

Third Wave: Women's Rights and Music in the 1990s

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What was Third Wave Feminism, why did it occur, and how did musicians address some of the movement's demands?

OVERVIEW

(Warning: This lesson contains strong language and depictions of sexual violence. It is intended for upper high school and early college students, and teacher discretion is advised.)



Photo: Bill Haber

In 1991, law professor Anita Hill appeared in front of the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee on the confirmation of Judge Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court. Before the committee, she testified that Thomas, her former boss, sexually harassed her in the workplace. The nationally televised hearings showed the harsh, humiliating, and dismissive treatment Hill—a black woman—received from a committee made up solely of white men. Judge Thomas was eventually confirmed to the Supreme Court, but the hearing reawakened a national discussion on sexual politics and the continued gender inequality in the United States. Reactions to Thomas' confirmation varied from elation to fury, especially amongst young women. The strong feelings that emerged from the Anita Hill case lead to the moment that is now referred to as “Third Wave Feminism.”

Third Wave Feminism was spearheaded by young, college-aged women, many of whom grew up with feminist mothers who fought for women's rights in the 1960s and 1970s. Feeling a growing need to draw awareness to unsolved issues, from sexual assault to equal pay, their form of activism was not like their mothers' generation. It was loud, raucous, and messy. Where second wave feminists tried to rally women around universal womanhood, Third Wavers recognized that feminism contained multitudes of intersections to address.

Just as in Second Wave Feminism, music became one of the primary ways to define and spread the demands of the Third Wave.

Inspired by the Punk rock “Do-It-Yourself” (DIY) ethos, in the early 1990s females in the Pacific Northwest picked up instruments and formed their own bands and scenes, refusing to let their music or their image be dictated by what men defined as good. Led by feminist artist Kathleen Hanna, Bikini Kill became the de facto head of the Riot Grrrl movement. With aggressively political topics, the band carved out a niche space in rock to reflect the ideals and

concerns young feminists of the '90s were embracing.

As political and well-intentioned as the feminism of Riot Grrrl was, however, it was criticized by some for centering primarily white and cisgender women. But other genres provided women of color with representations of empowerment and visibility. In Hip Hop, female rappers used their rhymes to speak about mistreatment by men, in and out of the industry, and to uplift women, especially black women. Rap trio Salt-N-Pepa found success with songs dedicated to openly talking about sex, gender roles, HIV/AIDS, and relationships. The proclaimed “First Ladies of Rap” even became the first female rap group to win the Grammy for Best Rap Performance by a Duo or Group.

Meanwhile, Tejano music, a genre originating in Texas and rooted in Mexican-American culture, saw the rise of Selena Quintanilla-Pérez in the 1980s and into the 1990s. While it included several female musicians, Tejano was mostly a male dominated genre. But Selena was able to breakthrough and achieve success. She sang about love and relationships, but outside of music, Selena became a fashion icon due to her curve hugging outfits that bared her midriff. She also was an entrepreneur who launched a fashion line, opened boutiques, signed a contract with Coca-Cola to be their spokesperson and did philanthropy work.

In this lesson, students will identify the origins of Third Wave Feminism and explore the diversity of the movement's demands, attitudes, and tactics by immersing themselves in three musical cultures from the 1990s: the Riot Grrrl punk rock scene exemplified by the band Bikini Kill, the female-fronted hip hop scene exemplified by Salt-N-Pepa, and the Tejano music sphere exemplified by Selena.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- About the Anita Hill testimony, and its continued significance
- About the development, goals, and tactics of Third Wave Feminism in the early 1990s
- How the music of Bikini Kill, Salt-N-Pepa, and Selena reflected the Women's Rights issues characteristic of Third Wave Feminism

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE

- Students will be able to trace Third Wave Feminism's goals, ideals, and attitudes by examining the work of women musicians in three musical scenes in the 1990s: Riot Grrrl, Hip Hop, and Tejano music.

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Ask students to write on a scratch piece of paper a list of political, social, and cultural accomplishments they think women have made in the past 100 years (entries could include the right to vote, female access to top corporate positions, etc.). Next, ask students to write a separate list of issues women continue to face today.
2. Ask students to share their answers, and discuss what issues facing women they feel have been overcome, and which are still in progress.

PROCEDURE:

