

# **Traveling In Time through Words: Lyrics of Hip Hop, Funk, Jazz and the Blues**

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“Calculations, tabulations I can’t do,  
but sophisticated poetry I’ll give to you.  
My name is Coffin, and I am often,  
The one who tries to teach in words that soften...  
I hope you like the poems that you hear, the stories that you fear,  
The essays that you have to write instead of drinking beer.  
Get the work done, long before class time,  
Leaving room for poems, contemplation, and a sweet rhyme.  
Welcome, to University City,  
sliding past Penn, all the way to West Philly...”

-“First Day” (rap excerpt) by the author

## **Overview**

How does a young person claim identity? Where in music does he/she find this identity? Why has hip hop music inspired a new form of identity? How is it a continuation of the long train of African American music? Putting a young person’s search for identity in the changing world in the context of the evolution of African American music is the focus of this unit. As poetry teachers, we look for literary elements such as rhythm, rhyme, metaphor, simile, alliteration, and tone, but the larger search is for finding ourselves in our own poetry and within the poetry of others. Hip Hop is just the latest and greatest manifestation of words combined with music and the poetry which combines with music is the territory in which this unit will seek to find an identity: cultural and cross-cultural, individual and collective, for both the teacher and each student.

If hip hop means to pervade the world's artistic and political culture, then the student of its poetry must allow himself to be submerged in the process of acculturation. In this unit, students of all backgrounds - urban, suburban, rural; black, white, brown and yellow; old, young, and all of the above and below-can immerse themselves in the poetry and music of black music as a means to find themselves, while allowing space to look at the wider realm of American lyricism. These lyrics surprisingly provided the roots and even the trunk for the cultural branches and flowering style of what at first seems to be new, but may not be, and what seems to be revolutionary, and may be: Hip Hop.

Based on teachers' own experiences living in America, informed by their study and practice of poetry, and fueled by their own attraction to understanding a seemingly all-encompassing movement called hip hop, this unit hopes to explore the fusion of writing with music throughout the history of African American music, with an appreciation for the contribution of contemporary musical movements into the progress of American poetry (and its incorporation of diverse influences from all over the world). The depth and breadth of the unit can be determined by time constraints and the particular interests of participants.

The methods of this unit are the goals as well, and will include accessing the prior knowledge of students of all ages, independent and collaborative research, writing, and performance by both students and teachers across the arts. Music, Art, Technology and English teachers can all serve a functional role here, but the unit is primarily concerned with the education of high school aged students in Language Arts.

### **Rationale**

My own reasons for creating this unit are to provide representation for current strains of music, as well as a venue through which high school students may discover and explore their own identities in relation to the phenomenon of music. In particular the contemporary movement called hip hop is put in a historical context.

By validating the poetry and music of this culture, students will find they are learning about their own history, and their own current status in relation to something much larger than themselves. My own work as a writer in the context of a changing society indicates that despite my class and race I am in fact a part of the culture of hip hop already, and it is my hope that given students acceptance of this reality, they will feel inspired to contribute to the evolution of American poetry (and by extension, all poetry) in reflective, meaningful ways.

My research in this field will be limited to specific texts; however, the discography can be much more extensive depending upon student and teacher interest and time limitations or lack thereof. Students participating in the course will be encouraged to contribute profoundly to the library of music and to the documentation of current and immediate performers, based upon local relationships and influences.

Furthermore, students and teachers can explore their own interests in the context of African American musical and lyrical history. As it is a limited history depicted here, African American music has been simplified to a few key songs, but it is clearly not that simple or limited in scope.

Due to the variety of forms the lyrics of hip hop have taken, as well as the extensive and varied influences upon it, teachers of this unit may choose from a large number of resources, which may be differentiated easily during instruction through substitution and scaffolding. For my own attempts to teach this unit I would focus on students grades 7-12 due to my particular certification, however the content of some lyrics, as well as the breadth and availability of the course of study (only high school students in the School District of Philadelphia are offered a year-long course in poetry) depends, again, upon the teacher guiding the class.

