# The Black Origins of Punk

### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did the bands X-Ray Spex, Bad Brains, and Death define Punk on their own terms?

### OVERVIEW

*In this lesson, students will explore three pioneering Black Punk bands: X-Ray Spex, Bad Brains, and Death. After listening to each group's music and examining their history, students will then write their own lyrics in the style of Punk.*

Punk…this word alone can bring up feelings of rebellion, loud music, leather jackets, DIY/distressed t-shirts, safety pins, crazy mohawks, and spiked accessories, and an overall attitude of being different.

But when imagining Punk music, who in particular comes to mind? The Sex Pistols? The Ramones? Joan Jett? Green Day? While these are all iconic Punk bands, often forgotten are the Black Punk bands. Groups like Death, X-Ray Spex, and Bad Brains not only helped define the Punk sound, but paved the way for today's modern Black and Brown Punk bands to flourish. They lived by their own rules, unapologetically. . .which to be very honest, is the most Punk thing to do.

Death is a Detroit-based band of three brothers that refused to change their name to be more palatable to white music executives. The Hackney brothers were inspired to begin playing music after seeing The Beatles on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and originally started as a R&B/Soul group before pioneering Proto-Punk. The band went dormant for almost 40 years until the sons of original member Bobby Hackney got a hold of their uncles' and fathers' music. This rediscovery by the younger Hackneys not only gave the band new breath for a new audience, but even got the original lineup, sans David, back together.

Bad Brains, whose name was inspired by a Ramones song, came out of Washington, D.C. The band mixed Punk and Hardcore, and later some Reggae influences. With a sometimes too-rowdy live show for the D.C. scene, they went to New York City where they were welcomed with open arms, and even released a single called, "Banned in DC."

English band X-Ray Spex was led by bi-racial, half Somalian frontwoman Poly Styrene, who wrote introspective and honest music without the anger and aggression of her male

counterparts, all while facing racist and sexist attacks. The band relied on their wit and mockery to tackle issues like consumerism, and the role of women in a male dominated scene and society.

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- Identify some of the stylistic characteristics of Punk and write Punk lyrics based upon those characteristics

- Examine the history of Black people in Punk music

- Discuss some of the earliest Black Punk bands of the 1970s and 1980s, and their contributions to Punk music and culture

- Explore the music and biographies of Death, Bad Brains, and X-Ray Spex

### 2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to write their own lyrics in the style of Punk by first exploring the history and work of Death, Bad Brains, and X-Ray Spex.

## ACTIVITIES

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Ask students:

   - Have you ever heard the word "punk"? What comes to mind when you hear the word "punk?"

   - What do you think a typical Punk musician looks like? What do you think Punk music sounds like?

2. Play **Clip 1, Three Musical Examples from Black Punk Bands**, and ask students to take notes on what stands out to them for each of the three examples.

3. Divide students into groups of 2-3, and distribute **Handout – Punk Word Map** to each group. If requested, play Clip 1 again for the class to further group discussion.

4. While groups complete the handout, create on the board a similar word map to the one in the handout. Have each group share some or all of the word map they created with the classroom and copy their responses on the board to create a class-wide Punk word map.

## PROCEDURE:

1. Instruct students that in class they will be exploring the bands featured in the clip they watched: Death, Bad Brains, and X-Ray Spex. Then, they will be writing their own Punk lyrics based on the inspiration set by these bands.

2. Inform students that before they explore these artists, it is important to recognize some of the pioneers of Rock and Roll who helped set the groundwork for later pioneers.

3. Play **Clip 2, "Hound Dog" by Big Mama Thornton with Buddy Guy.** Then ask students:

   • Have you ever heard this song before? If so, where? Was it Big Mama Thornton's version, or another version?

4. Explain that while Elvis might still be best associated with the song, Big Mama Thornton performed it before Elvis. Thornton was someone who was loud and proud, and often played around with androgynous fashion.

5. Play **Clip 3, "Tutti Frutti" by Little Richard**. Ask students:

   • Have you ever heard this song before? If so, where?

6. Inform students that Little Richard considered himself the "architect of rock and roll." A successful crossover artist of the genre, he bridged the gap between Black and white audiences with his unique showmanship and playing.

7. Ask students:

   • Using the word map the class created, what might make Big Mama Thornton "Punk"?

   • What might make Little Richard "Punk"?

8. Inform students they will now be learning more about the Punk artists they listened to at the beginning of the class. Split the class into groups, and have each group visit one of the following three stations below (if time, allow students to visit multiple stations). Inform students that they will be investigating a variety of materials for each artist, and they should be prepared to present what they learned with the rest of the class. Teachers may pass out **Handout – Station Activity Guide** if desired.

   • **Station 1: Death**
     • Materials Packet
     • Video

   • **Station 2: X-Ray Spex**
     • Materials Packet
     • Video

   • **Station 3: Bad Brains**
     • Materials Packet
     • Video

9. After students are finished with the station activity, ask each group to share one or two things they learned about the Punk band, or read aloud their completed **Handout – Station Activity Guide.**

10. Ask students to return to their groups and look again at the last section of their handout. Ask students to discuss with their groups what they know about the cities the

musicians grew up in and to consider what challenges the musicians faced in their towns and cities.

11. After the group discussion, ask students:

- What city did you discuss with your group? What did your group members know about it?

- What were some of the challenges the Punk musicians faced in these cities? Can you relate to these challenges? Why or why not?

## SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Return to the word map on the board. As a class, edit, amend, or add to the word map based on what they learned about Death, Bad Brains, and X-Ray Spex.

2. Ask students to identify one or two terms on the word map, and use those terms as inspiration to write their own Punk lyrics. Remind students to think about the challenges faced by the Punk bands X-Ray Spex, Bad Brains, and Death while writing their lyrics. Also remind them to consider their own challenges when writing the lyrics.

3. Once students have completed their Punk lyrics, ask for volunteers to share what they wrote. Then, have the class try and guess which terms from the word map inspired the lyrics.

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Explore the work of one of the below contemporary Black Punk Bands. Then create an infographic or write a one page paper comparing the band to one of the predecessors discussed in the class.

- The 1865
- MAAFA
- Proper.
- Rebelmatic
- Pleasure Venom
- Blk Vapor
- Oceanator
- The Muslims
- This Is Your God (TIYG)

# 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.

Craft and Structure 4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

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.

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

Text Types and Purposes 3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

*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.

*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.

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.

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

Theme 1: Culture
Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments
Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

## NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

*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.

## NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

*Responding*

Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard 8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Anchor Standard 9: Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

*Connecting*

Anchor Standard 10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

Anchor Standards 11: Relate artistic ideas and work with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

## RESOURCES

**VIDEO RESOURCES**

- Three Musical Examples from Black Punk Bands
- "Hound Dog" by Big Mama Thornton and Buddy Guy
- "Tutti Frutti" by Little Richard
- "Politicians in My Eyes" by Death
- "Oh Bondage! Up Yours" by X-Ray Spex
- "Attitude" by Bad Brains

**HANDOUTS**

- Handout - Punk Word Map
- Handout - Station Activity Guide
- Station 1: Death
- Station 2: X-Ray Spex
- Station 3: Bad Brains

*Lesson created in collaboration with Krystal McRae.*