1. Tell students they will be looking into issues women were confronting in the 1990s, which coalesced around the notion of “Third Wave Feminism.” Show **Image 1, Anita Hill before Congress** to the class. Before identifying the event in the photograph, ask students to take notes on what they notice. If needed, encourage students to think about the people in the photograph, how they look, their body positions, where they are located (the right side versus the left side of the image), what they are doing (speaking, taking pictures, etc.), and the space they are in.
 - What was at issue in the Anita Hill hearings? Why was she brought to testify before senate?
 - In what ways did some see the Anita Hill testimony as inherently unfair?
 - What was the result of the Anita Hill hearings?
2. Ask students to share their observations with the class. Then ask:
 - Where might the location of this photograph be?
 - What is occurring in this photograph? For those who might not know what is captured in this photograph, what conclusions can you draw based on the context clues from your notes?
 - Does anyone know what historic event is being captured according to this photograph?
3. Show **Clip 1, The Anita Hill Testimony**. Ask students:
 - How is Anita Hill being portrayed in this image? What statement might Coe be making in portraying Hill in this way?
 - How are the senators portrayed in the image?
 - How is the media portrayed in the image?
 - What else do you notice about this image?
 - Based on what you learned in the video, how might this art piece represent the feelings some Americans had about the Anita Hill hearings?
4. Display **Image 2, Thank You America (Anita Hill)** by Sue Coe (1991). Tell students that the image is by British-American illustrator Sue Coe, who made the piece in response to the trial. Ask students:
 - How is Anita Hill being portrayed in this image? What statement might Coe be making in portraying Hill in this way?
 - How are the senators portrayed in the image?
 - How is the media portrayed in the image?
 - What else do you notice about this image?
 - Based on what you learned in the video, how might this art piece represent the feelings some Americans had about the Anita Hill hearings?

5. Pass out **Handout 1 - Rebecca Walker, "I Am the Third Wave."** Ask students to read the article, highlighting and taking notes of what they find interesting. Ask students:
- How did the Anita Hill hearing affect the Walker? For her, what were the hearings about?
 - For Walker, what message did Clarence Thomas's promotion to the Supreme Court send?
 - What sort of issues do women continue to confront, according to this essay?
 - The phrase "The personal is political" was commonly used during the "Second Wave" feminist movement in the 1960s and 70s. How does Rebecca Walker mix the personal with the political in this article?
 - This article was first published in *Ms. Magazine*, which was a product of the second wave feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s. What message do you think Walker is sending the readers of this magazine?
 - In the clip you watched, Robin Morgan states that many women involved in Third Wave Feminism often had feminist mothers, but felt the accomplishments of past feminist movements were not "filtering into their lives," which made them "angry." Do you think Rebecca Walker's essay reflects this argument? Why or why not?
6. Tell students they will now be doing a station activity to examine how musicians addressed issues related to Third Wave Feminism. Split students into groups, and assign or let them choose one of the three following musical scenes and genres to examine. Teachers

can either create physical stations for each genre, complete with handouts and means to access the videos, or hand out materials to individual groups, and let them access the videos through personal devices. Genres include:

- **Riot Grrrl/Bikini Kill**
 - Video Clip
 - Document Set
 - **Hip Hop/Salt-N-Pepa**
 - Video Clip
 - Document Set
 - **Tejano/Selena**
 - Video Clip
 - Document Set
7. Display **Image 3, Inquiry Question**, on the board, telling students to use the materials at their station to address the question.
8. After the groups have investigated each musician/scene, ask them to present their findings and thoughts on that scene with the rest of the class.

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Ask students:
 - Can you think of any contemporary musicians who may have been inspired by one of the musicians discussed in class?
 - Can you think of any contemporary musicians who addresses similar issues as Bikini Kill, Salt-N-Pepa, or Selena? Who?
 - Do the issues articulated or characteristic in the careers of Bikini Kill, Salt-N-Pepa, and Selena persist today? Are there any additional issues current musicians are speaking out against that were not addressed by the three artists covered in class?
2. Play **Clip 2, Harvard Law Students Respond to the Anita Hill Testimony**, and encourage students to take notes throughout. Ask students:
 - Which opinions in the clip did you find particularly interesting? Why?
 - Was there an opinion you found yourself most in agreement with? Which opinions did you disagree with? Why did you feel this way?
 - What issues do the law students bring up in this video that you feel still affect women today?
 - Are there any issues the students bring up that you feel are no longer pertinent today?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

1. Writing Prompt: Read Laina Dawes' "Why I Was Never A Riot Grrrl." Having learned about Third Wave feminism's pitfalls, write a paragraph about the ways you see change in the women's rights protest movement today. How could it be better?
2. Make a short 3-4 page 'zine that showcases your personality, the things you like, and the beliefs you stand for.
3. Create a playlist of ten songs that exemplify some of the beliefs associated with Third Wave Feminism.
4. Research other female rappers of the 1990s. Choose one and explain how their music, beliefs, image, fashion, etc. connect to ideas of Third Wave Feminism.
5. Read Lauren Kaori Gurley's "The Many Afterlives of Selena" and Amanda Sabater's "How Selena Would Have Influenced Today's Culture If She Were Here," and write a two page summary on the legacy of Selena.

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.

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.

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 (K-12) (Extension Activities Only)

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.

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.

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.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge 8: Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.

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.

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. 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 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices

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

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.

Core Music Standard: Responding

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding of evidence and rhetoric.



RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- Soundtracks - The Anita Hill Testimony
- Soundtracks - Riot Grrrl/Bikini Kill
- Soundtracks - Hip Hop/Salt-n-Pepa
- Harvard Law Students Respond to the Anita Hill Testimony

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1 - Rebecca Walker, "I Am The Third Wave"
- Riot Grrl Document Set
- Hip Hop Document Set
- Tejano Document Set