Native American Music from Wounded Knee to the Billboard Charts: A Document Based Exploration

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

In what ways did the music of Native Americans mark them as outsiders from the developing narratives of “American-ness” in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and how did the federal government attempt to use music as a tool to force assimilation?

OVERVIEW

To a present-day listener with no additional context, Redbone’s single “Come and Get Your Love” may just sound like a classic mid-70s Rock tune. The song, which many might recognize from the opening sequence of the film *Guardians of the Galaxy*, is marked by a tight and funky drumbeat, as were many in that post-James Brown and Sly and the Family Stone moment. Its harmony is punctuated by a punchy, dry bass line that contrasts with lush, rather deep-in-the-mix string overdubs. The sparse, repeated lyrics are not what many would call “deep.” “Come and Get Your Love,” however, is in many ways a breakthrough track.

When “Come and Get Your Love” broke the Billboard Top 5 singles in 1974, and when the track went “Gold,” meaning it sold a half million copies, it marked the first time an outwardly Native American ensemble had reached such heights.

Pat and Lolly Vegas, the Yaqui, Shoshone, and Mexican American brothers who founded Redbone in 1969, hadn’t always been “outwardly” Native American in performance. In the early 1960s, the brothers began their professional careers playing “Surf” music in Los Angeles. They recognized that their family surname, “Vasquez,” would mark them as Mexican-American and limit their potential. So, the Vegas brothers were born. However, as national attitudes toward identity and ethnicity began to evolve later in the decade, the Vegas brothers decided to take the advice of part-Cherokee friend Jimi Hendrix and, as Pat Vegas puts it, “do the Indian thing.” Redbone performed in Native American clothing, and also worked traditional drum, dance, and song into performances, even on TV.

Redbone’s success came less than a century after the U.S. government banned traditional expressions of Native American song and dance, and 84 years after the Massacre at Wounded Knee, where U.S. forces murdered between two- and three-hundred Lakota men, women, and children, ostensibly because they refused to cease performing a pan-tribal ritual known as the “Ghost Dance.”
OVERVIEW (CONTINUED)

In this lesson, students are introduced first to Pat Vegas and Redbone by way of interviews and music from *Rumble*. They then look back to the late 19th century to consider the significance of Redbone’s success. Students will use clips from the film, as well as a set of seven source documents to assess the U.S. government’s attempt to control Native American populations by way of culture, particularly music. The documents, which include letters, acts of Congress, testimony, and newspaper articles, introduce students to legislation and the Federal Indian Boarding School system from the perspectives of both government agents and Native Americans.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. **KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):**
   - The history of the Massacre at Wounded Knee from several perspectives
   - About the Dawes Act
   - About the Carlisle Indian Boarding School and Federal Indian schools of the late 19th and early 20th centuries
   - Firsthand accounts of students’ experiences at Federal Indian Schools
   - About Col. Richard Pratt and the movement to “civilize” Native Americans during the period
   - About mainstream white feelings toward to the music culture of Native Americans
   - About Pat and Lolly Vegas (Vasquez) and their band Redbone

2. **MASTERY OBJECTIVE:**
   - Through analysis of source documents, students will be able to discuss how attitudes toward Native American culture impacted the events at Wounded Knee, and apply their historical perspective to interpret the success of Native American popular music later in the 20th century.

ACTIVITIES

**MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:**

1. Ask students:
   - Can you think of any times music feels like more than entertainment to you? When it might say something about who you are? (Encourage students to think of how music functions in rituals from religion, to “The Star-Spangled Banner,” to the singing of “Happy Birthday.” Also have students consider how music plays a role in shaping identity, e.g. “I’m a metalhead.”)
PROCEDURE:

1. Tell your students that they will now watch a clip featuring Pat Vegas, a Yaqui, Shoshone, and Mexican American musician whose band Redbone became the first Native American group to have a Gold (more than half-a-million sold) record in 1974. Show Clip 1, “Do the Indian Thing.” Ask students:

   • What do you think Jimi Hendrix meant when he told Pat Vegas to “do the Indian thing”? Why do you think Pat Vegas might have chosen to downplay or hide his heritage before Redbone?

   • What do you think David Fricke might mean when he says, “ultimately, getting through is the best revenge”? In what ways did Redbone “get through”?

2. Have students make a T-chart on which each side represents one of the Redbone performances (the “traditional” and the Rock and Roll) in Clip 1. Play Clip 1a, “Redbone Chant,” and then play Clip 1b, “Come and Get Your Love,” and have students record their answers to the following questions on the T-Chart for each performance, then discuss their answers as a class:

   • What instruments are being used?

   • In what language is the vocalist singing?

   • How would you describe the dancing?

   • How would you describe the dancing?

   • Do you notice any similarities between the two clips?

3. Show Clip 2, “The Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee,” and ask students:

   • Why do you think Native American music was seen as “dangerous” and a “threat” by U.S. officials? What power do you think they might have believed Native American music had? (Encourage students to consider the power music has to create a collective identity, how many Native Americans could say “our music” as a way of being apart from the white power structure, and what collective tribal identity might have represented to those who wished to control the tribes.)

   • In this clip, John Trudell suggests that the government agents wished to completely erase Native American culture, so “of course they came after our music.” Why do you think he feels so sure that controlling music was a way for the government to control the people? (Among many things, encourage students to explore the idea that many songs were “songs of ancestors” and parts of oral history; ending the songs could destroy the connections to history.)

   • How do you think an event such as the Massacre at Wounded Knee might impact the practice of traditional song and dance among other U.S. tribes?

4. Tell students they will now respond to a Document Based Question using seven source documents from the period of Wounded Knee. These documents are found in four handouts:

   • Handout 1 - Document 1: Excerpts from Richard H. Pratt, “The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites”

   • Handout 2 - Documents 2 and 3: Native American Students Write Letters Home from Boarding School

   • Handout 3 - Document 4: The Dawes Act

   • Handout 4 - Documents 5-7: Assorted Accounts on Wounded Knee

5. These documents could be assigned as an in-class group project, as an in-class individual project, or as a homework assignment. The documents could also be used to guide a document-based class discussion guided by the following questions:
• To what extent did the U.S. government seek to use culture to control Native Americans in the late 19th century? Using examples from the documents, characterize the philosophical underpinnings of these measures, i.e., were they “for good,” or callous, etc? In what ways do you think these measures contributed to the Massacre at Wounded Knee? Why?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Ask students:
   • Considering what you know now about responses to Native American music in the United States, how would you assess the significance of the Redbone clip that began this lesson?
   • Can you think of any other elements of culture that have moved from a marginal or forbidden position within society to one of acceptance? Can you think of anything that is currently marginal which you believe will someday be accepted?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

1. The seven documents included in this lesson demonstrate a concerted effort on the part of the U.S. government to attempt to “civilize” Native Americans by forcing them to adopt a Euro-centric approach to all facets of life. In a short essay, use the included documents, and external resources if necessary, to explore other facets of Native American life that the U.S. government attempted to change with legislation and intervention.

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 Writing (K-12)

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

Writing 7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Writing 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

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.

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
- Rumble – Do The Indian Thing
- Rumble – Redbone Chant
- Rumble – Come and Get Your Love
- Rumble – The Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee

HANDOUTS
- Handout 2: “Documents 2 and 3: Native American Students Write Letters Home from Boarding School”
- Handout 4: “Document 5: “Newspaper Stories Published in the Days Before and After the Massacre at Wounded Knee/ Survivor’s Testimony”