

## Women's Perspectives in Country and Tejano Music

### OVERVIEW

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did female Country and Tejano artists approach the issues of feminism and Women's Rights in the late 20th century?

#### OVERVIEW

*In this lesson, students will examine the lyrics and context surrounding four Country and Tejano songs about feminist issues: Loretta Lynn's "The Pill," Dolly Parton's "9 To 5," Selena's "Si Una Vez," and the Dixie Chicks' "Not Ready to Make Nice." Through the lens of these artists and these songs, students will consider the ways Women's Rights expanded over the latter half of the 20th century in America, and discuss the ways in which gender equity is still a work in progress.*



Photo: Bill Preston

The second half of the 20th century brought in waves of change for women. New freedoms such as the availability of oral contraceptives and those offered by the Equal Rights Amendment were fought for and won. Times were changing rapidly, and American's varied perspectives on these cultural shifts were reflected in the music of the period.

Country and Tejano music often articulated the progressive social gains and political fights women were engaging in during the late 20th and early 21st century. In 1975, Loretta Lynn made waves with "The Pill," a song celebrating the newfound freedoms granted women by oral contraception. In 1980, Dolly Parton's "9 to 5" became an anthem protesting the exploitation and harassment of women in the workplace. In the early 1990s, Selena almost singlehandedly took over the previously male-dominated genre of Tejano. And in 2003, the Dixie Chicks created controversy by publicly expressing their opinions of the Iraq War.

Each of the above songs provides a window into the moment in which they were created, and the experiences and feelings of those who experienced them. Looking through that window, students can use these songs to explore the ongoing struggle for gender equity within U.S. politics, culture, and history.

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The significance of the Women's Rights movement as an historical event
- The response to the Women's Rights movement in the United States
- How musicians can use their platform to speak to social and political issues
- About the work of musicians Loretta Lynn, Dolly Parton, Selena, and Dixie Chicks

### 2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE

- Students will be able to consider the complex ways American people viewed feminism and the women's rights movement throughout the second half of the 20th century by examining its representation by Country and Tejano artists.

## ACTIVITIES

### ENTRY TICKET ACTIVITY

1. Have students interview an adult they trust, asking three major questions:
  - Do you remember a time when contraception was taboo? How did you learn about birth control?
  - Growing up, did you know of any women in your life who worked? What sort of jobs did they have, or why did they not have a job? What were your observations of their work life (or lack thereof) like?
  - Have you ever felt you were silenced, or couldn't participate in a conversation or activity because of your gender?

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Have students report on their entry ticket interviews.
2. Ask students to share their own perspectives to the above questions. Do their views and experiences differ from their parents? Or are they the same?

### PROCEDURE:

1. Tell students they will be exploring how female Country and Tejano musicians incorporated the issues they just discussed into their music, and how this music was received by the public.
2. Play **Clip 1 – Loretta Lynn, “The Pill,”** which shows the onset and growing popularity of the birth control pill's effect on culture. Ask students:
  - What “Pill” is Lynn referring to in this song? Why might it have been

described in the clip as a “revolutionary technology”?

- Why might Chely Wright describe “The Pill” as the “soundtrack for every housewife in America?”
3. Pass out **Handout 1 – Song Lyrics**. Ask students to read the lyrics to “The Pill” silently. Then ask:
    - What message do you think Loretta Lynn is trying to send with this song?
    - Throughout the lyrics, Lynn refers to herself as “this chicken.” What do you think she’s trying to say by using that kind of language?
    - Who do you think the intended audience for this song is? Why?
    - In the clip, Ann Powers argues that much of women’s liberation was rooted in the availability of contraception. What lines in Loretta Lynn’s song support Powers’ belief?
    - In the clip, Chely Wright mentions the song was “controversial.” Why might have a song about contraception been controversial in 1975?
  4. Show **Image 1, Loretta Lynn** on “The Pill.” Have students read the quote, then ask:
    - How does Loretta Lynn describe the reaction to her song?
    - For her, why was the song not played on the radio? Why was it popular with women and not men?
    - Why is Lynn comparing “The Pill” to another song “about making love in a field?” What is the purpose of this comparison?
  5. Play **Clip 2, Women in the Workplace**. Ask students to discuss in group:
    - What do you think Lynn’s principal argument is in this quote?
    - According to Susan Douglas, what kind of factors contributed to women entering the workforce in the late 70s and early 80s?
    - How do the people featured in the clip talk about the conditions for women workers in the 1970s and 1980s?
    - What was the organization “9 to 5”? How was it formed?
    - In the clip, Jane Fonda says women are joining together because they’re mad. Why do you think this might be?
  6. Show **Image 2, “Female to Male Earning Ratio, 1960-2016.”** Ask students:
    - What data is this chart presenting?
    - Does this information surprise you? Why or why not?
    - How have wages improved since the 1960s? How have they not?
    - What is the relationship between men’s and women’s earning ratios today? Do you think this difference is fair?
  7. Show **Image 3, “Women’s Earnings as a Percentage of White Men’s Earnings, by Race.”** Ask students:
    - What is this chart presenting?
    - In your own words, can you summarize what this graph is showing?

