



storytellers

VH1 Storytellers: Jay-Z **Life of an American Gangster**

VH1 Music Studio
Cable in the Classroom

Lesson for Music Classes, Grades 7-12
Lesson 1

Note to Teachers: The programs viewed in conjunction with these lesson plans may include references, consistent with the eras portrayed, to substance abuse, violent acts, and topics of a sexual and/or political nature. Because this may be considered inappropriate for classroom use in some communities, you are encouraged to review the programs before presenting them to your students, and if necessary, choose those sections that enhance your lesson and are acceptable for use in your classroom.

Objectives

- Students will be better able to understand the life and personal journey of Shawn Corey 'Jay-Z' Carter and in turn, make connections within their own lives.
- Students will be able to analyze the poetry of 'Jay-Z' and compare it to that of Shakespeare and Langston Hughes.
- Students will be able to compose a rap in the style of 'Jay-Z' using his song "Pray" as an example.

National Standards for music education:

6. Listening to, analyzing, and describing music.
7. Evaluating music and music performances.
8. Understanding relationships between music, the arts, and disciplines outside the arts.
9. Understanding music in relation to history and culture.

Materials

- VHS / VCR Player
- Television
- Audio playback equipment
- *VH1 Storytellers: Jay-Z: American Gangster*
- Recording of “Pray” (available for mp3 download via American Gangster mp3 Album Only Download [mp3] through www.amazon.com)
- PC/MAC with speakers or CD Player
- Students copies of the Lyrics to “Pray” (provided below and available at: <http://www.jayzonline.com/lyrics.php>)
- Pencils

Prior Knowledge:

- Students should have familiarity with the term ‘Concept Album’. [Examples of such include critically-acclaimed ‘Concept Albums’ such as the ‘Rock-Opera’ *Tommy (1969)* by **The Who**; *The Wall (1979)* of **Pink Floyd**; **Queensrÿche’s** *Operation Mindcrime (1988)* and *Dream Theater’s Metropolis Pt. 2: Scenes from a Memory*, released in 1999.
- Distribute the ‘Lyrics Sheet’ to Pray as a preparatory activity for student review before viewing the VH1 Storyteller episode for the first time. Students may [at their own choosing and cost] visit the link above for access to purchasing the CD of the same name as a series of mp3 downloads.

Procedures

1. Play video, *VH1 Storytellers: Jay-Z: Life of an American Gangster* video in its entirety.
2. After the video, lead a short class discussion about the 3-acts of Jay-Z’s self described ‘Indie-Film’ that is ‘American Gangster’. What does Jay-Z want you to know about his life [the Genesis], his journey [The Rise] and near demise of the autobiographical characters portrayed throughout this ‘Concept Album’?
3. Now, divide your class into groups of 5 or 6 students each. Distribute the Lyrics Sheet to “**Pray**” (below) and give students a few minutes to read the lyrics. Pay special attention to the individual names [*Mowtown’s*, Barry Gordy, Shawn Corey, The Kennedys, Frank Sinatra, The Genovese Family] and using the internet, find out some background information on each and their longtime *alleged* ties to organized crime and roles within the world of ‘American Gangsters’.
4. Play the opening segment including “Pray” for a second time. After the initial reading, reviewing and researching the lyrics, conduct a *Socratic Seminar* based on your notes on how Jay-Z shared his life story.

5. Use the following questions to lead a short discussion about what the students found in the song lyrics:
- When Jay-Z and Beyoncé [during spoken interludes] talk about Prayer, are they being figurative, literal, or both? Why?
 - If the role of Verse 1 is largely of an historical context, what ‘Storyteller’ qualities does Verse 2 contain and what is its function as the songs Plot develops?
 - Verse 3 is a descriptive first-person account of the making and subsequent breaking of the main character. What environmental and social factors of life on the street contribute to the Genesis, Rise and Demise trilogy depicted throughout Jay-Z: Life of an American Gangster?

National Standards for Music Education

1. Singing, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music.
2. Performing on instruments, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music.
3. Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments.
4. Composing and arranging music within specified guidelines.
5. Reading and notating music.
6. Listening to, analyzing, and describing music.
7. Evaluating music and music performances.
8. Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts.
9. Understanding music in relation to history and culture.

Pray
Lyrics Sheet by Jay-Z

(Beyonce talking)

Delivery me from my enemies oh god
Defend me from those that rise up against me
Deliver me from the work of inequities
the savior from the blood of me

(Jay-Z: Verse one)

Look, mind state of a gangster from the 40's; Meets the business mind of Motown's Berry Gordy
turned crack rock into a chain of 40/40's; sorry my jewelry so gaudy
slid into the party with my new pair of Mauri's. America, meet the gangster Shawn Corey.

Hey young world, wanna hear a story? Close your eyes and you can pretend you're me.
I'm cut from the cloth of the Kennedy's; Frank Sinatra havin' dinner with the Genovese'
This is the genesis of a nemesis; mother America not witnessed since.
The Harlem renaissance birthed black businesses; this is the tale of lost innocence.

And the incense burns and the turntables turn; and that Al Green plays.
I see my mother's afro as mama taps her toes as she rolls her j's;
And my papa just left the house, in search of a killer of my Uncle Ray;
And she's trying to calm her nerves, as I observe this is just one day.
And what tomorrow has in store we can never be sure so all we can do is...Pray.

(Beyonce Talking)

Because of your strength while I walked upon the Earth for God is my defense...

(Jay-Z: Verse 2)

As I head to my home room I observe the ruins; dope needles on the ground.
I hear a car go vroom; drug dealer in the BM with the top down.
As the girls start to giggle I ask, "Why you laugh?" They say, "You're too little."
One day you'll understand when you become a man 'bout things you have to get you.

Fast forward freeze frame on my pistol; fist full of dollars ignorance is so blissful.
I ain't choose this life this life chose me; around here it's the s*** that you just do.
I just left school, the same BM is pulled over by the boys dressed blue.
They had they guns drawn screaming, "Just move!"
Or is there something else you suggest we can do?
He made his way to the trunk; opened it like "Huh"? A treasure chest was removed.
Cops said he'll be back next month. What we call corrupt he calls payin' dues.
Now when the rules is blurred as they is and were, what am I to do but... pray.
Pray the Lord forgive me; pray He guides me for what I'm 'bout to go through...

(Beyonce Talking)

Delivery me in thy righteousness; it cause me to escape and climb Thy air until I am
Save me Lord!

(Jay-Z: Verse 3)

Pray anywhere there's oppression; the drug profession flourishes like beverages;
Refreshing, sweet taste of sin. Everything I seen made me everything I am;
Bad drug dealer or victim; I beg... what came first, moving chickens or the egg?
This is why I be so fresh; I'm trying to beat life, 'cause I can't cheat death.
Treat shame like shamelessness; aim, stainless at anuses. You know the game this is;
Move coke like Pepsi, don't matter what brand name is; I stand behind mine!
Everything I do I'm a man behind mine; I'm sure... but every night before I lay;
I drop my knees to the floor and I pray!

(Beyonce Talking)

Thy name shall endure forever. Thy name shall continue as long as the sun will;
Men shall be Blessed in Him. All nations shall call him Blessed;
In your name I pray for your Blessings.



These standards-based materials are provided through a partnership with MENC: The National Association for Music Education. This lesson plan was created by MENC member Timothy M. Black, Kadena High School, Okinawa, Japan.