In my limited experience, the skill level of a poetry student does not benefit or harm them, be it beginner, advanced, or proficient. Therefore, all students are welcome. In my school we work on an inclusion model, and despite the challenges of the past two years to teach to all levels simultaneously, students of all levels find some reward and engagement with this process on some basis. In the development of this unit I will be consulting with Special Education and School Based Instructional Specialists.

With the advent of the Promise Academies across the SDP, there is now time to offer year-long enrichment for 2-4 hours a week, as well as yearlong seminars in poetry for students seeking a Humanities/Performing Arts credit. Furthermore, there has been rising interest in providing more cross-curricular and collaborative teaching implementation recently. Additionally, the SDP emphasizes such goals as PSSA preparation, and this course in poetry would include writing to specific PSSA rubrics, using higher order thinking skills as well as concrete language development, collaboration, and 21st century technology resources the administration has already emphasized across the city and the curriculum.

A unit of this kind feeds into the larger SDP curriculum of African American studies, diversity issues, 21st century skills and Media Literacy. However, in an adapted form, this unit may be used in conjunction with the 9th grade mentoring program at my

school, the 12th grade senior project, all poetry units within the 10th and 11th grade American Studies components, and even reading and writing resource rooms for those schools not working on an inclusion model, but choosing instead to develop the skills of Special Education students with IEP's on a more one-to-one basis.

### **Objectives**

This standard process could be used extensively by a capable teacher to create a classroom climate in which creative, engaged, collaborative and independent work would be the norm. Furthermore, if students actually chose to attend the course of their own free will (as opposed to simple rostering issues) there might be a breakthrough in which students could apply for programs in connection with local colleges and universities, in particular: guest visitors, student mentors, and public performances.

In simple terms, this unit would use the basic standards of a Language Arts curriculum to emphasize communication between individuals and self awareness on behalf of every participant. Compounding these specific academic standards, students' breadth of knowledge could grow to develop a common source of contemporary culture that, while not directly related to a science or math curriculum, would certainly provide an outlet by which students could better accept the variety provided in the larger school wide curriculum. Some studies have suggested that music develops math skills, English language expansion develops critical thinking in understanding the root words in science texts, and poetry even permeates our appreciation of social and community issues. Research in one field (poetry) always translates into an understanding of how to research material in other subjects.

Ultimately, this is a history course as well as a writing unit; an appreciation of hip hop is just the beginning of looking into the history of African American lyrics. Furthermore, the teacher ought to establish an appreciation for all lyrics, and all cultural strains of music on some level. If we can appreciate one history (African American) we can appreciate all history (human). By extension, if we can appreciate one set of lyrics (hip hop) we can appreciate all lyrics (literature in general).

### **Strategies**

This unit will use a variety of teaching strategies. One technique serves Madeline Hunter's Model of Direct Instruction, including lesson plans in the following pattern:

1. objectives
2. standards
3. anticipatory set (DO NOW)

4. teaching (I DO)
  - \* input
  - \* modeling
  - \* check for understanding
5. guided practice/monitoring (WE DO)
6. closure
7. independent practice. (YOU DO)

The strategies employed by the teacher of this unit will be varied, and require changes within the classroom environment, as well as permission from administrators to attend public performances and journey to local universities and cultural centers. There is also some planning required to coordinate public poetry performances, as well as some collaboration with other teachers in the arts.

First of all, teachers and students should become comfortable within the classroom setting: desks should be movable, in order to accommodate frequent changes in group structure. In support of this, the structures required for this unit include:

- 1) Circular seating for:
  - A. roundtable discussions
  - B. “popcorn” reading
  - C. laptop distribution and
  - D. independent writing with teacher supervision
- 2) Paired groupings: for
  - A. think/pair/share discussions
  - B. teacher/student conferences and private critiques
  - C. paired projects
- 3) Single rows of independent seating, facing one wall, for
  - A. films
  - B. Smartboard demonstrations and participation
  - C. Chalk & Talk
- 4) Small circles of 4-5 desks (depending upon the size of the class) for
  - A. Debate
  - B. multi-role group activities, in particular poetics analysis
  - C. a team poem for a slam contest
- 5) Comfortable reading area(s) of a sofa or easy chairs

**Ultimately, what matters most is student involvement and engaging activities.** However, a well-equipped room may aid teachers and students in this regard.

