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Jason J. Griffith
Carlisle High School

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Students Sing the Blues: How Songwriting Inspires Authentic Expression

JASON J. GRIFFITH

On many nights in my small town, Open Mic events take place at coffee shops, restaurants, bars, bookshops, and even churches. On stage, dozens of musicians and poets regularly spill their proverbial guts through original verse.

Considering the number of events like this, it's clear that there's a significant market for creative expression, often through original songwriting. Not only do many folks find pleasure and community in this type of written and performed expression, but some even make money by performing original songs with local bands. One of my goals as an English teacher is to show students what people are writing in the real world for pleasure and personal fulfillment as well as financial subsistence. Songwriting is definitely one of these.

Student interest is, perhaps, the most significant factor in meaningful writing instruction. If students cannot personally connect to the topics and task, a writing assignment will often become meaningless. This is part of the problem with writing prompts on standardized tests; these antiseptic topics are frequently stale and have no relevance in a student's life.

Deborah Dean (2006) writes in *Strategic Writing* that "if the idea of an imaginary audience is only to pretend a

context, the limitations weaken the assignment . . . For instance, when a state writing assessment frames a written response as a letter to the school board, and the students know that piece of writing will never see a school board, what is the point" (p. 86)?

It seems simple, then, that the key to inspired writing is to engage students with thoughtful and original assignments which intersect with their interests and, when possible, have real audiences. The student's perception of self as a stimulus for engagement is described by Robert Marzano (2007) in the *Art and Science of Teaching*. According to Marzano's interpretation of psychology, perception of self includes what students find personally interesting and valuable as well as how they see themselves (pp. 101-102).

One interesting method to allow for student exploration of self is through a songwriting unit. In my heterogeneously-grouped eighth-grade English classes in a public middle school in small town central Pennsylvania, students have enjoyed self-expression and establishing a unique sense of community by writing songs. This unit lets students listen to and respond to one another authentically, which Dean says is an "important way to help students consider audience" (p. 89).

Most of my students enjoy listening to music and have passionate opinions about their favorite songs and

artists. Tapping this interest is an excellent starting point for engaged writing. After students explore why they like certain songs, I ask them to write one. Specifically, I use the 12-bar blues format to teach about poetic structure and deeper meanings in songs as students create their own.

Songwriting is an appropriate genre for self-expression. According to an interview with Paul Zollo, Bob Dylan said that songwriting was more "confessional than professional" (Cott, 2006, p. 370). The same article quotes John Lennon, who "said that it was hearing Dylan that allowed him to make the leap from writing empty pop songs to expressing the actuality of his life and the depths of his own soul" (p. 368).

These quotes illuminate the power of songwriting to engage student interest and sense of self. Culminating with an open mic event, students have the ability to share their honest and original work with a real audience during the unit. More importantly, they've been exposed to a form which they can continue to develop with each other outside of class to meet their expressive needs.

Building a Foundation: Responding to Songs

While it is likely clear to most students that songs are valuable and an appropriate genre for self-expression,

it is also important to demonstrate that there can be an academic place for interacting with their favorite songs alongside canonical literature and traditional writing assignments. Regarding the role of readers and non-traditional literature, Coskie and Johnson (2005) write, “We must honor and make a place for every reader in our classrooms. To do this, we need to trust that all readers will bring something to and take something away from whatever they read. This means, our students—no matter how inexperienced, how naïve, or how confident—can (and will) create a unique understanding of the text” (p. 47).

Nowhere is true student reader-response more evident than in reaction to the music and lyrics they enjoy, and bringing this into the classroom is a powerful opportunity. I assign students a brief essay where they are asked, simply, to choose a singer, musical artist, group, or band whom they connect to personally.

The simple directions I provide my students for this assignment are to choose a songwriter and a song (by that artist) that you identify with and enjoy, and respond to the following in several well-developed paragraphs:

First paragraph (Artist)

Why do you appreciate this artist? How do you identify with this person and his/her work? Write one paragraph describing the musical relationship you enjoy with this artist and his/her music.

