

Singer-Songwriters and the Environmental Movement

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did the singer-songwriters of the 1960s and 70s address the concerns of the environmental movement?

OVERVIEW

*We are stardust
We are golden
And we've got to get ourselves
Back to the garden*

— Joni Mitchell, “Woodstock” (1970)



Photograph: Joe Mabel

In this lesson, students will analyze a series of songs articulating a connection to nature and the environment – a longing to “get ourselves back to the garden” – and examine the ways in which they reflect a growing attention to environmental issues in American culture.

In 1962, marine biologist Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, a chilling account of the damage done to the environment by pollution, particularly in the form of chemicals and pesticides. Eight years later, on the first “Earth Day,” Americans joined in protests over the degradation of the country’s air and water, launching an environmental movement that continues today.

Silent Spring introduced environmental concerns to new audiences, leading to a strengthened environmental movement. But well before the publication of Carson’s book, many Americans were already intimately familiar with the dangers of pollution and the extraction of resources. Poor Americans, people of color, and immigrants have regularly worked in close proximity to dangerous chemicals or other pollutants. For centuries, indigenous people have witnessed the desecration of the environment, from the eradication of the buffalo to the pollution of waterways to the strip mining of mountains considered sacred. Songs created by these communities that address such experiences and concerns have long been part of the American musical landscape.

In part thanks to the publication of *Silent Spring*, environmentally-minded songs began to become commercially popular in the 1960s. In 1962, Buffy Sainte-Marie released the song “Now That the Buffalo’s Gone,” which protested the U.S. Government’s treatment of both Native Americans and the environment. While the song did not make the charts, it was widely influential in the Greenwich Village folk music scene which went on to inform the Folk music genre.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, some of the country’s most well-known singer songwriters began following Sainte-Marie’s lead. Some made assertive statements about protecting the land from the ravages of corporate greed: as Jackson Browne sang in “Before the Deluge,” “Some of

them were angry at the way the earth was abused/By the men who learned how to forge her beauty into power.” In “Big Yellow Taxi,” Joni Mitchell lamented that “They paved paradise and put up a parking lot,” and invoked a world where “They took all the trees / Put ‘em in a tree museum / And they charged the people a dollar and a half just to see ‘em.” Mitchell explicitly called attention to the insecticide DDT, a specific concern at the heart of *Silent Spring*. Marvin Gaye voiced his sorrow and concern for the polluting of the natural world with his 1971 hit single, “Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology),” singing, “Whoa, mercy, mercy me / Things ain’t what they used to be, no, no / Oil wasted on the oceans and upon our seas / Fish, full of mercury.”

At the same time, many Singer-Songwriters expressed a more general unease about America’s increasing urban sprawl and suburbanization, and a longing for a closer connection to the land. “In my mind I’m gone to Carolina / Can’t you see the sunshine / Can’t you just feel the moonshine,” sang James Taylor in “Carolina in My Mind.” In “After the Gold Rush,” Neil Young painted a portrait of “a fanfare blowin’ to the sun / That was floating on the breeze / Look at Mother Nature on the run in the 1970s.”

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The main ideas and historical importance of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), which detailed threats to the environment from pollution and the use of pesticides
- The events surrounding the celebration of the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970
- The growing attention of Singer-Songwriters in the late 1960s and early 1970s to themes relating to nature and the environment
- The musical contributions of such Singer-Songwriters as Joni Mitchell, Marvin Gaye, James Taylor, Neil Young, and Jackson Browne

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE

- Students will be able to understand how singer-songwriters from the 1960s to today have addressed environmental concerns in their music by analyzing lyrics, newspaper articles, and photographs.

ACTIVITIES

PREPARATION

1. Set up four listening stations around the room:

- Station 1: Joni Mitchell, “Big Yellow Taxi” (1970)
- Station 2: Marvin Gaye, “Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)” (1971)
- Station 2: Neil Young, “After the Gold Rush” (1970)

- Station 3: James Taylor, “Carolina in My Mind” (1968)
- Station 4: Jackson Browne, “Before the Deluge” (1974)

2. Make colored pencils, markers, or pens available to students.

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Display **Image 1, Environmental Protesters**. Ask students:

- Who might be the people in the picture?
- What are they doing? Where do they appear to be doing it?
- What props are they using?

2. Display **Image 2, Front Page of the Wisconsin State Journal, April 23, 1970**. Ask students:

- What does the main headline say? What news is this headline reporting?
- What is “Earth Day”? What might have people been protesting in the first Earth Day?

3. Inform students that the first Earth Day was on April 22, 1970, and that environmental protests were held all over the country. Earth Day continues to be commemorated every year.

