

Ritchie Valens

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did Ritchie Valens meld traditional Mexican music and Rock and Roll?

OVERVIEW

Ritchie Valens has become one of the most celebrated Rock and Roll musicians of the 1950s. His recording career lasted less than a year, cut short in February 1959, when he was killed in the same plane crash that took the lives of Rock and Roll star Buddy Holly and disc jockey/musician J.P. Richardson (better known as “The Big Bopper”).



Valens released only two singles during his lifetime. The second, featuring the love ballad “Donna,” soared to No. 2 on the Billboard Pop singles chart and established Valens as a rising star. Newspaper accounts of his death referred to him as “a young sensation... rapidly becoming one of the hottest singing talents in the country,” and even “the next Elvis Presley.”

But it was the B-side of that single, featuring the traditional Mexican wedding song “La Bamba,” that secured Valens’ legacy. The lyrics of the song were entirely in Spanish, sung over a tune that would have been immediately recognizable to most Mexican-Americans. Born Richard Valenzuela to a Mexican family in Southern California, Valens had played the song growing up and with various bands at school. His biographer reports that he may have been reluctant to record a Rock and Roll version of the song, both because he thought it might be disrespectful to the original and because he didn’t speak Spanish very well. But his recording, driven by Latin percussion, enjoyed commercial success—particularly for a single’s B-side—cracking the Top 40 and peaking at no. 22.

In this lesson, students will compare Valens’ version of “La Bamba” to a traditional version of the song, and examine how Valens was able to successfully incorporate a Latin feel into a mainstream Rock and Roll recording. They will further evaluate why the song became influential, paving the way for later artists, and how it illustrates Rock and Roll’s capacity to absorb multiple influences and redefine itself.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- Ritchie Valens' role as a Rock and Roll pioneer
- The origins of Valens' "La Bamba" as a traditional Mexican folk-dance song or huapango
- Highlights of the brief career of Valens, who died at age 17 in the same plane crash that killed Buddy Holly, in 1959

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE

- Students will be able to explain Ritchie Valens' contribution to Rock and Roll by comparing the traditional Mexican song "La Bamba" to Valens' Rock and Roll version.

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Tell students that they will be watching a short video featuring three musicians of Native American heritage. Play clip **Fitting In**. Ask students:
 - What role did each musicians' ancestral heritage play in their work as a musician? Did it play different roles or the same role?
 - How did each musician describe the impact of their heritage on their musical career? Which of them described their Native American heritage as a motivation for their music?
 - Is there another artist you know of who you feel was inspired by their heritage? How do you know? (For example, students might name Bruno Mars, Jennifer Lopez, Rihanna, or Bob Marley.)
2. **Optional:** If the teacher feels comfortable, they can share the ways their own heritage might have shaped them, and ask students volunteers to discuss their heritage.

PROCEDURE:

1. Divide students into pairs. Distribute **Handout 1 - Ritchie Valens Biography** to each pair.
2. Instruct pairs to read the handout aloud to each other, alternating by paragraph. Each student should follow along as his/her partner reads, underlining key words and phrases.
3. After all groups have finished reading the passage, discuss the following:
 - At the time of his death, what kind of music was Valens best known for? Who appears to have been his primary audience?
 - Why do you think he recorded under the name Valens rather than Valenzuela?
4. Play the excerpt from the song "**Donna**." Ask students:

- How would you describe the style of the song?
 - Whom do you think the song was popular with? (*Refer students back to the reading and the fact that “Donna” was Valens’ biggest chart hit.*)
5. Distribute **Handout 2 - “La Bamba” Listening Template** to students. Explain that you will play two song clips, and that as they listen they should fill in as many parts of the listening template as they can.
 6. Play the short video excerpt of the traditional version of **“La Bamba.”**
 7. Ask for volunteers to share what they wrote on the template, particularly about instrumentation, vocal style, lyrics, language, tempo, and mood.
 8. Distribute **Handout 3 - “La Bamba”** to each pair. Have students read it to each other as they did with the first handout.
 9. After all groups have finished reading the passage, discuss the following:
 - What kind of song is “La Bamba”? Where was it traditionally performed?
 - What do the lyrics of the song suggest about its purpose?
 - Where might Ritchie Valens have heard this song?
 - Why might Valens have started playing this song as a teenager?
 - Based on what you know about Valens, are you surprised that he decided to record a version of this song? Why or why not?
 - Why might Valens have been reluctant to record the song? Why might he have wanted to record the song?
10. Play the Valens version of **“La Bamba.”**
 11. Ask students to record their observations on the listening template.
 12. Discuss:
 - Is the song recognizable as the same song played in the traditional version? Why or why not? What about the two versions is similar?
 - What are the major differences between Valens’ version and the traditional version? (Be sure to emphasize the guitar line and the strong beat.)
 - Would you describe Valens’ version as a Rock and Roll record? Why or why not?
 - How does the song combine elements of the traditional song with Rock and Roll?
 - What do you think Valens was trying to express when he recorded this song?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Ask students:
 - At the time of his death, Valens was known as a teenage Rock and Roller in the style of Elvis Presley, yet today he is best remembered for “La Bamba.” What do you think accounts for this?
 - “La Bamba” is included on Rolling Stone’s list of the “500 Greatest Songs of All Time” (at No. 354). Why do you think the song is regarded in this way? What has made it so influential?

- Do you think Valens would record under the name “Valens” or “Valenzuela” if he were still alive?
- What does the success of “La Bamba” suggest about the ability of Rock and Roll to absorb different musical influences? How has this ability helped Rock and Roll expand its audience?
- Can you think of other influences absorbed by Rock and Roll? (*Note: Help the students consider how Rock and Roll has absorbed Country, Hip Hop, Folk, or any other genre that comes to mind.*)

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. **Writing Prompt:** Describe how Ritchie Valens merged Rock and Roll with traditional Mexican music.
2. **Writing prompt:** Imagine that you are Ritchie Valens, and that you have been able to read about the success of your recording of “La Bamba” and its influence on Rock and Roll. Write a journal entry in which you describe your reaction to the success of the song . Are you surprised? Is this something you set out to do? How do you feel about being thought of in this way? Be sure to make specific reference to sources discussed in this lesson.
3. Have students read the Rock’s Backpages article “Chicano Rock,” by Bill Millar. Have them research one of the artists mentioned in the piece and write several paragraphs comparing that artist’s music and career to Ritchie Valens’.
4. The band Los Lobos covered “La Bamba” for the 1987 biopic about Ritchie Valens, also entitled *La Bamba*. Their version reached no. 1 on the Pop chart in the United States. Ask students to compare Los Lobos’ version both to the traditional version and to Valens’ version.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading

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 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Reading 3: Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a 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.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing

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.

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.

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 Language

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.

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.

NATIONAL CURRICULUM STANDARDS FOR 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 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

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

Core Music Standard: Responding

Select: Choose music appropriate for a specific purpose or context.

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.

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. performers' expressive intent.

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

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

- *Rumble*: “Fitting In”
- Ritchie Valens - “La Bamba”
- Conjunto Villa del Mar - “La Bamba”

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1 - Ritchie Valence Biography
- Handout 2 - “La Bamba” Listening Template
- Handout 3 - “La Bamba”

Lesson Materials



Handout 1 - Ritchie Valens Biography



Richard Steven Valenzuela was born into a Mexican-American family in Los Angeles, California, in May 1941. His parents struggled to make a living, though they were able to find temporary work in a nearby arms factory during World War II. While the Pacoima section of Los Angeles in which Valenzuela was raised had a strong Latinx community, it was also one of the few communities in Southern California that had an integrated population of whites, blacks, and Asian-Americans. Though Valenzuela spoke some Spanish, by most accounts English was his primary language.

Valenzuela took up the guitar at a young age, and by the time he was a teenager had gained a local following, performing at parties and in local clubs. At 16, he joined a band called the Silhouettes, and caught the attention of a Hollywood music producer, Bob Keene, who owned a small label called Del-Fi Records. Valenzuela signed a recording contract with Keene shortly after his 17th birthday, and soon began recording under the name Ritchie Valens.

