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'What's that stuff you're listening to Sir?'

Rock and pop music as a rich source for historical enquiry

Simon Butler

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Building on the wonderful articles by Mastin and Sweerts & Grice in *TH 108*, Simon Butler urges us here to make greater use of rock and pop music in history classrooms. His reasons are persuasive. First, it provides a rich vein of initial stimulus material to tap, helping us to engage and intrigue even our least motivated learners. Second, it allows students to construct layers of meaning that might escape them purely through the written word. Students often find it easier to 'read' the tone of a source by listening to it and this can be a powerful way to consider perspective. Third, the use of this type of music supports close textual analysis, providing ways of exploring the lyrics at different levels. Finally, it helps us to pose rigorous historical questions about significance and interpretation. Enquiries that explore *why* people still sing about the Diggers and what *impact* Billie Holliday's songs had on the Civil Rights movement provide students with both challenge and motivation. They also provide teachers with imaginative ways to combine depth and overview in their planning.

Contemporary pop charts might sometimes be regarded as a bland and anodyne cure for pre-pubescent growing pains. The history of rock and pop music, however, from its earliest days in 'tin-pan alley' to the global influence of multi-national record companies, offers a rich and diverse source of evidence to stimulate the most disenchanted adolescent.

I read with considerable interest the articles by Grice & Sweets and by Mastin in a previous edition of *Teaching History*.[1] The articles highlighted how song and music provide historians with an insight into beliefs, attitudes and feelings in the past. For Mastin, a study of Tallis's changing style perfectly captures the shifting religious moods of 17th century Britain. For Grice and Sweerts, it is the music of the African slaves and the emergence of new genres such as blues and jazz that enhances a study into the emerging resistance of African-Americans to slavery and segregation. Both articles therefore highlighted the value of using music to provide students with a 'way into' a period, by creating an atmosphere and a mood which is frequently easier to hear than to read.

Music to motivate

All of this vividly reminded me of my first experience of using music to motivate a disaffected Year 11 G.C.S.E group and engage them in a study of the Vietnam War in 1988. Paul Hardcastle's song *Nineteen* (Number 1 in 1985) and accompanying video succeeded in capturing the interest of Mark and Lee, who were usually more concerned with discussing the merits of Yamaha and Suzuki bikes than debating the finer points of history. After this partial success, I sifted through my record collection and identified a number of tunes (see Figure 1) which might provide stimulus for an auditory learner. Fifteen years later, I still listen out for either contemporary or back catalogue material which tackles an historical event retrospectively or which offers an insight into the thoughts, feelings and experiences of people in the past.

As with all resources, each class and the individuals within it respond in different ways to the material. My own favourite memory is of a young man in Milton Keynes who played his 'air-guitar' and sang his own rendition of Billy Bragg's *The world turned upside down*. Certainly, this type of resource enables students with an interest in music and an auditory learning style to access the curriculum in particular ways. It can, for example, be used as a starter activity to attract the attention and curiosity of the students. It can also be used to develop students' evaluation skills if further evidence is provided for the purposes of cross-referencing. Furthermore, as exemplified by Steven Mastin with his use of a Manic Street Preachers tune, songs frequently present a particular viewpoint or interpretation which students can then reflect upon and evaluate.

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Figure 1: Examples of twentieth-century rock and pop music to use in history classrooms.

Artist	Song	Topic
Billy Bragg	The world turned upside down	The Civil War
Rev Hammer	Freeborn John (Lilburne)	The Civil War
Orchestral Manoeuvres	Enola Gay	Hiroshima
Billie Holiday	Strange Fruit	Civil Rights in the U.S.A.
Bob Marley	Buffalo Soldier	U.S. Civil War
The Farm	All together Now	World War One
Paul Hardcastle	Nineteen	Vietnam War
Paul Weller	Ghosts of Dachau	Holocaust
Manic Street Preachers	If you tolerate this.....	Spanish Civil War
The Specials	Free Nelson Mandela	South Africa

Music and historical significance

Music can also provide a perfect lens through which to explore the undervalued strand of the history National Curriculum, 'historical significance'.[2] Indeed, the poignancy of an event as depicted in a song raises all kinds of questions such as 'why did someone write a song about this?' and 'why do people still listen to it?' Rob Phillips, in a previous edition of *Teaching History*,[3] referred to the work of Geoffrey Partington who identified five possible ways of measuring or assigning historical significance: importance, profundity, quantity, durability and relevance. Material such as The Farm's 1990 hit *All Together Now*, for example, can help students to reflect on the profundity and durability of the First World War in our collective consciousness. It is only a small step further to incorporate the idea of 'relevance' by reflecting on the recent conflict in the Gulf and to explore the changing attitudes towards war that have developed within our society. My assemblies, P.S.H.E. and R.S. lessons have all benefited from tapping into this kind of material. Most evocatively, perhaps, I used a Paul Weller song, *Ghosts of Dachau*, to accompany a power-point presentation of black and white photographs of Nazi concentration camps on Holocaust Memorial Day.