Teachers should have the following tools at their disposal:

- 1) Paper (lined, blank, colored) and pens/pencils
- 2) Stereo system (either with a laptop, speakers, and projector (ideal) or “boom box”)
- 3) Copy of Poetry Vocabulary terms (see Hip Hop Poetry and the Classics)
- 4) DVD's
  - *Do the Right Thing*
  - access to select downloaded YouTube videos
- 5) Computer access
- 6) A reading and/or listening library (see Bibliography)

Students will:

- read and listen to poetry of the hip hop, funk, jazz, and blues eras cooperatively and independently;
- write independently and cooperatively
- complete a group project as well as (depending upon time) an independent research project

These assignments reflect a desire to couple the I Do/We Do/You Do paradigm within each class day with a course path of I Do/We Do/You Do progression.

### **Classroom Activities/Lesson Plans**

#### **LESSON PLAN I:**

**Objective** = Analyze lyrics to see how the music of hip hop communicates a political message

**Standards** =

- (1.1.11.D) Identify, describe, evaluate and synthesize the essential ideas in text
- (1.1.11.F) Understand the key meaning of and apply key vocabulary across the various subject areas
- (1.3.11.C) Analyze, in terms of literary quality, the effectiveness of the author's use of literary devices
- (1.3.11.F) Read and respond to non-fiction and fiction, including poetry and drama

**Do Now**/Warm-Up Activity = list at least 5 songs by African Americans you like, from any time period, on one side of a note card

**Step 1** = Distribute copies of “Fight the Power” by Public Enemy and play the song from a CD, YouTube, or some other recording device

**Step 2** = Develop a discussion around student associations with the song: Did anyone write this song on his/her list? Has anyone heard this song before? Does anyone like this song? Why? Why not? Limit this discussion to no more than 5 minutes.

**Step 3** = (I DO) Explain to students the importance and relevance of this song in African

American historical music, including but not limited to:

- Public Enemy was one of the first hip hop groups anywhere but in particular in black America
- “Fight the Power” was used as the theme song for a groundbreaking film by Spike Lee called “Do The Right Thing,” the first film to use hip hop music as a “musical score” (give a definition if necessary on a “Word Wall”)
- “Fight the Power” uses “turntablism,” the musical technique of scratching vinyl records backwards to create sound effects in the same way a guitar is strummed or picked to create sound effects from its strings
- “Fight the Power” is a political statement that sums up an attitude of a collective group of people who challenge the “status quo” (give a definition if necessary on a “Word Wall” = “keeping things the way they presently are”)
- The main “refrain” or “chorus” is an “anthem” = a rallying cry/a set of words with such an impact as to inspire singing along

**Step 4** = (WE DO) Develop a discussion around three essential questions based upon the lyrics of the song “Fight the Power” (have students write/list their answers on a handout or blank piece of paper):

1. Who is the power they’re fighting?

-Possible answers include: the Police, the government, teachers(!), parents, the self

2. Do you think Public Enemy, as a band, is the only group affected by these “powers”? Who else is affected?

-Possible answers include: criminals, teenagers, oppressed people, political activists, rebels

3. How do they/we fight these powers? What are our options for challenging these powers?

-Possible answers include: retaliation, violence, political action, voting, speaking out, protest, and writing

**Step 5** = (YOU DO) Have students read the lyrics on both a handout and a projection (or excerpts, see p.111 in Hip Hop Poetry and the Classics) of the song and locate lines which give the poem a political stance and explain why each line has a political message or impact.