Second paragraph (Song)

What song do you most connect with? Write one paragraph describing what you like about the song and how it relates to you and your personality.

Identifying with the artists and songs provides two purposes. It allows for students to consider why certain songs are personally connective, and in the process, students explore their inner values and experiences. Most students really eat this assignment up and write fervently about the topic so it could easily be expanded; however, I only assign two paragraphs minimum. Students are interested in whom everyone has chosen, and few neglect this assignment or turn it in late, which proves that the topic is interesting to them.

Since this is such an interesting topic to students, it’s important to share responses. Louise Rosenblatt (2005) writes, “In the teaching of literature, then, we are basically helping our students learn to perform in response to a text” (p. 27). The first opportunity in the unit to experiment with classmates as an authentic audience is on “Jukebox Day.” I require students to read their essays in front of their classmates, but in an effort to alleviate some pressure and to make the presentations more communal, I bring students to the front of the room in five-student panels.

Each student reads his or her response, and then, when each has read, he or she has the opportunity to play the song for the class. Breaking the presentations into panels allows for some breaks between reading and music. Students definitely get a kick out of bringing their I-pods and other music media to class to share, and there are ubiquitous comments such as “we should listen to music like this every day.” While, Jukebox Day is a more literal performance than Rosenblatt described, the event highlights the pieces of and connections to student-selected texts which they feel are important.

I allow students to write about any artist and song they choose, but for Jukebox Day, I do exercise minor censorship. Students can write about any song they choose, but any song played for the class must be school appropriate. Specifically, songs played in class cannot contain overt and significant profanity, sexual references, drug and alcohol references, or violence.

What’s interesting is that when I first verbalize this fairly obvious requirement, students groan and exchange comical looks while shouting out titles from controversial rappers and rockers, but their actual choices of songs to share are usually thoughtful and revealing, often sensitive, and always school-appropriate. And when students write about songs with controversial lyrics, they usually are revealing a pretty raw and/or tender part of themselves.

There are always predictable choices from pop music such as one student who wrote about her appreciation for Justin Bieber; “I can identify with Justin Bieber because he is currently a teenager, and he is going through some of the same events that we are in life such as dealing with school, friends, family, and the world. I enjoy his music and the lyrics, which I can relate to, because they are about teenage topics.”

There are also often some throwbacks to artists from previous generations such as the student who wrote about her favorite Johnny Cash song “Hurt.”

Part of the song “Hurt” is about everyone Cash knows going away in the end. That can either be from growing old and all of your friends and family dying, or it could be interpreted as just losing a friend. I interpret it as invol-

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untarily pushing away the people you love. I can easily relate to a lot of the messages in the song, some of them about staying true to yourself, or feeling like you're not good enough for someone else, or watching everyone around you change.

The personal connections to the songs are among the most powerful themes in the student essays. Music is clearly demonstrated as a tool for helping students deal with difficult times. One student writes:

"Never Gonna Be Alone" by Nickelback is the only song that can make me cry. What makes the song so powerful is that it speaks for everyone. Unfortunately, we each have our own experiences of losing significant people in our lives. This song relates to me because of my grandma who passed away almost two years ago which still has an impact on me today. Also, this song reminds me of one of my best friend's recent, unexpected death from a drug overdose. Either from growing apart or losing a certain someone, it's never easy to say goodbye.

Another student echoes the use of music as consolation, albeit for a different form of torment:

One ABBA song in particular gave me consolation during a time when I felt especially miserable and alone. The cause of my pain was a bully, but not the kind of bully I could just beat up after school. My tormentor was a teacher. I wasn't willing to tell anyone anything because I didn't want to mess up my school year even more, and I didn't want to be perceived as a victim. I didn't want to be that vulnerable. I did,

however, find solace in music. Specifically, the song "Chiquitita" by ABBA. What I find most comforting about "Chiquitita" is that it is not a song about wallowing in sorrow. It is a song about feeling pain, then moving on. It is a song about feeling hope for a better tomorrow.