Valens released only two singles during his lifetime. The first, “Come On, Let’s Go,” was a modest hit. His second single, the love ballad “Donna,” reached No. 2 on the Billboard pop chart. The B-side of the single was “La Bamba,” whose lyrics were entirely in Spanish. “La Bamba” reached No. 22.

On February 3, 1959, a few months before his 18th birthday, Valens was killed in the notorious plane crash that also took the lives of Rock and Roll star Buddy Holly and singer/disc jockey J.P. Richardson, a.k.a. the Big Bopper. One newspaper account of the accident referred to Valens as “a recording star billed as the next Elvis Presley” and noted that “Valens, a young sensation from Pacoima, Calif., was rapidly becoming one of the hottest singing talents in the country.” A Hollywood film about his life, *La Bamba*, was released in 1987, and in 2001, Ritchie Valens was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Handout 2 - “La Bamba” Listening Template

	Version 1: Traditional	Version 2: Ritchie Valens, 1958
Instrumentation What instruments do you hear? Which are emphasized? In what order do you hear them?		
Vocals What is the style of singing? How would you describe the singer’s voice?		
Mood What kind of mood does the song create? How does it make you feel?		
Tempo Is the song fast, slow, or something in between?		
Beat/Percussion Does the song have a strong beat? Does it make you want to move in some way?		
Lyrics What language are they in? Can they be easily understood? What basic ideas do they convey?		
Sounds Like Does the song remind you of any other songs you’ve heard? Be specific.		

Handout 3 - “La Bamba”

“‘La Bamba’ is one of the few songs at the fiber of Mexican folklore. Traditionally a wedding dance from the region of Veracruz, it is often performed to this day even at weddings north of the border. The origin of the word ‘bamba’ is African, meaning ‘wood’ ... it referred to what the dancers originally performed upon, emphasizing footwork that showed a heavy Spanish influence. The highlight of the dance would be one solo couple tying a ribbon, using just their feet, to symbolize unity. The song itself is an old huapango, a Mexican song consisting of nonsense verses, which usually have undertoned meanings, often private in context.

“When the traditional dance is not performed at a wedding, often the band will play ‘La Bamba’ in a more popular vein, changing the original 6/8 tempo to 4/4 time. The popular rendition has been performed in America since World War II, yet in spite of all the popular Latin songs that became renowned in the 30’s and 40’s, ‘La Bamba’ was apparently not successfully recorded until 1958, with Ritchie Valens’ version.

“Ritchie’s relationship to ‘La Bamba’ goes back to at least Pacoima Junior High, where both students and teachers remembered his playing it. Ritchie in return learned it from Richard ‘Dickie’ Cota, his cousin, who supposedly played many of the familiar riffs and chords in similar fashion.

“[Record producer Bob] Keane maintained that Ritchie did not initially want to record ‘La Bamba’ because, as Keane said, ‘Ritchie felt it would demean his culture. It was a national folk song and he was afraid it would be exploiting his ethnic music. He was funny that way.’ But Keane also mentioned that Ritchie may have been following the feelings of his mother about commercially recording ‘La Bamba.’

Another problem was Ritchie’s Spanish. He may have been reluctant to record the song because of his Spanish. ‘Ritchie had an accent when he sang “La Bamba,”’ said [his half brother Robert] Morales. ‘The words were mispronounced. Keane was behind him whispering the words to him! But I liked the way Ritchie played it.’”

—adapted from *Ritchie Valens: The First Latino Rocker*, by Beverly Mendheim

Lyrics (in Spanish)	Lyrics (in English)
Para bailar La Bamba Para bailar La Bamba Se necessita una poca de gracia Una poca de gracia Para mi, para ti, ay arriba, ay arriba Ay, arriba arriba Por ti sere, por ti sere, por ti sere	To dance La Bamba To dance La Bamba You need a little grace A little bit of grace For me, for you, ah up, ah up Ah, faster, faster For you I will be, for you I will be, for you I will be
Yo no soy marinero Yo no soy marinero, soy capitan Soy capitan, soy capitan Bamba, bamba Bamba, bamba Bamba, bamba, bam	I am not a sailor I am not a sailor, I am a captain I am a captain, I am a captain Bamba, bamba Bamba, bamba Bamba, bamba, bam