

Relevant Unit Objectives

Module 1: African American Community and Culture

This lesson addresses the following Essential Questions:

- How is a community defined?
- How was the African American community defined?

Objectives of the Lesson

Aim

How did Duke Ellington help transform popular American music?

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Understand what makes jazz music “jazz”
- Understand how the African American experience is reflected in the music that Duke Ellington popularizes
- Become familiar with the particular achievements of Duke Ellington

Introduction

Experiencing the music of Duke Ellington:

Students will view a brief video clip of the Duke Ellington Orchestra performing “Take The A Train” from the 1943 film *Reveille With Beverly*. It is available at: <http://youtube.com/watch?v=azHbjNMaEFc>

Ask students to answer the following questions:

- How does this video open?
- What connection do you think jazz music has to the opening sequence of this video? (*Note to teacher: Explain what a record player is, and that trains were the “modern” way to cross the country in the 1940’s.*)
- What do the movements made by the musicians while playing and the steps taken by the singer during the song tell you about the music?
- This movie was released five years before the first televisions were available for purchase in private homes. How do you think people shared visual entertainment before television?

Instructional Procedures

Step One:

The teacher leads students in a brief discussion of the four questions posed above.

Step Two:

Have students read the first four paragraphs about the Pullman Porters at:

<http://www.wnyc.org/books/36642>

- In segregated pre-Civil Rights era America, why is the job of Pullman Porters so important in sharing the culture of Black America with people across the nation?
- Why would African American songwriters, poets and entertainers value Pullman Porters? (Think about the opening sequence featuring the train and phonograph album)

Step Three:

After the teacher has familiarized him/herself with Wynton Marsalis' introduction about the train as "the rhythm in jazz music," the teacher chooses two or three spreads from the book to show to the class. Point out the illustrations and ask the class to brainstorm the things that inspire rhythm for Langston Hughes. Students will then watch the opening video again. Students should look for all the different ways rhythm is represented in the movie (hint: pay attention to the music, the musicians, the singer, the setting, etc.)

Step Four:

The teacher reads the poem "Juke Box Love Song" by Langston Hughes (from *The Block*, available at

<http://www.amazon.com/Block-Langston-Hughes/dp/067086501X>)

- How is this poem's message reflected in the video?
- How is the video reflected in this poem?

Step Five:

The teacher can provide additional background information about Duke Ellington found in middle/upper school MAAP lessons.

Concluding Discussion:

- Using a New York City subway map, have students locate the A train. If the A train ends in Harlem, where does it start? (If the song is about people ending up in Harlem, where do they live?) If Harlem is a cultural destination for Black America what is the song saying about who celebrates it?
- How did the railroad, the record album and the radio help Duke Ellington spread the popularity of jazz?

Materials

Video clip of the Duke Ellington Orchestra performing Billy Strayhorn's "Take The A Train" from the 1943 film *Reveille With Beverly*.

<http://youtube.com/watch?v=azHbjNMaEFc>

Biography of Duke Ellington from website accompanying PBS' documentary, *Jazz: A Film by Ken Burns*.

http://www.pbs.org/jazz/biography/artist_id_ellington_duke.htm

Langston Hughes, *The Book of Rhythms*, Reprinted by Oxford University Press, 1995.

The Block, Printed by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: Viking Juvenile Press, 1995.