These examples are just a sampling to demonstrate the power, passion, and connection that such a simple assignment generates, simply because the students are working with self-selected texts which already have deep personal meaning. Writing about meaningful song lyrics allows students to explore themselves, and sharing their writing with classmates allows students to understand one another as well as why we appreciate the songs and texts that we do.

Examining Poetic Facets of Song Lyrics

The next piece of the songwriting unit is to examine how songs are constructed by considering poetic devices and techniques. More specifically, considering the questions: how do songwriters (and poets) get their audience to enjoy the song and connect to it personally? Examining the poetry in song lyrics is also an excellent curricular connection because the poetic terminology and interpretation required on a state assessment are just as easily (and perhaps more enjoyably) applied to songs as they are to traditional, non-musical poems. Rappers such as the late Tupac can be used to study many poetic elements, including meter, rhyme scheme, and figurative language. Not only hip-hop, but all types of lyrics offer a platform for literary discussion. I break my instruc-

tion of the poetic elements of songwriting into two parts: aesthetic quality and deeper meaning.

In talking about the aesthetic quality of a song, I mean how good it sounds lyrically. There are some songs that just sound good and we find ourselves singing along even if upon careful consideration, we find the lyrics to be meaningless or actually in contrast to our own values or interests. Part of this is certainly because of the beat and the music itself, but I deal specifically with lyrics and poetry in my class. Even without regard to content, a songwriter can make a tune sound good by making effective use of poetic elements. Three to focus on are rhythm, rhyme, and alliteration.

Rhythm is the foundation of music, and students understand that this is created by the beat which is often established by the drums in music. Establishing this basic definition of musical rhythm is an effective bridge to teach students that with words, the beat is created by the patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables. In a song, a lyricist must carefully arrange words for the stresses to match the music's beat.

A classic example from a rhythm master is the song "I Got the Feelin'" by James Brown. Anyone who remembers The Cosby Show may remember Rudy singing the lyrics "baby, baby, baby" from this one. Coincidentally, it's the same line which serves as a good example of using accented syllables in a song. Listening to the song, it's easy to snap or clap out the beat, and when Brown gets to the "baby, baby, baby" line, the instruments drop out, and Brown holds time with his syllable pattern ("BAY-buh, BAY-buh, BAAAAYYY-buh").

When I use song examples in class, I try to choose from a multitude of genres to keep students interested and not alienate certain tastes. Another song I use to show how words rhythmically align with music is Ryan Adams' "The Hardest Part" which is a county-tinged acoustic rock song. In it, Adams starts with a soft guitar rhythm which he gently sings over. As the song progresses, a steady drumbeat picks up with Adam's vocal and matches his stressed syllables perfectly.

In fact, the pattern is close to Iambic. Adams sings, "pay my respect to the company store, I ain't got no money, don't want no more" with the stressed syllables neatly filling out a driving rhythm. I play these and other songs for my students and have them mark accents on a copy of the lyrics while we snap or clap out the beat.

I also have them examine lyrics for rhyme scheme and alliteration. So, one way we connect to a song is if it sounds good to us by making effective use of lyrical rhythm, rhyme, and alliteration. Figure 1 offers an example of a guided note sheet that I provide to students as they listen to an examine the song examples.

A song may sound good aesthetically, but many of us connect to music because of deeper meaning which is the second category of examining lyrics as poetry. Of course, much of poetry instruction is interpreting figurative language, especially the metaphor. Songs are the same way. If we really connect with a metaphor, a song becomes deeply meaningful to us.

