

Art, Music, and the AIDS Epidemic

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did the LGBTQ+ community creatively respond to the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s, and protest government inaction in addressing the epidemic?

OVERVIEW

On June 5, 1981, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) published a report detailing the cases of five previously healthy young men in Los Angeles who had contracted the rare lung infection *Pneumocystis carinii*, in addition to a variety of other unusual infections. That same day, a dermatologist in New York reported an increased prevalence of *Kaposi's Sarcoma*, another extremely rare ailment, in New York and California. After the CDC's report was picked up by the mainstream press, the agency was inundated by reports of similar cases nationwide, each detailing rare diseases brought on by greatly weakened immune systems. The following year, the CDC gave this emerging symptom a name: Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, or, as it became most widely known, AIDS. In 1983, the retrovirus that causes the condition was discovered, and a few years later it was termed human immunodeficiency virus, or HIV. By the time HIV was identified, over 1,450 cases of AIDS had been reported, and 558 individuals had died.

HIV is transferred through blood, semen, pre-seminal fluids, amniotic fluid, vaginal fluids, and breast milk. The virus takes over and replicates infected CD4 t-cells, an integral component of the body's immune system. With a weakened immune system, people living with HIV are susceptible to infections that healthy people rarely contract—a symptom known as AIDS. Today, there is no cure for AIDS, but with proper medical treatment, HIV can be suppressed to the point that the immune system can operate normally.

HIV doesn't discriminate. But because the condition happened to have first affected gay men in the United States, it was quickly stigmatized. Mainstream newspapers initially began describing AIDS as "gay cancer," and for the first few years of the epidemic, the condition was largely ignored—even laughed off—by decisionmakers and people in power. Because the infection was sexually transmitted, and because it initially affected gay men, it was quickly painted by politicians like Pat Buchanan as a punishment for sin and "unnatural" proclivities. This stigmatization provided further cause for the Reagan administration, already opposed to increases in domestic spending, to limit funding for research.



Image: ACT UP

Meanwhile, the epidemic was devastating the LGBTQ+ community. As Village People member Felipe Rose expressed in the Stonewall episode of *Soundtracks*, “I couldn’t speak, physically speak, because I had so many friends passing away.” In the same episode, activist David Mixner noted he lost 300 friends in a single decade.

In the face of so much indifference at the governmental level, many in the LGBTQ+ community turned to music and art as a means of communal solidarity and political advocacy. Discos became sites of resistance both to AIDS and its stigmatization, a place where the marginalized LGBTQ+ community could feel alive in the face of the epidemic through the collective joy of dancing to songs such as Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive.”

Art became a form of resistance and a way to express anger towards the government’s neglect of the ongoing AIDS crisis. Many artists also became activists, participating in demonstrations, and using their work to condemn those in government, educate the public about HIV/AIDS, and memorialize those they lost to AIDS-related complications. Some artists would unfortunately pass from the illness.

In this lesson, students examine the first decade of the AIDS epidemic from a variety of vantage points: from the scientists who worked to discover the cause of the epidemic to the public health officials who developed methods of treatment to the activists who demanded that the nation pay attention. Then, students examine how the LGBTQ+ community responded to the epidemic through music and art by watching clips from CNN *Soundtracks* and conducting a gallery walk featuring artists whose lives were directly impacted by the AIDS crisis.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The biological characteristics of HIV and AIDS
- The history of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s
- How the Reagan and Bush administration responded to the AIDS crisis, and criticisms of their response
- How the LGTBQ+ community used music and visual art to address the AIDS crisis
- The current state of the AIDS/HIV epidemic

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE

- Students will be able to consider the medical, social, scientific, political, and cultural significance of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s by examining statistics, timelines, and primary source documents, in addition to the music and art of the period.

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Ask students:
 - What do you know about HIV and AIDS? What is it, and what are its effects?
 - Where did you learn about AIDS?
2. Play students the video from AVERT.org, “**What is HIV?**” (<https://www.avert.org/about-hiv-aids/what-hiv-aids>) (*Note: this link will open to YouTube, we suggest loading the video before class to avoid showing advertising during class.*) Ask students:
 - What is HIV? What does it stand for?
 - How does HIV operate? How does it affect the body?
 - Is there a cure for HIV? Can it be treated?
3. Display **Image 1, Ways of Transmitting HIV**. Ask students:
 - Based on the image above, how is HIV spread? Can it be spread through the air, water, or food?
 - What preventative measures can be taken to avoid getting HIV?