-Possible answers include: “freedom of speech” which refers to our rights in this country according to the Constitution; “To revolutionize make a change”, suggesting insurrection or overthrowing the government or any of the powers listed above by students in Step 4; “We are the same/No we’re not the same” suggests that people in our country are the same but *not* equal

**Step 6** = Have students share their responses with the class as a whole. If there is a smart board or overhead projector a lot more can be done through the teacher demonstration, as well as with students highlighting and/or circling the key lines on the board.

**WRAP-UP** = Identify the key words from the lesson: musical score, turntablism, status quo, as well as any other words of interest arising from the discussions. Summarize the importance of the lesson: Understanding the lyrics of a song is as important to

understanding the music, and is a lifelong practice. Every song using language has the potential to express a political act as this one does, though some are not as direct.

**HOMEWORK** = Homework should be to identify key lines in one song on the original note card from the beginning of class (the “DO NOW”) which have political impact and/or significance to the overall meaning of the song. Students should be encouraged to bring in copies of the lyrics to their songs attached with these lines highlighted, circled, or identified in some way. In addition, they can be assigned the responsibility of explaining why the lines are significant to the overall impact and meaning of the song they have chosen to analyze.

- The following days can be spent exploring other hip hop songs in a similar method, with the teacher developing questions around each set of lyrics. Key songs from the period can be found in The Anthology of Rap (see bibliography), an indispensable volume for the teaching of hip hop lyrics, and providing a plethora of source material that would significantly contribute to any classroom library. Just be careful it doesn't disappear on the first day!
- For teaching poetry/lyrical terms there is no greater resource to the classroom teacher than Hip Hop Poetry and the Classics, to which this activity owes a lot of credit.
- Students could watch the film “Do The Right Thing” by Spike Lee to see the song in context of the larger political movement against racism at the time, in the way A Raisin in the Sun sparked the civil rights movement of its time. A careful teaching of the film could go a long way towards developing a media literacy as well as appreciation for the larger musical score. Teachers should read “Scoring a Black Nation” (ch.7) in Race Music by Guthrie Ramsey (see bibliography) ahead of time for deeper insight into the film's musical and cultural elements.
- Students could apply themselves further by writing their own political “anthems” around an issue that needs changing in their own contexts; this would open an entire new field of experimentation, including but not limited to composing their own songs in the style of the time. See How to Rap by Paul Edwards and Kool G Rap. (PA standard 1.2.11.C, Produce work in at least one literary genre that follows the conventions of the genre)
- KRS-ONE is a solo musician who “is often referred to simply as the Teacher for his command of lyrical knowledge” (p.439, The Anthology of Rap). His song “Sound of Da Police” also stirs a lot of complex political attitudes. Reading these lyrics can lead to a productive discussion as well as unproductive though sometimes necessary venting, so concern must be made to emphasize specific poetic and literary techniques employed in the song. Use the glossary found in the book Hip Hop Poetry and the Classics to guide student analysis, as well as the guiding questions: How do we challenge these authorities? What constructive changes need to be made? How does his poetry communicate an urgency to confront and change society?

## LESSON PLAN II:

**Objective** = participate in groups to analyze the role of men and women in society according to James Brown's song "It's a Man's World"

**Standards** =

(1.2.11.B) Use and understand a variety of media and evaluate the quality of material produced

(1.8.11.B) Locate information using appropriate sources and strategies

(1.4.11.B) Write complex informational pieces (essays)

(1.5.11.B) Write using well-developed content appropriate to the topic

(1.6.11.D) Contribute to discussions

**Do Now** = Ask female individuals in the class to independently *think* of the names of at least 5 inventions created by women. Male individuals in the class should *think* independently of 5 inventions for which men are responsible.