The songs in Figure 1 represent a small selection of material ideal for motivating students. Furthermore, they provide an opportunity to challenge students' historical thinking and indeed their very perception of what constitutes historical evidence. I have selected two particular songs to explore in greater detail in the rest of this article. One can be used as a primary source whilst the other is an historical interpretation. Both provide opportunities to explore ideas of significance and develop skills of evaluation.

'Blood on the leaves and blood at the root' (Strange Fruit – Billie Holiday)

In keeping with the principles of effective 'Initial Stimulus Material',[4] the song 'Strange Fruit' by Billie Holiday provides a perfect illustration of introducing Black Peoples of the Americas in a 'deliberately "oblique" manner'. In other words, the teacher arouses the curiosity of the students by choosing *not* to provide any historical context before they first listen to the song. *Strange Fruit* was considered the best song of the century by U.S. TIME magazine in December 1999 and was explicitly called 'a historic document' by song writer Yip Harman.[5] Furthermore, its historical significance was acknowledged by jazz writer Leonard Feather, who described it as 'the first significant protest in words and music, the first unmuted cry against racism'.[6] Several cover versions have been made of the song by contemporary artists, of which UB40's (on the album *Signing Off*) might be the most familiar to a modern British audience. This reveals the enduring significance of the song as a landmark in the fight against racism and prejudice in contemporary society. Consequently, *Strange Fruit* can be used as an important primary source which both influenced and reflected its age; indeed, it lends itself perfectly to a consideration of issues of historical significance and to source evaluation.

I usually play the tune as the students are entering the classroom, to the cries of 'What's that stuff you're listening to, Sir?' A second, more formal listening follows, where I ask students to comment on the mood

***Strange Fruit* has an enduring significance as a landmark in the fight against racism and prejudice.**

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and style of the music, together with any lyrics that catch their attention. A mini-plenary follows to identify their initial thoughts. This might typically include comments like 'it's quiet and soft', 'a bit gloomy', 'it sounds a bit eerie', 'I heard blood mentioned several times', 'She sounds sad', 'someone might have died', 'Yeah – I heard her say 'black bodies' Sir', 'and burning flesh', 'but what's that got to do with fruit ?'

Now all the class is 'hooked' and ready for another rendition. With some groups, the lyrics (see Figure 2) can now be circulated, whilst with others, the teacher might play it 'blind' a second time before investigating the lyrics in detail. This is a perfect opportunity to tackle the literacy demands of the song at both a word and sentence level before taking forward the discussion in the style of Claire Riley's 'layers of inference' diagram.[7] This develops speculation around questions such as 'where do you think this might have happened?', 'why might it have taken place?', 'when might it have happened?' 'how frequently did this happen?' 'who is the singer?', 'when was the song written?' and 'why was it written?'

Figure 2: The lyrics of 'Strange Fruit'

Strange Fruit

Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant south
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh

Here is a fruit for the crow to pluck
For the rain to gather, the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

From www.leoslyrics.com

To help more visual learners, this activity can be supplemented with a photograph of a lynching from the 'Deep South' in the 1930s. At this stage, the students' growing indignation with the treatment of Black Americans leads to bigger questions: 'why did whites treat blacks like this in those days?', 'why didn't people try to stop this happening?' and 'what did the police do about it?' Once again, the teacher can encourage students to speculate about these and other questions in pairs or groups. Now the teacher can open up the enquiry and reveal a 'big question'. This can either focus on the song as a piece of evidence – 'How much can 'Strange Fruit' tell us about the Civil Rights movement?' – or it can focus more directly on issues of significance – 'How important was the song 'Strange Fruit' in kick starting the Civil Rights campaign in America ?'