PROCEDURE:

1. Distribute **Handout - Lesson Vocabulary**. As a class, go over the terms and people that will be introduced in the lesson.
2. Distribute **Handout - Excerpt from *Silent Spring* (Chunked Reading with Comprehension Questions)**. Individually or in groups, read and answer the questions on the handout. Then, go through the handout together as a class.
3. Play **Clip 1, “Woodstock.”** Then display **Image 3, Woodstock Lyrics**. (*If students are unfamiliar with Woodstock, briefly explain that it was a three-day music festival in 1969 that attracted almost half a million people. It was held on farmland owned by a man named Max Yasgur in Bethel, N.Y.*) Ask students:
 - What does Mitchell suggest happens when you “camp out on the land”?
 - What do you think Mitchell means when she says, “we’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden”?
 - Is the idea of “the garden” similar to Carson’s depiction of farmlands “where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings”? Why or why not?
 - According to the lyrics, what else would people do while they were at Yasgur’s farm? What does Mitchell seem to be suggesting about the connection between Rock and Roll and being back in the garden? How might these two together help “get my soul free”?
4. Distribute **Handout - Listening Station Activity**. Instruct students that, just as they analyzed “Woodstock” as a class, they will analyze a variety of other songs released around the

same period that also address environmental concerns. Encourage students to write their observations and answer questions in the handout as they attend each station.

- Station 1: Joni Mitchell, “Big Yellow Taxi” (1970)
- Station 2: Marvin Gaye, “Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)” (1971)
- Station 3: Neil Young, “After the Gold Rush” (1970)
- Station 4: James Taylor, “Carolina in My Mind” (1968)
- Station 5: Jackson Brown, “Before the Deluge” (1974)

5. Reconvene the class and discuss:

- Are there common themes to all four songs? If so, what are they?
- Are all the songs overtly about the environmental movement? Are some more explicit about threats to the environment than others? Do you think,

for example, that “Carolina in My Mind” is a song about the environmental movement? Why or why not? Does a song have to be explicitly about a historical event to reflect what is happening at the time it was written/performed? Why or why not?

- Remember that these performers are called “Singer-Songwriters” because they generally perform material that they themselves have written. Why do you think many Singer-Songwriters might have chosen to write about themes relating to nature and the environment in the late 1960s and early 1970s?
- Do these songs reflect the influence of *Silent Spring*? What specific evidence can you find in the songs to suggest that they do?
- Do these songs reflect the spirit of Earth Day and the idea of getting “back to the garden”? Cite specific evidence in your answer.
- If you had to pick one of these songs to be the theme song for Earth Day, which would it be and why?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Distribute **Handout - Illustrated Timeline Activity** to individual students or student groups. Ask students to complete the handout, and then present their handout to the rest of the class.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. **Writing Prompt:** How did the Singer-Songwriters of the late 1960s and early 70s reflect the concerns of the burgeoning environmental movement in their music? Be sure to discuss the influence of the publication of *Silent Spring* and the first Earth Day on the environmental movement in your answer.
2. Ask students to research the history of Earth Day since 1970. Have them identify songs by popular artists from later eras that reflect the concerns expressed on Earth Day. You may also wish to ask students to identify a current song that might be used as a theme for an upcoming Earth Day celebration in your school or classroom.



3. Have students engage in a creative writing exercise by writing their own song lyrics about the current state of the environment.

COLLEGE, CAREER, AND CIVIC LIFE (C3) SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

History

D2.His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.

D2.His.3.9-12. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.

D2.His.5.9-12. Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people's perspectives.

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

Students analyze important events and trends in the 1960s and 1970s.

5. Describe the dimensions of the energy crisis, the creation of a national energy policy, and the emergence of environmentalism (e.g., creation of the Environmental Protection Agency; Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*; disasters such as Love Canal, Three Mile Island, and the Exxon Valdez).(G, P, S)

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE FRAMEWORK STANDARDS

Topic 4: Defending democracy: the Cold War and civil rights at home [USII.T4]

8. Using primary and secondary sources, analyze the causes and course of one of the following social and political movements, including consideration of the role of protest, advocacy organizations, and active citizen participation.

- The environmental protection movement (e.g., the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*; the 1970 federal Clean Air Act; the 1972 Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act; the 1972 Federal Water Pollution Control Act and subsequent amendments)

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

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 7: Production, Distribution, and Consumption

Theme 8: Science, Technology, and Society

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Reading Literature Standards for Grades 11-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2 Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

College and Career Readiness Reading Information Text Standards for Grades 11-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in Federalist No. 10).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.6 Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness or beauty of the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 11-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.3 Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.



College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language for Grades 11-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.11-12.6 Acquire and use accurately 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 considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

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

- Neil Young - “After the Gold Rush”
- Joni Mitchell - “Woodstock”
- Jackson Browne - “Before the Deluge
- James Taylor - “Carolina In My Mind”
- Joni Mitchell - “Big Yellow Taxi”
- Marvin Gaye - “Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)”

HANDOUTS

- Handout - Lesson Vocabulary
- Handout - Excerpt from *Silent Spring* (Chunked Reading with Comprehension Questions)
- Handout - Illustrated Timeline Activity
- Handout - Listening Station Activity