**Step 1** = Think Pair Share activity: *Pair* one male with one female as nearly as possible depending upon the makeup of the class (require that there be at least 1 male and 1 female in each grouping.) Have students *share* his or her list with their partner of the opposite sex in each pairing/group. Each partner should listen to what the other person has to say and prepare to repeat it back to the class. Third, have students *share* their partner's list of inventions aloud. Teachers can approach the recording of this information in a number of ways: using the old fashioned chalk board or a white board; using a laptop projector or Smartboard/Promethean Board to display the answers, or have students practice listening skills if that's what's needed or that's what's sufficient based upon the size or climate of the class. This can easily lead to a very heated discussion, so be careful to manage the group with humor above all else, but also with a critical eye. Thinking/Pairing/and Sharing should be accomplished quickly and efficiently, as students will inevitably protest against their pairing partner, but this is to be disregarded or dismissed as "part of the activity". Ha!

**Step 2** = If possible, watch YouTube video (see works bibliography) of James Brown's performance of "It's a Man's World" for dramatic effect, or play a recording of the song to allow students to look at each other while listening, or distribute the lyrics and have students read them silently during the music. Or you could skip to Step 3.

**Step 3** = Read aloud the lyrics to the song by James Brown by having individual students read at least one "stanza" or "verse" (these terms can be added to the word wall.)

**Step 4** = Ask students to discuss how their lists compared and contrasted with James Brown's beliefs, as read/heard/seen in the song "It's a Man's World". The guiding questions should be: Is it a Man's world? How? Why? Teachers can direct them to participate in their original pairings or in the entire group context. The teacher should facilitate only (again, depending upon the climate developed in the room, which may be supported by a friendly colleague, special education teacher, counselor or administrator

for the day) but allow students to engage in their own collective discussion so long as they keep focused upon the topic. Simply be the note taker (unless there is a specific student with whom this would be an excellent role.)

**Wrap-Up** = Teacher can summarize (or better yet have students summarize as an exit ticket on a note card) the conclusions or salient points of the class period

**Homework** = Students should write two paragraphs: One of James Brown's opinions and another of the students' own opinions

**Lyrics to "It's a Man's World" by James Brown  
(transcribed by the author from James Brown's Greatest Hits Collection)**

This is a man's world, this is a man's world  
But it wouldn't be nothing, nothing without a woman or a girl

You see, man made the cars to take us over the road  
Man made the trains to carry heavy loads  
Man made electric light to take us out of the dark  
Man made the boat for the water, like Noah made the ark

This is a man's, a man's, a man's world  
But it wouldn't be nothing, nothing without a woman or a girl

Man thinks about a little baby girls and a baby boys  
Man makes them happy 'cause man makes them toys  
And after man has made everything, everything he can  
You know that man makes money to buy from other man

This is a man's world  
But it wouldn't be nothing, nothing without a woman or a girl

He's lost in the wilderness  
He's lost in bitterness  
He's lost.

**Sample Constructed Response**

It may be a man's world, however, James Brown says it is incomplete without women. For example, he states men are responsible for technology: "man made the trains", "man made electric light", and "man made the boat". Furthermore, he adds that man "has made everything", especially "money to buy from other man". In short, he believes men are responsible for it all, but are incomplete without women: "but it wouldn't be nothing without a woman or a girl". Ultimately, he says "he's lost". He may be writing about a lack of female influence in his own life, on a personal level.

I think he's all wrong. In fact, I think the world was created by women, who clearly have the power of creativity as child bearers, but even created baskets to carry food, blankets to keep us warm, and clothes to show us off. While mostly this is a stereotype and maybe even a gross assumption, women are the great creators in this life. Why else would we call our home "Mother Earth"?

- class days can be followed by peer editing, adding more sophisticated language or connecting words, as well as scaffolding sample paragraphs with the help of Special Education or ESOL teachers
- students can be asked to bring in songs (from the 1960's-70's "funk" era, or really any period) which seek to define or address the roles of men and women. (For example, see "Ladies First" by Queen Latifah in The Anthology of Rap)
- further discussions can address how men's and women's roles are defined in certain ethnic groups, races, cultures, societies, historical/herstorical periods, and economic classes
- essays/constructed responses can be expanded upon, especially in the upper grades, and could even lead to deeper research, of producing at least a 5 paragraph essay, but including diverse quotations from lyrics and/or philosophical statements

