

Singer-Songwriters and the Environmental Movement

PARADISE

UC's fee lot demolished by
THE PEOPLE

NOVEMBER 11-15, 1979

Est. Time: 60 minutes

Subjects: History, Social Studies

Age Range: High School

See the full lesson [here!](#)



★ *TEACHROCK* ★

How did singer-songwriters of the 1960s and 1970s address the concerns of the environmental movement?

In this lesson, you will:

- Determine the main ideas and historical importance of Rachel Carson's environmental science book, *Silent Spring* (1962)
- Investigate events surrounding the celebration of the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970
- Examine how Singer-Songwriters in the late 1960s and early 1970s included themes relating to nature and the environment in their music
- Explore the musical contributions of such Singer-Songwriters as Joni Mitchell, Marvin Gaye, James Taylor, Neil Young, and Jackson Browne

Examine this image. Consider or ask a partner:

- Who might be the people in the picture?
- What are they doing? Where do they appear to be doing it?
- What props are they using?
- What is the message they might be trying to get across?



Next, examine the news article on the following slide.

Consider or ask a partner:

- What does the main headline say? What news is this headline reporting?
- What is “Earth Day”? What might have people been protesting on the first Earth Day?
- What does the article say about who participated in Earth Day? Why was this particularly newsworthy in 1970?

Earth Day Observance

Pollution Protest Unites Americans



Smoke billows from burning tires during Tuesday's rally in Port of Spain, Trinidad.

Government Fights Dirty Money
U.S. Sends Six Ships

High Winds, Hail Lash State Areas

All Walks Join Fleets for Action

Protesters joined in a variety of ways to mark the day. In Madison, a parade of thousands of people marched through the city. In other cities, people held rallies, sang songs and held signs.



Man on horse with sign during demonstration, Madison, Wis., Tuesday.

Earth Day Is an 'Old' Thing Youths Make Moves to Save a Heritage

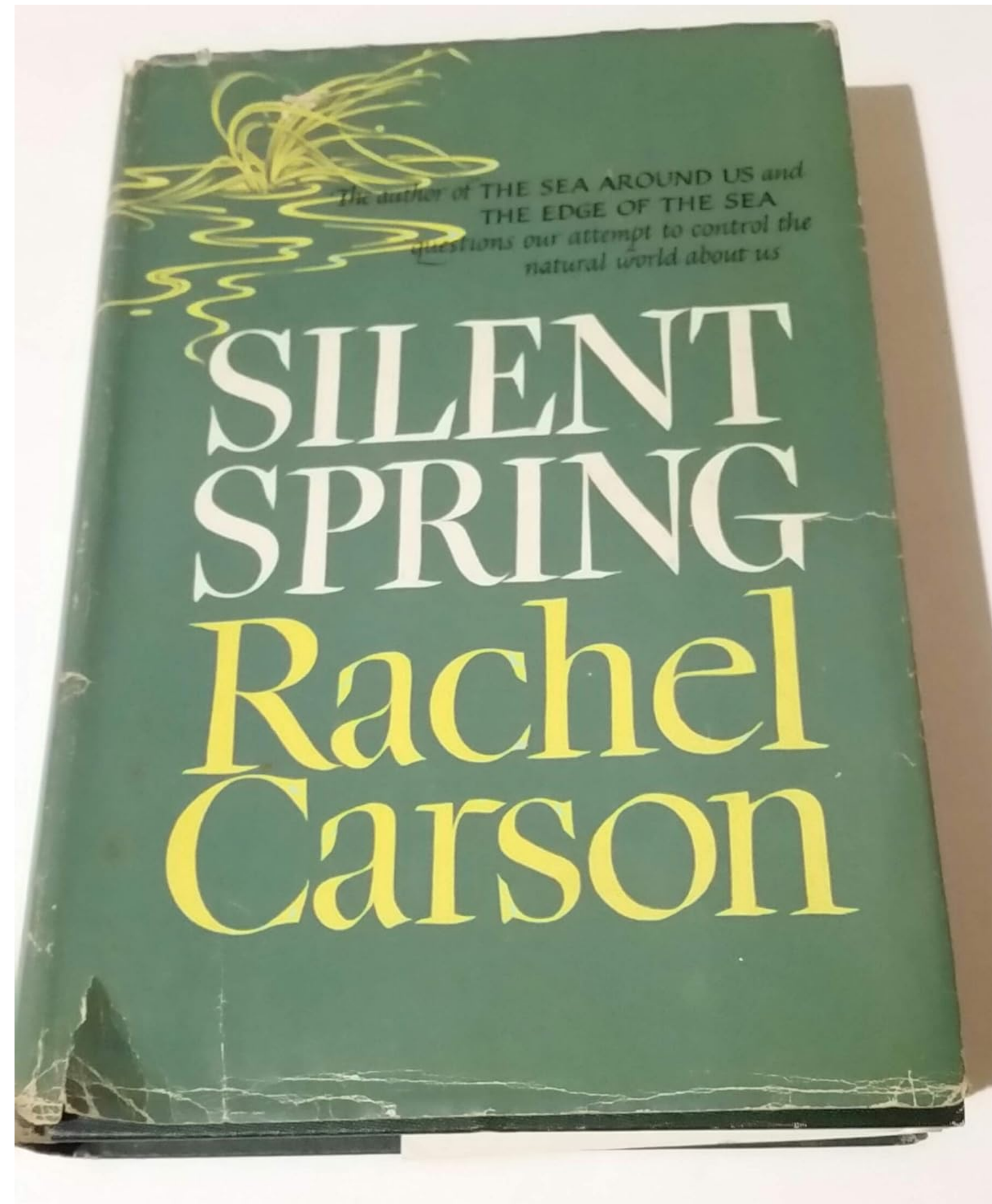
Young people are making a big move to save a heritage. They are organizing a "Save the Earth" campaign. They are holding rallies and protests. They are also working to clean up the environment.

