



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 3 - Shakespeare and Harlem

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 performance and compositional techniques of Shawn Corey 'Jay-Z' Carter and in turn, explore their own abilities and desires to create music based on historical 'Best Practices' of *Improvisation*.
- Students will utilize the poetry of Shakespeare and Langston Hughes as resource material for 'Improvisation' and translate this prose to 'Rap' and 'Hip-Hop' idioms.
- Students will utilize available music technology resources as compositional aides. MIDI programs [such as Band-in-a-Box, Sibelius, Cakewalk and FruityLoops are suggested for use] will be introduced and where available, used to provide accompaniments for student performances.

National Standards for music education:

3. Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments.
4. Composing and arranging music within specified guidelines
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 “American Dreamin” (available for mp3 download via American Gangster mp3 Album Only Download [mp3] through www.amazon.com)
- PC/MAC with speakers or CD Player
- iTunes, Windows Media Player or other multimedia player for PC or MAC.
- Students copies of the Lyrics’ excerpt to “American Dreamin” (provided below and available at: <http://www.jayzonline.com/lyrics.php>)
- Shakespeare Sonnet #29 (provided below and available at: <http://shakespeare.about.com/od/studentresources/a/sonnet29guide.htm>)
- Langston Hughes poem, “Democracy” from *Shakespeare in Harlem*. (provided below and available at: <http://www.poemhunter.com/langston-hughes/>)
- Microphones for ‘Performances’ [based on need and preference].
- Pencils

Prior Knowledge:

- As previously assigned in conjunction with Lesson #2, students will have gained preparatory background information on the life and works of William Shakespeare, Sonnets in general and Sonnet #29 in specific.
- As previously assigned in conjunction with Lesson #2, students will have also gained preparatory background information on the Harlem Renaissance, American poet, Langston Hughes, his Poetry in general and the 1942 work, Democracy in particular.

Procedures

1. Play video, VH1 Storytellers: Jay-Z: Life of an American Gangster video from indexed position Title: 1 - - - Chapter: 2 - - - Time: 12’00” through Time: 13’00” for a key segment of the song, ‘American Dreamin’. After the video, lead a short class discussion about what musical technique Jay-Z appeared to demonstrate in the midst of this particular rap... ‘Improvisation’! *Important* Please explain that while Jay-Z appears to ‘Improvise’, this pause in performance and repetition of the selected text is more ‘Pre-Planned Spontaneity’ than true improvisation.
2. With the aid of classroom texts and resources of your choosing, define and discuss the following terms: Musical Improvisation [especially those of J.S. Bach’s ‘Inventions’ & Chopin’s ‘Impromptus’]; The song-form of 12-bar blues [especially as it developed in the early 20th-century in Jazz], Freestyle Rap [key in on those artists who developed the idiom on the US east-coast in the 1970s] and Scat Singing of Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Cab Calloway, Mel Torme, Chet Baker, Diane Schuur and vocal groups like ‘*The Swingle Singers*’ and ‘*Manhattan Transfer*’. Please feel free to include other artists of your choosing.

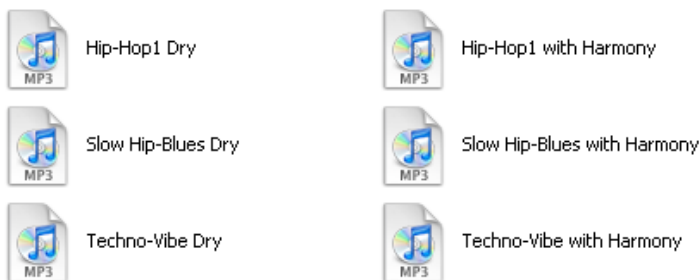
3. Follow definitions' discussion with Reading of the Shakespeare Sonnet #29. Discuss terms of Iambic Pentameter, and the nature of syllabic stresses employed by Shakespeare and the similarities / differences between the meter of the Sonnet and those 'Speak-Sing' patterns used by many rap artists of today.
4. Repeat the sequential and guided discussion, this time of the Harlem Renaissance, its impact as an important artistic, literary and cultural movement amongst African-American communities of NYC in the 1920s & 1930s and the themes about which authors and musicians used 'Art' as a communicative form.
5. Let the same groups utilized in Lessons #1 & #2, continue in the following exercise. Have each group 'Perform' a dramatic reading of the Shakespeare Sonnet [a la 'Heavy English Accent' – being as 'Serious' and 'Dramatic' as you can contain] and the social commentary poem, Democracy. ***Important*** Please encourage students to discuss the themes they feel are most relevant to the political and social issues of today.

