



SOUNDTRACKS

SONGS THAT DEFINED HISTORY

9/11: Country Music Responds

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did Country musicians' responses to the September 11th terrorist attacks speak to the feelings of the American people after the tragedy?

OVERVIEW

(Note: this lesson contains words and imagery that may be disturbing or offensive. Teacher discretion advised.)



Photo: Mike Rieger

On 9/11, The United States experienced the deadliest terrorist attack in its history. That morning, 19 terrorists hijacked four planes. Two planes were flown into the World Trade Center, one into the Pentagon, and one crashed near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, short of its target. Combined, the attacks killed nearly 3,000 people, wounded another 6,000, and caused the iconic “Twin Towers” of New York City’s World Trade Center to topple.

Reactions to the 9/11 attacks were complex, and, at times, even contradictory. Some citizens were stricken with grief, others consumed in anger. Some were filled with national pride, others paralyzed with horror. Some wanted time to grieve, others wanted immediate action. Some were simply too bewildered to contextualize the tragedy. Many felt some combination of all of the above.

In the CNN *Soundtracks* episode about September 11th, Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson cites songwriter Harlan Howard’s assertion that the core of country music is “three chords and the truth.” After 9/11, Country music truthfully represented the diversity of American reactions to the terrorist attacks. Some artists, like Alan Jackson, spoke for those Americans confused and grieved by the incident. Others, like Brooks and Dunn, responded with patriotism, pride, and a reassurance sense of American exceptionalism. Perhaps most famously, Toby Keith responded with anger.

In this lesson, students examine the lyrics and context surrounding three country songs related to the 9/11 attacks: Alan Jackson’s “Where Were You When the World Stopped Turning?” Brooks and Dunn’s “Only in America,” and Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue.” Through the lens of these songs, they consider ways Americans reacted to the tragedy of September 11th, and discuss whether some reactions might be more appropriate than others.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The significance of 9/11 as an historical event
- The response to 9/11 in the United States
- How music can speak to the collective emotions of people following tragedy

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE

- Students will be able to consider the diverse ways the American people responded to the terrorist of attacks of September 11th by examining the lyrics and context surrounding three country music songs.

ACTIVITIES

ENTRY TICKET ACTIVITY

1. Ask your parents, guardians, or caregivers the following questions, taking notes of their responses:
 - Do you remember where you were on 9/11?
 - Do you remember how you felt the day of 9/11, and the days following?
 - What other things do you remember most during that time period?

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Have students report on their interviews regarding 9/11.
2. Ask students:
 - What do you know about 9/11?
 - What happened on that date, and why is it commemorated every year?
3. Play **Clip 1, Photos from Ground Zero**, which shows the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center. Ask students:
 - Imagine something similar happened recently in the area where you live. How do you think you might feel? Why? (*Take notes of student's reactions on the board.*)
 - Why might there be so many different reactions to this type of tragedy?

PROCEDURE:

1. Tell students that in this lesson they will be investigating how country musicians spoke to the wide variety of feelings Americans had following the 9/11 attacks. Pass out **Handout 1 - Lyric Comparison** to each student.
2. Ask students to read silently or aloud the first song on the handout, Alan Jackson's "Where Were You When the World Stopped Turning?" Then ask students:
 - How would you summarize the message of this song?
 - Who might be the intended audience for this song? How do you know?
 - What kind of tone or emotion does Jackson convey in this song? What specific lines in the song gives you that impression?
 - How does Jackson portray himself in this song? What specific lines in the song give you that impression?
 - What effect might Alan Jackson be trying to achieve in writing a song that is almost entirely built from questions?
3. Play **Clip 2, "Where Were You When the World Stopped Turning?"** Ask students:
 - In the clip, Beville Dunkerley says that following 9/11, country musicians wrote songs expressing their own feelings. What lyrics in the handout do you think might most reflect Alan Jackson's feelings?
 - Dunkerley also argues that the song represents the "spirit and patriotism" of the American people. What about Alan Jackson's song might be read as being patriotic?
4. In the clip, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson refers to an old adage that "Country music is three chords and the truth." How might Alan Jackson be telling "the truth" in this song?
4. Ask students to turn to the table on the last page of Handout 1. Instruct them to fill out the "Where Were You When the World Stopped Turning?" portion of the chart with some notes, based on the class conversation.
5. Ask students to read, silently or aloud as a class, the lyrics to "Only in America," on the second page of the handout. Then ask students:
 - What is being described in this song?
 - What do you think this song's message might be? What lyrics lead you to this conclusion?
 - What kinds of people are being profiled in this song? Why might have the songwriters chosen to focus on these type of people? Was there a certain audience they were trying to reach out to?
 - What emotion do you feel is being conveyed in this song? What lyrics lead you to this conclusion?
6. Play **Clip 3, "Only in America."** Then ask students:
 - Was "Only in America" written in response to 9/11?
 - Why might have "Only in America" been an appropriate song to perform shortly after 9/11? How might the song have taken on new meaning following September 11th?