Both of these questions have been explored by David Margolick in his book, 'Strange Fruit',[8] where he explores the influence of the song on the African-American or the wider American community and its impact on the Civil Rights campaign. Whilst many individuals saw the song as a landmark in confronting the racism of the 'Deep South', others feared it might provoke racial hatred, encourage more lynchings or simply identify blacks as passive victims of racial violence.[9] Furthermore, although the song was performed by Holiday, it was actually written by Abel Meeropol (pen name – Lewis Allen), a white Jewish schoolteacher and known communist sympathiser. It therefore lends itself, not merely to a stimulating and engaging starter activity, but also to a far deeper analysis of its impact and significance to the Civil Rights campaign in America. It also provides an ideal way to blend overview and depth. An initial investigation of the song itself will naturally lead to a consideration of bigger issues from the Civil Rights movement in the US right through to race relations today.

'We come in peace to dig and sow' (The world turned upside down – Billy Bragg)[10]

In contrast to Holiday's song, a primary source about Civil Rights, Bragg's song is a secondary interpretation about the Diggers during the Civil War. The two songs provide a musical contrast: Bragg's one-man 'guitar rock' style is totally different to the 'jazz/blues' sound of Holiday. This might even meet the individual music preferences of the students! What both singers have in common is a passion and emotion for the issue they tackle which can be grasped by students more clearly when they hear the song, rather than simply by reading the lyrics alone.

I have used *The world turned upside down* to support students' understanding of the growth of radical ideas in the seventeenth century. This topic is usually tackled in a fairly dry and sometimes superficial way in most textbooks, with perhaps a short quote from Winstanley or Lilburne and a summary account of the

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Figure 3: A short biography of Billy Bragg

BILLY BRAGG

Billy Bragg has been recording music for the last twenty years. His first album, entitled *Life's a Riot*, was released in 1983. Since then, he has become a prolific writer and composer, collaborating with a wide range of artists including Johnny Marr, REM, Peter Seeger and Wilco. He has experienced considerable chart success and dedicated much of his professional career to performing live to audiences across the globe. He was dubbed Britain's finest 'rock poet' by the music journal NME and he has always placed great importance on the lyrical composition of his songs.

Bragg frequently uses his music to express his concern for political and humanitarian issues. During the 1980s, he actively campaigned on behalf of the striking miners and later became a lead figure in a coalition of musicians, 'Red Wedge', who supported the Labour Party in the 1987 election. He has also expressed his opposition to racial discrimination and homophobia through his music. More recently, he has become a regular media broadcaster/writer and last year published a pamphlet entitled 'A genuine Expression of the Will of the People' in which he argued for a major reform of the House of Lords. He is currently finishing another U.K. tour with his backing band 'The Blokes'.

Note: A more extensive biography and full details of the discography are available on the website www.billybragg.co.uk.

fate of these groups. After initial reference to a textbook, I use the song to explore in greater depth the beliefs, actions and fate of the Diggers at St.George's Hill, before moving onto ideas of historical interpretation and significance. Further renditions, supported by a copy of the lyrics (see Figure 4), can be supplemented by some clearly focused questions to tease out both the literacy and historical demands of the text. The students can then explore the factual accuracy of Bragg's account, by comparing it with the textbook evidence in order to verify or challenge his version of events.

Note, however, that this exercise in verification is *not* the end in itself. Encouraging students to consider ways that the song may not present a wholly reliable narrative provides the perfect route into a much bigger question. If the song *does* presents a particular viewpoint, then *why*? And even more interestingly, why is it presenting a view at all, over 300 years after the events it describes? This is the key to good historical interpretations work. The point is not simply to assess whether the interpretation is right or not (of course it isn't – and what does 'right' mean anyway?) but rather to explore *why* the interpretation exists at all and *what* this might tell you about the significance of the historical event and the people who have subsequently interpreted it.[11]

As the students listen to and discuss the song, they start to debate both the beliefs and the treatment of the Diggers at St.George's Hill. Most take a sympathetic view towards 'the dispossessed' and are generally indignant towards the landowners, partly due to Bragg's own persuasive performance, including his use of the first person for most of the song (this in itself must be made clear to students to avoid any confusion regarding primary and secondary evidence). The students can now be steered towards a consideration of interpretation by tackling the question 'How can we tell what Billy Bragg thinks about the Diggers?' By considering the language, style and tone of Bragg's lyrics, the students can begin to tease out why the song made them feel so indignant. Sean Lang's idea of annotating or highlighting the text provides excellent scaffolding to support this activity (see Figure 4).[12] After reflecting on the techniques Bragg uses to put across his views, students are ready to consider another question – 'Why do you think Bragg might have these views?' By researching into his background (see Figure 3), they will learn that Bragg has had a long association with 'socialist' issues during his career. Now students are in a good position to understand and evaluate why Bragg adopts his particular tone and also why, towards the end of the song, he appears to address people in the present.