“Youth joined hands with ages across the generation gap Wednesday in a gigantic array of demonstrations pleading for an end to pollution.

Earth Day, as Wednesday was designated, was a phenomenon in this age of protest - a day when Americans of all shades of belief joined in protesting the spread of contamination which threatens the very existence of life on this planet.”

The first Earth Day was on April 22, 1970, and that year environmental protests were held all over the United States. Earth Day continues to be commemorated every year. In this slideshow, you will be exploring what role music and musicians played in the creation of Earth Day.

Throughout your exploration, check [this handout](#) for any terms or figures you come across that are new to you.



The work of environmentalist Rachel Carson played a large role in establishing Earth Day.

Read an excerpt of Carson's book *Silent Spring* and answer the questions in [this handout](#).

Listen to the song “Woodstock” by singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell [here](#), and analyze the lyrics above. Consider or ask a friend:

- What do you think Mitchell means when she says, “we’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden”?
- Is the idea of “the garden” similar to Carson’s depiction of farmlands “where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings”? Why or why not?
- What does Mitchell seem to be suggesting about the connection between Rock and Roll and being back in the garden? How might these two together help “get my soul free”?

**I'm going on down to Yasgur's farm
I'm going to join in a rock 'n' roll band
I'm going to camp out on the land
I'm going to try an' get my soul free**