- How would you summarize the data presented in both of these graphs?
  - What factors do you think contribute to why equal pay still does not exist today?
8. Play **Clip 3, Dolly Parton, “9 to 5.”** Ask students:
- According to the various people in the clip, what was the film “9 to 5” saying? Why was that considered important?
9. Have students read the lyrics to “9 to 5” in **Handout 1 - Song Lyrics.** Then ask:
- How would you describe the mood of this song?
  - Is there a message to the song? If so, what is it?
  - What is being described in the first verse? What function do you think that verse plays in the song?
  - What is being described in the second verse? What function do you think that verse plays in the song?
  - What are some of the issues presented in the song? Is there a solution offered?
  - Are there any lines in the song you find particularly powerful? Why?
  - Is this a song that applies specifically to women? Why or why not?
10. Pass out to students **Handout 2 – Introducing Selena** (alternatively, teachers can lead students to TeachRock’s Trace It Back entry for Selena, which also contains a video of Selena performing.) Ask students:
- What is one thing you learned about Selena, based on the handout?
  - As a male-dominated genre, What difficulties might have Selena had to overcome to achieve her level of popularity within the Tejano music scene?
  - How might Selena’s success relate to data on pay gaps presented in the previous images?
11. Have students examine the lyrics to “Si Una Vez” in **Handout 1 – Song Lyrics.** Ask students:
- What is the mood presented in this song?
  - Do you think this song presents a woman’s perspective? In what way?
  - Prior to Selena, Tejano music was largely male-centered. How might this song have broken tradition in the Tejano Genre?
12. Play **Clip 4, Dixie Chicks Speak Out.** Then ask students:
- According to the clip, how did the Dixie Chicks create controversy?
  - What was the response to Natalie Maines’ stated opinion on the U.S. invasion of Iraq?
  - What were some of the gendered ways the Dixie Chicks were harassed in the clip?
  - Do you think the Dixie Chicks were more vulnerable to backlash because they were women? Why or why not?
13. Ask students to read the lyrics to the song “Not Ready To Make Nice” in **Handout 1 – Song Lyrics.** Then ask:
- What is being described in this song?
  - What do you think this song’s message

might be? Why might Natalie Maines have wanted to write about her experience?

- How do you think being women affected Natalie's being asked to "make nice"? Do you think a male artist might have had to do the same? What lyrics in particular lead you to this conclusion?
- What audience do you think Maines was trying to reach?
- What argument does she make for not just "shutting up and singing"?

## SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Break students up into groups and display **Image 4 – Discussion Questions**. Have the student groups discuss and share their thoughts with the rest of the class.

## EXTENSION ACTIVITY

1. Read *Longread's* "Living With Dolly Parton." (<https://longreads.com/2018/10/16/living-with-dolly-parton/>). Write a short paragraph: Is Dolly Parton an appropriate face of feminism in Country music? Why or why not?
2. Read *The Guardian's* "Taylor Swift: Trump thinks his presidency is an autocracy" (<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/aug/23/taylor-swift-trump-thinks-his-presidency-autocracy>.) Write a short paragraph addressing the following question: What factors do you think might have led Taylor Swift to stay silent on political issues for so long? What might have made her decide to speak out?
3. Read *NPR's* "Priscilla Renea Refuses To Be Quiet About Racism In Country Music" (<https://www.npr.org/2018/06/23/622316454/priscilla-renea-refuses-to-be-quiet-about-racism-in-country-music>) or *Essence's* "We've Been Here: The Problem With Erasing Black Women From Country And Rock Music" (<https://www.essence.com/culture/black-women-history-country-rock-music/>). Write a paragraph summarizing the erasure of Black women from Country and how certain stars have combated their exclusion.
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.



## 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.

Craft and Structure 4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

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 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 Writing (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.

Text Types and Purposes 3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

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.

Production and Distribution of Writing 6: Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.

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 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. 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 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance



## **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.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

### *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 – Loretta Lynn, “The Pill”
- Soundtracks – Women in the Workplace
- Soundtracks – Dolly Parton, “9 to 5”
- Soundtracks – Dixie Chicks Speak Out

### HANDOUTS

- Handout 1 – Song Lyrics
- Handout 2 – Introducing Selena