- What might Kix Brooks mean when he said the song became “sacred ground?”
 - In the clip, Ronnie Dunn mentions “Only in America” is an “apolitical song.” Looking at the lyrics in the handout, why might the song be considered universal or apolitical?
7. Ask students to again turn to the chart on the last page of Handout 1, and fill out the “Only in America” portion of the chart with some notes based on the class’s conversation.
8. Have students turn to the third page of the handout, and read the lyrics to Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue,” silently or aloud as a class. Then ask students:
- What is being described in this song?
 - What emotion do you feel is being conveyed in this song? What lyrics lead you to this conclusion?
 - What is this song advocating? What do you think Toby Keith’s intent is in this song?
 - What do you think this song’s message might be? What lyrics lead you to this conclusion?
- What kinds of people are being profiled in this song? Why might have the songwriters chosen to focus on these type of people? Was there a certain audience they were trying to reach out to?
9. Play **Clip 4, “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue.”** Ask students:
- How might this song be an effective “rallying cry,” as described by Dan Rather?
 - What about the lyrics or feeling of the song might lead people to consider it patriotic?
 - According to the clip, what kind of feelings did this song speak to?
 - In what ways might the song be considered “polarizing,” as Beville Dunkerley argues?
10. Ask students to again turn to the chart on the last page of Handout 1, and fill out the “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue” portion of the chart with some notes based on the class conversation.

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Have students look at the notes they took on the final page of the handout. Ask students:
- Did the three songs covered in class express different messages, or similar messages?
 - Did the songs express different emotions, or similar emotions?
 - How might have each of these songs spoken to the emotions people felt after 9/11?
 - Do you think one song’s message or emotional content is a more appropriate after 9/11 than others? Why?



EXTENSION ACTIVITY

1. Watch the entire of the Soundtracks September 11th episode at <https://www.cnn.com/shows/soundtracks>. Analyze another song featured in the episode as you did the songs discussed in class. Does this song represent the feelings people might have had after 9/11? In what way?
2. It has been said that tragedy can bring out the best and worst in people. Conduct archival research on the top news stories three months following the attacks on September 11th. Which stories arise that see, positive? Which are negative?

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 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, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Craft and Structure 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style 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 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.

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.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity 10: Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing

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

Research to Build and Present Knowledge 7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

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.

Language 2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

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.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in a word meaning.

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.

Comprehension & Collaboration 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

Presentation of Knowledge 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

NATIONAL CURRICULUM STANDARDS FOR 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 10: Civic Ideals and Practices

THE COLLABORATIVE FOR ACADEMIC, SOCIAL, AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING COMPETENCIES

Social Awareness

Perspective-taking

Empathy

Appreciating Diversity



Respect for Others

Responsible Decision Making

Analyzing situations

Solving problems

Evaluating

Reflecting

Ethical responsibility

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

- Photos from Ground Zero
- *Soundtracks* - "Where Were You When the World Stopped Turning?"
- *Soundtracks* - "Only in America"
- *Soundtracks* - "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue"

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1 - Lyric Comparison