

# USING FOLK MUSIC TO TEACH STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY

by  
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*I would teach music, physics, and philosophy; but most importantly music, for in the patterns of music and all the arts are the keys of learning*  
—Plato

## *Introduction*

**F**olk music is a useful tool for teaching social studies in the classroom. The egregious errors and glaring omissions that plague U.S. history textbooks are beyond the breadth of this article, however, it is quite evident that nontraditional methods are needed to bolster student's interest in history and social studies. By employing alternative methods such as deconstructing folk song to teach social studies, students may be surprised to find that social studies is educational, entertaining and enlightening.

Among these alternative instructional methods, the use of primary sources holds promise for motivating and encouraging students in historical inquiry. Using primary sources generates interest and inspires creativity among students. Primary sources also allow for past and present comparative analysis, emotional impact, and employing various methods of research. When students are able to formulate an historical interpretation for themselves, their educational experience is both enriching, and exciting. Students benefit from hands-on experience, but more importantly, they are able to get involved in the process of history making when engaged with primary sources. One such source is the American folk song.

## *Folk Songs as Instructional Tools*

Folk songs, though considered somewhat unconventional, can serve as an ideal primary source, because, like traditional primary sources, they derive from and reflect the values and ideals of the period under examination. Folk songs offer valid commentary on the life and times of its author as well as those that subscribed to its professed ideology. Folk songs also offer insight

into regional variances of the American experience. Moreover, folk songs provide useful clues to interpret values, beliefs, as well as the collective hopes and fears of an individual or group under historical examination.

Alan Lomax, the preeminent folklorist of American folk music, suggests the primary function of a folk song is to articulate a specific characteristic of a region and the culture of its inhabitants. The folk song provides a community and its members with emotional attachments to their locality, their collective and individual identity. Despite its origins in the U.S., the blues nevertheless furnished blacks with ties to Africa by retaining African cultural aspects, such as polyrhythmic techniques and vocal styling. In 1929, Ella May Wiggins, songwriter and activist in the textile mill strikes in the Piedmont region, adapted new lyrics to traditional mountain ballads. By bestowing the new songs with an established regional atmosphere, Ella May helped listeners easily identify with the song and its message.

Folk songs exist to tell a story—personal and political. Protest in folk song is a long-standing American tradition. Lomax says, “The mass of the colonists were poor country folk, carriers of traditional melodies. Many were rebels, fleeing from political persecution and longing to express their feelings openly. Thus a note of social protest rang through early American balladry, and the lives and problems of the common people became its main concern.” Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. DuBois both suggest blues and spirituals were subversive forms of protest for the black community. Protest songs also fueled the turbulent decade of the 1960s, including the Civil Rights Movement as well as the counter-culture revolution.

Critical analysis of folk songs existed in the late 19th century, but historians, by and large, have been hesitant to accept folk songs as worthy of serious scholarly inquiry. Philip S. Foner uncovered American songs of protest as early as colonial times. Foner’s research suggests that as long as Americans have been working there has been a need to sing about their triumphs and tragedies. Scholars of African-American history have disproved accepted historical theses by demonstrating songs were subversive and a means of perpetuating a culture of resistance.

Perhaps no one has done more to establish folk song as an academic canon than Alan Lomax. Alan Lomax’s main goal was, “To give ‘a voice to the voiceless’ and to engender ‘cultural equity’ so that the little man’s and woman’s thoughts and feelings could be heard as clearly as those of the upper classes that control the cultural spigots.” Lynch concurs, “As historical sources, labor [folk] songs give voice to workers who might otherwise be

deemed inarticulate.” Thus, Lomax suggests that historical inquiry of folk song is the same as historical analysis of the very lives of the people for whom the songs meant something.

Scholars of African-American history have often looked to jazz and other black idioms as guides to understand the history and culture of black Americans, such as history professor John Baskerville’s study on the impact of Black Nationalism on the free jazz idiom of the 1960s and 1970s as well as Frank Kofsky’s *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*. The current trend in scholarship substantiates the importance of cultural artifacts such as songs, dance, and music. Harvard professor and Pulitzer Prize winner Robert Coles says of Bruce Springsteen, “His songs give you documentary glimpses of America.” Denisoff says, “[Bob] Dylan, rightly or wrongly, has been termed the ‘voice of a generation.’” Folk songs say this is who we are and this is our life, and peoples’ lives and times merit historical inquiry.