A possible extension exercise could include the use of additional audio sources provided by another contemporary rock group *The Levellers* (yes – inspired and named after Lilburne and co). They have produced a variety of work to reflect their name, including a collaboration with Rev. Hammer in 1997 which produced an album entitled *Freeborn John*. This recounts the story of the Levellers' leader John Lilburne in a semi-musical style format and would probably be most suitable for students with excellent listening skills. Once again, students can access biographical information on the band through their website[13] and start to consider the band's perspective.

***Why* is the song presenting a particular viewpoint so many years after the event?**

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Figure 4: The lyrics of *The world turned upside down*[14]

To St. George's Hill,
A ragged band called the Diggers
Came to show the people's will.
They defied the landlords,
They defied the law.
They were the dispossessed
Reclaiming what was theirs.

'We come in peace' they said
To dig and sow
We come to work the land in common
And to make the wastelands grow.
This earth divided
We will make whole
So it will be
A common treasury for all.

The sin of property
We do disdain
No man has any right to buy and sell
the earth for private gain.
By theft and murder
They took the land.
Now everywhere the walls
Rise up at their command.

They make the laws
To chain us well
The clergy dazzle us with heaven
Or they damn us into hell.
We will not worship
The God they serve,
The God of greed who feeds the rich
While poor men starve.

The Diggers are poor

Bragg thinks the land was taken from them unfairly

The land belongs to them

The Diggers are peaceful - they just want to dig and sow the land. (Compare this with what the landowners do).

Bragg starts to use first person here

They grow crops

The land belongs to everyone and everyone should benefit from it

It is wrong for individuals to own land or buildings (what would landowners think of this?)

This is how the landowners behave

The rich landowners make all the laws in the country

The Church of England is also blamed for being on the side of the rich landowners

We work, we eat together
We need no swords.
We will not bow to masters
Or pay rent to the lords.
We are free men
though we are poor.
We Diggers all stand up for glory
Stand up now.

From the men of property [landowners]
The orders came.
They sent hired men and troopers
To wipe out the Diggers claim.
Tear down their cottages,
destroy their corn.
They were dispersed [thrown off the land]
But still the vision lingers on.

You poor take courage
You rich take care
This world was made a common treasury
for everyone to share.
All things in common,
all people one
We come in peace but
The orders came to cut them down.

They will not give in to the landowners

Other examples of how landowners behaved

They are not forgotten

Who is Bragg telling to be brave? Is it people today?

All people are equal?

Glossary

Clergy:	bishops and vicars	troopers:	soldiers
landlords:	landowners	dispossessed:	people whose land was taken away from them
common treasury:	the earth	vision:	ideas or dream
reclaiming:	taking back	disdain:	dislike
defied:	refused to obey	wasteland:	unfarmed land

Figure 5: Suggested activities to accompany Figure 4.

Underline the words that help us understand Billy Bragg's opinion about:

1) The Diggers 2) The Landowners

Who do you think Billy Bragg supports? Explain your opinion fully, using quotations from the song to support your answer.

Compare this with another Billy Bragg song, such as *Which side are you on?** What are the similarities and differences between the two songs? What can they tell us about Bragg's political beliefs? To what extent do you agree or disagree with Bragg's opinions?

BIG question:
Why do you think people still sing about the Diggers today?

* available on the *Back to Basics* album

The songs of both Bragg and The Levellers encourage students to consider *why* radical groups of the seventeenth century still generate considerable interest today, even amongst the rock/pop fraternity. This naturally leads to a discussion of the significance of their beliefs and in particular, their durability and relevance to contemporary society. An enquiry question along the lines of 'What is the legacy of the Diggers and/or Levellers today ?' or 'Why are people still singing about the Diggers and the Levellers?' provides a clear conceptual focus to the investigation by steering students very clearly towards a consideration of historical interpretation and significance.

Dancing in the streets

The history of pop music has generated considerable interest in the media in the last few years. The BBC2 series entitled *Dancing in the Street* concluded with the following reflection: 'The great songs will last forever …. to become the soundtrack of our lives.'[15] Whilst the songs listed above, with the possible exception of *Strange Fruit*, would not necessarily merit inclusion in a 'Top 100' based on musical merit alone, they do provide a very real record of the cultural experience of the twentieth century for future generations. Furthermore, they also offer historians a real insight into popular public opinion – whether it be opinion expressed within the period of the past under study, or modern popular views and interpretations of the past.

Songs offer a real insight into popular public opinion.

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