? Do you think life as a enslaved person was different for those in the United States versus those in the Caribbean?
6. Tell students they will now be moving from the Caribbean to the United States. Explain that in the 1930s, the U.S. Government created the Federal Writers Project, which began collecting narratives from Americans who experienced slavery. Tell students they will be watching videos that feature audio recordings of people recalling what slavery was like for them.
7. Play **Clip 2, “Voices Remembering Slavery: The Workday.”** Ask students:
- What kind of work are the people in this video describing?
 - What kind of work was done by enslaved people working outside in the fields?
 - What kind of work was done by enslaved people working domestically, in the house?
 - Was there a gender labor divide? According to these interviews, did enslaved women and enslaved men do different kinds of work?
8. OPTIONAL: Play **Clip 3, “Voices Remembering Slavery: Treatment”** (Warning: the video contains accounts of violence and racist language. Teacher discretion is advised). Ask students:
- According to these various accounts, how did slave masters treat their enslaved people? Is it possible to generalize on how enslaved people were treated at this time?
 - How were enslaved people educated, or learn to read and write?
 - What were some ways enslaved people were punished?
 - How did the people being interviewed conceptualize their slavery? (*If necessary, remind students of Fountain Hugh’s comparison of enslaved people to cows and dogs.*)
9. Play **Clip 4, “Voices Remembering Slavery: Music.”** Ask students:
- According to these interviews, when did enslaved people perform music?
 - What were some of the functions music might have served for enslaved people?
 - How did some of the lyrics of the songs sung by enslaved people reflect their environment or position?
10. Tell students that next they will be looking at how music making by enslaved people entered into larger political discussions at the time, especially involving the question of abolition, or the ending of slavery.
11. Play **Clip 1, “Dink Roberts: Fox Chase/Old Rattler”** once again. Tell students that the musician in the video, Dink Roberts, plays a very old style of music, one that might be in some ways similar to the music enslaved people performed. Ask students to keep this music in mind as they pursue the next activity.

12. Split the students into 4 groups and pass out **Handout 2 - “The HIPPO Technique for Analyzing Documents”** and **Handout 3 - “Historical Accounts of Slavery and Slave Music”** to each group. Assign each group one of the four documents in Handout 3, and ask students in the group to analyze their document using the HIPPO technique outlined in Handout 2. (Note: teachers might want to warn students that these documents were written centuries ago, and have some anomalies - for instance, letter “s” in some documents looks more like

an “f”).

13. Have student groups share their analysis with the rest of the class. Then ask the class:

- Which documents seem to be degrading to the enslaved people? (*Documents 1 and 3*). What arguments do these authors make about music making by enslaved people that supports their conclusions?
- Which documents seem more sympathetic to the enslaved people? (*Documents 2 and 4*). What arguments do these authors make about slave music making that supports their conclusions?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Show **Image 3, “Writing Prompt,”** and have students follow the prompt given. Collect responses, or have students present their responses to the class.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

1. Read **Extension Activity - “How the Banjo Became White,”** and answer the provided questions.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Books:

- Laurent Dubois, *The Banjo: America's African Instrument*
- W.E.B. Dubois “The Sorrow Songs” in *The Souls of Black Folk*
- Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*

Films:

- Sascha Paladino, *Throw Down Your Heart*
- Tommy Thompson, *Dink: Pre-Blues Musician*

Records:

- *Black Banjo Songsters of North Carolina and Virginia*, Various Artists
- *American Negro Slave Songs*, Alex Foster and Michel Larue

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.

Reading 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Reading 8: Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

Reading 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. College and Career Readiness

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

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

Writing 7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Writing 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

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

Speaking and Listening 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.

Speaking and Listening 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

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

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity



Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 9: Global Connections

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

Core Music Standard: Responding

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

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

- *The Association for Cultural Equity* - "Dink Roberts: Fox Chase/Old Rattler"
- "Voices Remembering Slavery: The Workday"
- "Voices Remembering Slavery: Treatment"
- "Voices Remembering Slavery: Music"

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1 - "First Accounts of the Banjo in North America"
- Handout 2 - "The HIPPO Technique for Analyzing Documents"
- Handout 3 - "Historical Accounts of Slavery and Slave Music"