I have students examine the figurative language in and author's intent of lyrics which helps them to understand a less superficial way of connecting to songwriting. One example of a metaphor to examine in class is in Jen-

nie Stearn's song "Early Train." In it, she sings, "you took that ticket home, just a one-way, now you're gone." Stearns uses the metaphor of a one-way ticket on an early train to describe being heartbroken over a lover leaving. This also provides evocative discussion on emotional tone in music. Students examine songs looking for words and phrases which establish the tone and match the feeling of the music.

By examining the facets of poetry in music, students can see the same elements from traditional poems in some of their favorite songs. Students also begin to understand what tools they have at their disposal should they choose to write a song which leads us to the highlight of the unit: writing an original 12-bar blues song.

Writing a 12-bar Blues Song

According to the PBS Blues Classroom website (2003), the 12-bar blues "evolved out of African-American work songs, field hollers, spirituals, and country string ballads more than a century ago, the blues is the foundation of virtually every major American music form born in the 20th century, including jazz, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, and hip-hop" (n.p.).

Because of its versatility and simplicity, the 12-bar blues is an easy form for students to study and compose. The PBS Blues website has a concise essay describing the 12-bar format called "Understanding the 12-Bar Blues," and I've attached my own assignment sheet which guides students as an appendix (Figure 1: Write Your Own 12-Bar Blues Song).

Understanding the 12-bar blues requires very little musical knowledge. Basically, it involves a repeating pattern of 12 bars (or measures) of music which each contain four beats. Over the course of these 12 bars, the singer sings three lines; the first establishes a problem or complaint, the second repeats or echoes the first line and the third line resolves or answers the repeated line. The verses connect thematically under a common title or progress to tell a story, and writers make use of rhythm, rhyme, and alliteration as well as the possibility of metaphor and double meanings which are common not only in poetry, but definitely in American blues music as well.

Robert Johnson, a classic blues artist from the 1930s, recorded many 12-bar blues songs such as "Crossroads Blues" where he sang, "I went down to the crossroads, fell down on my knees, I went down to the crossroads, fell down on my knees. I asked the Lord above for mercy; save me if you please."

These lyrics exhibit the 12-bar pattern, and this song was re-recorded as a rock anthem by 1960s rock trio Cream. In more modern times, funk band Sharon Jones and the Dap Kings used a 12-bar pattern for their hit, "100 Days, 100 Nights;" and pop-singer Duffy used a 12-bar pattern on a catchy tune (with frequent radio play as well as being on commercials) called "Mercy."

After playing these examples for students and explaining the pattern, it's time for them to write their own. Using the assignment (Figure 1), students compose the first verse of a 12-bar blues song. I play a 12-bar riff on my guitar over and over while singing various examples and counting the beat.

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As students compose verses which they think work with the pattern, I invite them to test them by singing the verses along with my guitar. If the students are shy, I allow them to recruit classmates to sing their verses, or I will sing them, and then I offer guidance on how the students can make their verses more rhythmic. Once students have one verse which works, it's much easier for them to complete the song by adding verses which connect thematically or continue the story of their blues song. I require each student to compose a complete blues song of four verses, but, because I know that singing in front of an audience is a brave task, I do not require any student to sing or perform their song in front of the class, though all students are invited to try.

Some verses from student-created 12-bars include the following:

The Dish Doin' Blues

When Momma say do the dishes,
I don't wanna.
Oh, when Momma say do the
dishes, I don't wanna.
All of that soapy water just ain't
me.

The Homework Blues

I got the homework blues, baby.
Yeah, I got the homework blues,
I said.
Homework is a hassle, but don't
do it and you'll get no graduation
tassel.

These examples show students dealing comically with the routine details of their lives while working with poetic elements of rhythm, rhyme, and alliteration. Creating 12-bar blues allows students to move from identifying poetic elements to using them in

new ways. If you are interested in trying something similar, but you have no musical ability, there are several alternatives to teacher-supported songwriting.

First, student musicians can often be recruited to play the pattern. A 12-bar pattern is simple and can be played by even rudimentary guitar or piano players. If there are no live musicians available, the free mp3 site www.free-playmusic.com offers tracks to use for free in school projects, etc. This site has an extensive collection of styles including 12-bar blues. To find one that works, click on the blues style and search for the keywords 12-bar.

