

## “Funny”: Tori Kelly, Fame, and Judgement

### OVERVIEW

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How might Tori Kelly’s song “Funny” speak to the potential pitfalls of “superstardom,” and how does it relate to past songs written about the subject?

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“Funny,” a song from the debut album of singer, guitarist, and composer Tori Kelly, explores the potential negatives of mass recognition and success. In the lyrics, Kelly questions the impetus that drives many to “make it”:



Photo: Disney/ABC Television Group

*It’s so easy to lose all the meaning of who you are  
What is your definition of a true superstar?  
Is it beauty? Is it money? Is it power? Is it fame?  
Are you in it for the glory? What’s the purpose? What’s the gain?*

Tori Kelly was 22 when “Funny” was released on her debut *Unbreakable Smile* album. While her search for personal meaning might be a natural part of young adulthood, Kelly’s exploration of the underbelly of mainstream recognition seems quite mature, and perhaps reflects her distinctly 21st-century path to success.

Before she was a teen, Kelly had competed in a host of televised singing competitions, from *Star Search* to *America’s Most Talented Kids* to *American Idol*, where Simon Cowell described her voice as “almost annoying.” Kelly advanced toward the finish line but never emerged the final victor in any of the contests. Undeterred, at 14 she began posting homemade YouTube videos, and soon found a receptive online audience. By the time Kelly signed with Capitol Records in 2013, she was a seasoned 21-year-old musician who had navigated her way toward success, mostly on her own. With close to a decade of experience with an often unforgiving music industry, one can understand how Kelly, barely an adult, could pen a song that asks “What’s the purpose? What’s the gain?”

But Kelly is not alone in interrogating the price of “stardom.” Her questions in fact reflect a trope in popular music that dates as far back as the 1920s, when the word “stardom” first appeared.



## OVERVIEW (CONTINUED)

In this lesson, students will consider how Kelly's "Funny" reflects her present-day experience while still speaking to the broader issues of success and stardom. Students will view a clip of Kelly being harshly judged by an American Idol panel, and discuss how the experience might be reflected in her current work. Students will then watch a clip of The Beatles at the height of "Beatlemania," and consider how Kelly's lyrics might express what The Beatles were experiencing a half-century earlier. Finally, students will compare "Funny" with David Bowie's "Fame," exploring the similarities and differences between their critiques of pop culture success. An included extension activity encourages students to create their own lyrics about fame and judgement.

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- About the success and failures Tori Kelly experienced as a young adult
- About the rise of the concept of "stardom" in the United States
- How and why songs written generations apart still have similar narrative themes.

### 2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to discuss the possible drawbacks to achieving celebrity status and monetary wealth, and cite popular songs that expressed such ideas.

## ACTIVITIES

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Ask students:

- How would you define the term, "superstar"? (*Note: Dictionary.com defines the term as, "a person, as a performer or athlete, who enjoys wide recognition... and is eagerly sought after for his or her services."*)

2. Tell your students that the term "superstar" came into use only in the 1920s, then ask:

- Why do you think the term "superstar" is less than a century old? What was happening in the 1920s that might have created the first "superstars"? (*Encourage students to consider the rise of mass media and the national entertainment industry.*)
- Would you want to be a "superstar"? What do you think might be the benefits or the drawbacks of "superstardom"? (*Encourage students to consider how "superstardom" might impact an individual's daily life.*)



3. Show students Clip 1, "Tori Kelly on American Idol, 2010," and ask:

- How do you think this experience felt to Kelly? Why?
- What are all the different ways you hear Kelly being evaluated by the judges? Do they agree? How do they express their disagreement? (*Encourage students to recognize that while the judges evaluate her singing, they also spend quite a bit of time talking about how she looks, and what they perceive as her attitude. In addition to calling her voice "almost annoying," Simon Cowell responds to another judge's praise of her positive demeanor by saying, "you're like a human orange."*)
- In what ways do you think a "superstar" might be judged on a daily basis? How might these judgements affect that person?

### PROCEDURE:

1. Show students Clip 2, "Beatlemania," from the movie *The Beatles - Eight Days A Week*. Then ask:

- How do you think "Beatlemania" might have affected the Beatles' daily lives?
- How do you think "superstardom" on this level might change a person's personality, both for better or worse?

2. Distribute Handout 1 - Lyrics: "Funny" and "Fame." Then, show the music video to the Tori Kelly song "Funny," and have students follow the lyrics. (*Note: this link will open to the official video on youtube we suggest preloading the video before class to avoid unwanted advertising in the classroom.*) Then ask:

- Are there any lyrics that stand out to you? Why? How might you see Kelly's warnings about the perils of success playing out in the "real" world?
- How do you think Kelly's American Idol appearance might have informed her lyrics on "Funny"?

- Thinking back to the "Beatlemania" video, how might you apply Kelly's words to their experience?

- Specifically, how might you relate the following lines to what you know of the Beatles' or Kelly's experiences?

a. "The same ones that chose you are the same ones that own you"

b. "Surrounded by faces, no one to call"

c. "You say it's fine but deep inside you wish you could escape"

3. Now play audio or video to David Bowie's "Fame" and have students follow the lyrics. (*Because there is no official legal version of "Fame," the teacher will need to supply this song.*) Then ask:

- In what ways might Bowie express a similar sentiment to Kelly, but from a different perspective? (Encourage students to recognize that while Kelly focuses on the effect of a massive, adoring audience, Bowie addresses the changes in the individual who experiences fame.)



- What similarities do you find in the lyrics to “Funny” and “Fame”? What differences do you notice?

## SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Ask students:

- “Beatlemania” occurred in 1964, Bowie released “Fame” in 1975, and Tori Kelly’s “Funny” is from 2015. In what ways do you think “superstardom” might have changed? In what ways might it be the same? (*Encourage students to think about how media has changed over the past half century, and whether perceptions of what it means to be a star have changed.*)
- All of the above examples of “superstardom” are from the music industry. Can you think of any other industries in which similar patterns of fame exist? How are they similar or different to the music industry?

## EXTENSION ACTIVITY

1. **Composing your own ode to fame:** Pick one or two of your favorite lines of lyrics from any of the songs featured in this lesson, then use them as part of a new song for which you compose the rest of the lyrics. The song can be about fame, judgement, or any subject you choose.

## 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 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.

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### 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 Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

## **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.

## **NEW JERSEY STATE LEARNING STANDARDS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS**

### *Reading*

NJSLSA.R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences and relevant connections from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

NJSLSA.R6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

NJSLSA.R8: 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.

NJSLSA.R9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

### *Writing*

NJSLSA.W1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

NJSLSA.W7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects, utilizing an inquiry-based research process, based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.



NJSLSA.W9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

## RESOURCES

### VIDEO RESOURCES

- "Tori Kelly on American Idol"
- *The Beatles - Eight Days A Week: "Beatlemania"*

### HANDOUTS

- Handout 1 - Lyrics to "Funny" and "Fame"