~ Transition To Performance Element ~

Instructors at all levels may wish to divide this culminating activity into a series of several sessions for better pacing and processing information. Allow ample preparation time for 'Performance Groups' to memorize, choreograph and collaborate before final presentations to the class.

Proposed Sequence for Culminating Activity ~ Performance

- Divide class into 6 final 'Performance Groups'.
- Each group will be assigned either the Shakespearian Sonnet OR the Langston Hughes poem for their performance text. The selections should be divided equally [i.e. 3 Shakespeare and 3 Hughes groups].
- Each group will be assigned an mp3 file with which to set their text for performance. [i.e. 3 are 'Dry' rhythmic track-loops; 3 are identical rhythmically, but have minor, blues-based chord progressions with which to set their text].



Example 1: Supplemental mp3 files for 'Performance'

Important Ideally, varieties of settings will be achieved. Both Shakespearian and Hughes' texts will be performed 'Rhythmic' & blues-based 'Harmonic' manners.

Choose from the following evaluative Follow-Up Activities

Did you 'Film' or 'Audio-Record' your performances? If so...

Play the 'Live' performances on the 'Morning TV Broadcast'

Make an 'American Idol' panel of students and popular teachers to judge your performances and video-recordings.

Did you post a video to a web-based 'Share-Site', MENC or VH1?

Did you ask your students to perform in 'Costume'? If so...

Did you take pictures and put them in the 'School Newspaper'?

Did you post pictures to your school 'Intranet Page'?

Did you send pictures to MENC or VH1?

Did you have your students 'Peer Evaluate' each others' performances? If so...

What were their favorite performances?

What was the best combination of mp3 [Dry or Harmonic] and text choice [Shakespeare or Hughes?]

Did you ask your students to evaluate these lessons? Send their comments to MENC and VH1... We'd love to know!!!

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.

American Dreamin'

[Excerpt from]

Lyrics Sheet by Jay-Z

You're now in the game where time can tell;
Survive the droughts, I wish you well...
Survive the droughts? I wish you well?
How sick am I? I wish you HEALTH!
I wish you wheels, I wish you wealth;
I wish you insight so you could see for yourself.
You could see the sign, when the jackets is schemin'
And the cops is comin', you could read they mind
You could see from behind, you could redefine
The game as we know it, one dream at a time
I'm American Dreamin'

SONNET 29 [c.1592]
By William Shakespeare
Paraphrase and Analysis of Sonnet XXIX

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweepe my outcast state
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possess'd,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

Further Teacher Resources

- 1- Cliff Notes' Critical Commentary on Sonnet 29
- 2- Synopsis and use of Sonnet 29 in Popular Culture

Democracy [1949] ~ by Langston Hughes

Democracy will not come
Today, this year
Nor ever
Through compromise and fear.

I have as much right
As the other fellow has
To stand
On my two feet
And own the land.

I tire so of hearing people say,
Let things take their course.
Tomorrow is another day.
I do not need my freedom when I'm dead.
I cannot live on tomorrow's bread.

Freedom
Is a strong seed
Planted
In a great need.

I live here, too.
I want freedom
Just as you.

Further Teacher Resources

1- A Peer-Criticism of 'Democracy' and its meaning

A link to an article in PDF format on the
"Voice and the Visual Poetry of Langston Hughes"
by Leslie Wheeler



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.