PROCEDURE:

1. Tell students that they will be examining the early history of the HIV/AIDS, before it could be diagnosed and treated, and how musicians and artists responded to the epidemic. Split students into at least five groups. Tell students that each group will be given a document set that presents the AIDS crisis from a particular perspective. Student groups are to examine the document set and answer the questions at the beginning of the packet. Encourage them to be prepared to share their answers with the rest of the class. Provide each group with one of the following handouts:
 - AIDS and Scientific Research
 - AIDS and Public Health
 - AIDS and Advocacy
 - AIDS in the Media
 - The Federal Response to AIDS
2. Ask each student group to share their answers with the class.
3. Tell students they will now look at what role music and art played for communities experiencing the AIDS epidemic. Show **Clip 1, “Music During the AIDS Crisis.”** Ask students:
 - How did the people in the beginning of the clip describe their experience with the

AIDS epidemic?

- Did the people in the clip feel that American society and the United States government was concerned about the AIDS epidemic? Why or why not?
 - According to the clip, what various roles did music and dancing play for the LGBTQ+ community during the AIDS epidemic?
 - What was the significance of the Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive?”
 - What might Urvashi Vaid mean when she says “culture is a strategy of resistance and survival?”
4. Place the **Gallery Walk** images around the classroom. (*Note: the included bios of each of the artists should be placed adjacent to the images of their work.*) Allow students time to walk throughout the classroom to examine the work. Then ask students:
 - Which piece or artists particularly stood out to you? Why?
 - What are some of the feelings conveyed in these works? Did you find any of the works particularly powerful in this regard?
 - In what ways did these artists respond to the AIDS epidemic through their work?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Pass out **Handout 1 - Introducing Kia LaBeija** to students.
2. After examining the handout, ask students:
 - How is living with HIV represented in LaBeija’s photography? How might her work educate people about HIV and AIDS?
 - LaBeija was born several decades after the artists featured in the Gallery Walk, at a time when AIDS-related protests were first gaining national attention. How might her experiences differ from these earlier artists? Do you see any differences between her work and the work seen in the gallery walk?
 - In an interview, LaBeija stated that the story of AIDS was a “white, gay man’s story” and that when invited to panels, she’s often the “only person of color, the only woman and, of course, the only person on the panel born with HIV.” How might LaBeija’s work contribute to the narrative of how HIV and AIDS have been and are depicted?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

1. Explore the website, POZ.com, which is a publication for those living with and affected by HIV/AIDS. Write a summary explaining a few of the issues involved in the ongoing AIDS crisis of today?



2. Examine the website of one of the following historic organizations that addressed the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s. Summarize what sorts of issues and projects they are working on today.
- AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power - <https://actupny.com/>
 - The Foundation for AIDS Research - <https://www.amfar.org/>
 - The Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation <https://elizabethtayloraidsfoundation.org/>
 - Lambda Legal - <https://www.lambdalegal.org/>
 - National Minority AIDS Council - <http://www.nmac.org/>
 - Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation - <http://www.pedaids.org/>
 - Visual AIDS Artists Caucus - <https://visualaids.org/>
 - National Gay and Lesbian Task Force - <https://www.thetaskforce.org/>

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 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 (K-12)

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 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 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.

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

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 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 8: Science, Technology, and Society

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.

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

Social Awareness

- Perspective-Taking
- Empathy
- Respect for Others

Self-Management

- Impulse Control

Relationship Skills

- Communication
- Teamwork



RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- *CNN Soundtracks* - Music During the AIDS Crisis

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1 - Introducing Kia LaBeija
- Document Set: AIDS Activism and Advocacy
- Document Set: AIDS and Public Health
- Document Set: AIDS and Scientific Research
- Document Set: AIDS and the Media
- Document Set: The Federal Response to AIDS
- Gallery Walk Activity