Once students have composed their songs, there is a tremendous performance opportunity to share compositions and take advantage of classmate audience in the form of a songwriting assembly.

Performance and Ownership

Brent McKeown (2011) recognizes that engaging personally with music as literature

... is not, however, fundamentally different from what we ask of our high school students —born in the late 1990s —when we ask them to read a Shakespearean sonnet or a Dickens novel. By asking them to step into these worlds, we expect them to be brave, smart, and playful, to be open to the possibility of personal transformation. (p. 88)

There is no greater evidence of the transformative power of music than when students perform their original music or participate in ownership of the unit.

What's neat about the songwriting process is that not everyone has to perform to take part. In fact, many

famous bands and artists have their hit songs written by songwriters who remain behind the scenes and relatively anonymous. In our unit, not everyone has to perform, but as a culminating activity, we take the best songs from each of my class periods, and we perform them in our middle school auditorium in front of the academic team.

First, each class period elects a class song to represent them. Then, each period auditions singers and decides who will perform the song. Often, the singer and songwriter are not the same. After a few rehearsals, we have our songwriting assembly where each class representative sings their elected 12-bar blues song, and the audience (our entire 8th grade academic team from which my individual classes are comprised) votes for a favorite.

Since everyone has written a song, the students all have an appreciation for how challenging and rewarding it is to write a good song. And since all students had the opportunity to perform in their class period and audition for the assembly, they tend to be respectful of one another as performers. This assembly offers an authentic audience, and an interesting way for students to take ownership of the songwriting unit with their own work and through the gentle competition of the songwriting assembly.

Several weeks after the songwriting assembly, near the end of the school year, I host an Open Mic event for our team. All students are eligible to participate with any creative work. The only catch is that the work has to be original.

Because of our songwriting unit, students are much more apt to write and perform an original song, and each year, there are several songwriters who

participate as well as traditional poets and those who read from other creative work.

Several bands which formed for this 8th grade Open Mic event were still performing together and creating original songs when the students were seniors in high school. The significance of the songwriting unit is not just in providing an enjoyable and personally relevant way for students to write, connect, and examine poetic devices, but rather it's in exposing students to a form and genre which they could continue to explore in their own lives beyond the normal walls of the classroom. McKeown (2011) writes that there is "no greater disservice to our students than failing to afford them both the physical space and the critical apparatus to enter into a thoughtful discussion about the merits and the problems with the music they listen to on a daily basis" p. 89). By writing songs and about music, students have the opportunity to explore their inner landscape and potential in a unique way not often explored in a traditional English class.

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Jason Griffith currently teaches 10th grade English at Carlisle High School in Pennsylvania. A National Board Certified Teacher and National Writing Project Fellow (Capital Area Writing Project, Harrisburg, PA), Jason was the recipient of the 2012 NCTE Edwin A. Hoey Award for Outstanding Middle Level Educator. Jason is also a frequent presenter at NCTE conventions and other state and local workshops.

Figure 1. Write your Own 12-Bar Blues Song

A 12-Bar Blues song is one of the most basic and recognized patterns in blues music. Creating your own lyrics is an easy exercise in putting syllables together rhythmically.

Verses are written in groups of three lines. The first two lines are the same, the third is different:

Verse one:

The first phrase makes a statement.

The second phrase repeats the same statement

The 3rd phrase resolves, completes, or answers the first statement.

Example:

When I get into class, I've gotta work so hard

Oh, when I get into class, I've gotta work so hard.

If Mr. G keep being so mean, I ain't gonna come back no more.

Your turn: Listen to the music, and create a verse that matches the pattern above. Make sure it can be sung or spoken rhythmically with the music.

Line 1 (Statement):

Line 2 (Repeat statement):

Line 3 (Resolve, complete, or answer the first statement):