**We are stardust
We are golden
And we've got to get ourselves
Back to the garden**

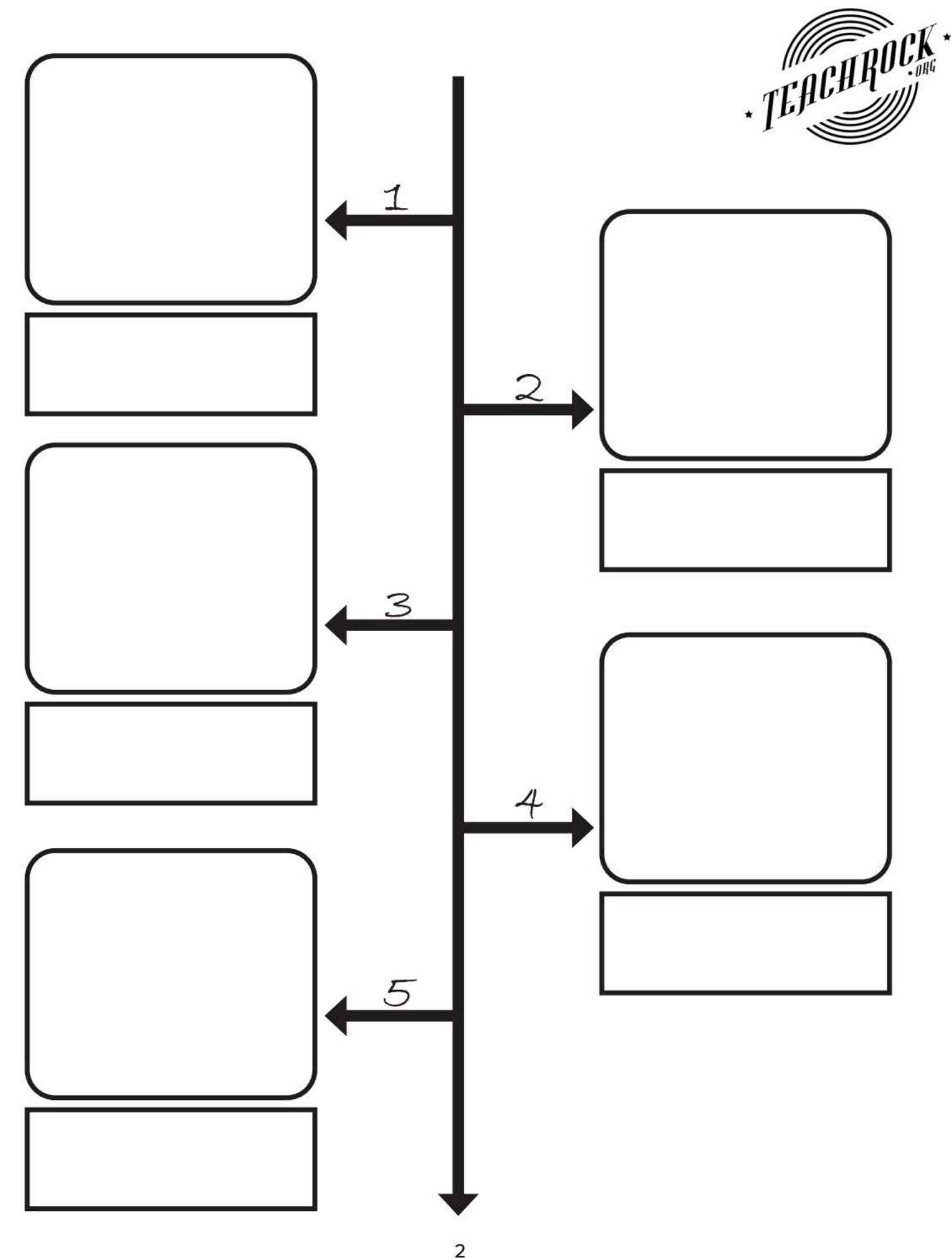
Investigate how other singer-songwriters addressed environmental concerns in their music. Listen to two or more of the following songs, and use [this handout](#) to read lyric excerpts of the song and make notes on what you notice.

- Joni Mitchell, "Big Yellow Taxi" (1970)
- Marvin Gaye, "Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)" (1971)
- Neil Young, "After the Gold Rush" (1970)
- James Taylor, "Carolina in My Mind" (1968)
- Jackson Browne, "Before the Deluge" (1974)

After listening to the songs, consider or ask a friend:

- Are there common themes to the songs you listened to? If so, what are they?
- Are the songs you listened to overtly about the environmental movement? Or are they more subtle?
- Why do you think many Singer-Songwriters might have chosen to write about themes relating to nature and the environment in the late 1960s and early 1970s?
- Do these songs reflect the influence of *Silent Spring*? What specific evidence can you find in the songs to suggest that they do?
- Neil Young, "After the Gold Rush" (1970)
- If you had to pick one of these songs to be the theme song for Earth Day, which would it be and why?

To further draw connections between Rachel Carson's work, music in the 1960s and 1970s, and the environmental movement, create a timeline using [this handout](#).



SUMMARY

- The popularity of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* strengthened the environmental movement, and helped to establish Earth Day in 1970.
- *Silent Spring* detailed threats to the environment from pollution and the use of pesticides.
- Singer-Songwriters in the late 1960s and early 1970s became advocates for the environment, and included themes relating to nature and the environment in their music.

BE CREATIVE

- Write a short essay addressing the question: how did the Singer-Songwriters of the late 1960s and early 1970s reflect the concerns of the burgeoning environmental movement in their music? Be sure to discuss the influence of the publication of *Silent Spring* and the first Earth Day on the environmental movement in your answer.
- Write your own song lyrics about the current state of the environment.

BE CURIOUS

- Research the history of Earth Day since 1970. Identify songs by popular artists from later eras that reflect the concerns expressed on Earth Day. You may also wish to identify a current song that might be used as a theme for an upcoming Earth Day celebration in your school or classroom.

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