### **LESSON PLAN III:**

**Objective** = Compare and contrast two blues songs by Langston Hughes

**Standards** =

(1.5.11.C) Write with controlled and/or subtle organization

(1.5.11.D) Write with a command of the stylistic aspects of composition

(1.8.11.B) Locate information using appropriate sources and strategies

**Do Now** = Write on a note card what makes you "blue" (sad, depressed, down)

**Step 1** = Discuss the role of sadness and its creative possibilities. It may be appropriate to open up here about personal moments of grieving or alternatively keep it light with a quote from Bleeding Gums Murphy on The Simpsons, who once said to little Lisa "The blues isn't about feeling better. It's about making other people feel worse!" (episode unknown). Ultimately, the point is to convince students everyone gets "the blues". In this case the poet expressed himself through a "vernacular" form that previously had not existed in the world, although it drew heavily on the music traditions of black Americans like himself who had been brought here from Africa (teachers are encouraged to read both Lift Every Voice and The Making of African America as a much deeper background and for appreciation of this fact; see the works cited list above for more details.) Draw from whatever examples you'd like, however keep it brief.

**Step 2** = **If possible**, arrange for a dramatic reading of a blues song by Langston Hughes with musical accompaniment: the point is to make the song come alive. Despite initial groans this can be very effective. It can be as simple as having a school musician play a

piano, flute, saxophone, clarinet or guitar, with or without words, but could be accompanied with a class poet reading the words by Langston Hughes (choose someone respected by his/her peers, if possible.) Dignifying this kind of “country” music for the class through live performance is a great introduction to the blues, and can be done very simply but may require significant guts and/or preparation. Otherwise, skip to Step 3.

**Step 3** = Print copies of two Langston Hughes blues poems found in The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes (see bibliography), “Homesick Blues” (p.72) and “Evenin Air Blues” (p.225) and share them with two halves of the room (by any grouping). Have one half brainstorm together on a large sheet of poster paper (or if technology is available, a Smartboard) elements of the poem which stand out to them, while the other half of the class does the same with their blues poem. The point is to analyze the lyrics separately for their individual characteristics first. Examples of standout characteristics include the “rhythm pattern”, “rhyme scheme”, “content”/subject matter, “internal narrative”, and language “style” which suggests “character” and “voice”, all of which can be placed in a word wall and explored in vocabulary exercises.

**Step 4** = After each group has analyzed and documented observations on the poster paper or Smartboard, have them switch to the other poem and do the same as in Step 3. Spend only 10 minutes on Step 3 and 10 on Step 4.

Step 5 = Have students address a main classroom board together (no longer in 2 separate groups). Have students draw (or distribute copies of) a Venn Diagram and draw comparisons between the two sets of notes from each poem. As a collective class this can be very productive and fast paced.

**Wrap-up** = Have students copy the Venn Diagram notes from the board

**Homework** = What could follow this class is a larger essay or research project at the teacher’s discretion and based upon curriculum expectations in the School District. Ideally, students should be expected to locate blues lyrics independently from the Langston Hughes and other books or from other exhaustive but rather simple internet research. Students can look into the various Blues forms and explore the wide range of subjects leading to traditional blues music expression. Homework products could include independently produced Venn Diagrams from new Blues research to Compare and Contrast essays.

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## **Appendix**

### **Content standards**

1.1.11. A Locate various texts, media and traditional resources for assigned and independent projects before reading

1.1.11. H Demonstrate fluency and comprehension in reading

1.2.11. A Read and understand essential content of informational texts and documents in all academic areas

1.3.5. C Describe how the author uses literary devices to convey meaning

1.4.11. A Write poems

1.5.11. D Write with a command of the stylistic aspects of composition

1.5.11. C Revise writing to improve style, word choice, and subtlety of meaning after rethinking how questions of purpose, audience, and genre have been addressed

1.6.11. A Listen to others

1.6.11. D Contribute to discussions

1.6.11. E Participate in small and large group discussions and presentations