John Steinbeck best summarizes the importance of folk songs: The songs of the working people have always been their sharpest statement, and the one statement that cannot be destroyed. You can burn books, buy newspapers, you can guard against handbills and pamphlets, but you cannot prevent singing ...

Songs are the statement of a people. You can learn more about people by listening to their songs than in any other way, for into the songs go all the hopes and hurts, the angers, the fears, the wants and aspirations.

## *Five Key Inquiry Questions*

By applying five key inquiry questions, students can learn history using folk songs. (1) Why was it written, (2) Whose viewpoint is presented, (3) Is the account of the song believable, (4) Is the song’s meaning reflective of the larger group, and (5) How has the song made the investigator feel about the period under examination?

When applied to folk songs, these questions engage students in using folk songs as historical primary sources. These five questions provide students with a unique opportunity to analyze the sociopolitical aspects of U.S. history. By researching select folk songs and the historical implications attached to those songs, students are able to effectively make connections between past and present. As Howard Zinn said:

“We learn something about the symbiotic relationship between giant corporations and government. We learn about the selective control of violence, where the authorities deal one way with the violence of workers and another way with the violence of police and militia. We learn about the role of the mainstream press. At the same time, we are inspired by those ordinary men and women who persist, with extraordinary courage, in the resistance to overwhelming power. It is a story that continues in our time.”

By using these key questions, teachers implicitly invite students to explore alternative interpretations of U.S. history. As a result, students may actually experience the nature of historical inquiry. For example, students may discover that lower-class Americans were openly critical of U.S. society, a perspective infrequently presented in U.S. history textbooks. Student may discover that the voiceless have used folk songs as a way of making their voices heard. In other words, folk songs demonstrate how to think about the social studies—and history in particular—rather than just what to think about social studies. Students may also discover that in a very real sense, the powerful write the histories, the poor write the songs.

## *Getting Started*

Several songs provide exemplary case studies such as “This Land is Your Land” by Woody Guthrie, “The Ballad of Ira Hayes” by Peter LaFarge (made popular by Johnny Cash), and “I Hate the Capitalist System” by Sarah Ogan Gunning. There are also several websites that promote using music in the classroom such [www.amc-music.org](http://www.amc-music.org), and [www.songsforteaching.com/socialstudiessongs.htm](http://www.songsforteaching.com/socialstudiessongs.htm). The Google search engine will also lead to a wealth of information with regard to applicable folk songs.

Currently, music programs as well as social studies have been devalued due to the requirements of No Child Left Behind Legislation (NCLB). Using music in the social studies classroom may well be a healthy, educational alternative to insure that our students understand the importance of music in people’s lives. Using music in the classroom also eases the monotony of textbook reliance when presenting the past to students—a past that is vibrant, exciting, and relevant. The study of folk songs is but another tool teachers can use to motivate students to learn history.

## References

<sup>1</sup><http://www.amc-music.org> Retrieved August 16, 2004.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 315.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 316.

<sup>4</sup>Loewen, 316.

<sup>5</sup>Alan Lomax, *The Folk Songs of North America* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1960), xv.

<sup>6</sup>Lawrence W. Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 153.

<sup>7</sup>Lomax, xvi.

<sup>8</sup>Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 57-58. See also W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; reprint, New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 179-80.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 4-6. See also Archie Green, "Labor Song: An Ambiguous Legacy," *Journal of Folklore Research* 28 (May-December 1991), 93-94.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 5. See also Philip S. Foner, *American Labor Songs of the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975).

<sup>11</sup>No Depression, no. 41 (September/October 2002), 8. See also Alan Lomax, *Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1993), xv.

<sup>12</sup>Lynch, 3.

<sup>13</sup>Lomax, *Folk Songs of North America*, xxi.

<sup>14</sup>Baskerville, *passim*. See also Denisoff, 234.

<sup>15</sup>"More Scholars Focus on Popular Music as a Key to Examining Culture and History," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 1, 1998, A16-A22.

<sup>16</sup>New York Times, *The Arts*, March 20, 2003, B1, B5.

<sup>17</sup>Denisoff, 20.

<sup>18</sup>John Greenway, *American Folksongs of Protest*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), vii.

<sup>19</sup>James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 316-17.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 55.

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