

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:

- Identify the central elements of jazz music
- Understand the historical impact of jazz on popular American music and culture
- 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:

- Pick the three adjectives that first come to mind when you hear this music
- Listen to the lyrics. Why do you “take the A train”?
- Do the musicians (including the singer) stand still while they are performing? Why or why not?

Instructional Procedures**Step One:**

The teacher leads students in a brief discussion of the three questions posed below:

1. On the board, compile a list of adjectives offered by students in reaction to the video. Ask students to briefly explain why they chose the adjectives they did. Do certain adjectives appear more than once?
2. Make sure students identify that the A train goes to “Sugar Hill” and is the “quickest way to get to Harlem.” Ask if they know where Sugar Hill is, and briefly discuss its importance (you may wish to use “A Walk about Harlem’s Sugar Hill, below in the “Materials” section). Then ask why anyone – black or white -- might want to go to Sugar Hill or Harlem in 1943.
3. Discuss student findings about the activity of the musicians in the video. Is it possible to play or listen to this kind of music without wanting to move around or dance? What exactly is it that makes one want to dance when s/he hears this music?

Step Two:

The teacher provides background information about Duke Ellington. This may be done as a summary of the main points listed below, as a worksheet, as a PowerPoint presentation, or another appropriate strategy. (NB: This language is taken directly from the lessons on Langston Hughes & other important figures in the MAAP lesson format.)

Edward Kennedy Ellington, known for most of his 50-year-career as “Duke,” is widely considered one of the most important figures in the history of jazz and popular American music. Just as Louis Armstrong is most closely associated with New Orleans jazz, Ellington is the key figure in the rise of New York jazz, based mainly in the Harlem of the Harlem Renaissance. He is known as both an orchestra leader and composer of such jazz staples as “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got that Swing),” “Mood Indigo,” and “Sophisticated Lady.”

Born in Washington, D.C., in 1899, Ellington moved to New York at the invitation of a bandleader in 1923. By 1927 his orchestra had become headliners at the famed Cotton Club in Harlem. It was during his stint at the Cotton Club that Ellington became a household name, thanks to nightly radio broadcasts and the prestige of the club as a hotspot for black and white audiences alike. The Ellington Orchestra appeared in numerous Hollywood films, the clip shown at the beginning of this lesson being a prime example. Ellington headlined regularly at Carnegie Hall. He was a major musical figure of his era for both black and white audiences alike.

Ellington continued to tour the world and perform until his death in 1974. He is credited with writing more than 2000 songs. His music incorporated elements of many traditional forms of African-American music, including ragtime, the blues, and minstrel songs, as well as mainstream American music. But he combined these into a new and unique form of expression that became the most popular music of its day, and continues to be considered among the most important and original musical expressions in American history.

Step Three:

The teacher gives students the handout on Ten Basic Elements of Jazz. Students will then watch the opening video again. Ask students if they can identify any of the elements of jazz offered by Hughes in the performance in the video. Here are some possible connections to keep in mind:

- The trumpets play syncopated notes in the opening phrase
- The drums, bass and guitar all provide a basic beat
- The men who accompany the vocal soloist demonstrate tone color in their vocals by imitating the sounds of instruments
- There are several recurring riffs in the piece; ask students if they can identify any of them by singing or humming them
- Watch for Ellington's improvisation during his piano solo in the middle of the piece
- Joy of playing is demonstrated throughout by the actions and bodily expressions of the musicians

Step Four:**Concluding Discussion**

1. Why do you think Ellington's music became so popular not only with African-American audiences, but with white audiences as well?
2. In the video, how are the musicians dressed? What conclusions can you draw from their attire? What does this attire indicate about how audiences perceived these musicians?
3. What types of music are most popular in the United States today? Does this music have African-American influences? (Note to instructor: the development of rock and roll draws heavily from rhythm and blues, which was a distinctly African-American musical genre. Rap, though performed by many white artists today, is a form of rhythmic story-telling that draws heavily on traditional African musical forms.)

Additional Activity:

Ask students to research one of Ellington's songs or peruse the many videos of Ellington performing available on YouTube. They may then wish to present their findings to the class about what further insights into Ellington's music they have learned from their research.

Materials:

- Video clip of the Duke Ellington Orchestra performing "Take The A Train" from the 1943 film *Reveille with Beverly*.
<http://youtube.com/watch?v=azHbjNMaeFc>
- A Walk about Harlem's Sugar Hill
<http://www.sugarhillmap.com/home.asp>
- 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 First Book of Jazz*, Reprinted by Ecco Press, 1995.

Handout: Basic Elements of Jazz**Basic Elements of Jazz**

(Adapted from Langston Hughes, *The First Book of Jazz*, 1955)

The great poet Langston Hughes (see MAAP lesson on Hughes) wrote a children's guide to jazz in 1955 (it is still available for purchase as a reprint from Ecco Press). In it, he identified ten basic elements of jazz music, some of which have been explained below. (Note: all quotations are directly from Hughes' book.)

Syncopation – The “shifting of the normal rhythmic stress from the strong beat to the weak beat, accenting the offbeat.”

Improvisation – Changing the musical line as one plays, “or making up variations on old themes directly on the instrument being played rather than from written notes.” With improvisation, the same piece of music is never played exactly the same way twice.

Percussion – Jazz relies heavily on a beat provided not only by traditional percussion instruments, such as the drums, but also by the guitar, piano, tuba, or bass.

Tone Color – “Jazz instruments may take on the varied tones of the singing or speaking voice, even of laughter or of groans, in a variety of tonal colorations.” Likewise, the human voice can imitate the sounds of instruments, as is common in “scat singing.”

Riff – “This is a single rhythmic phrase repeated over and over, usually as a background to the lead melody.”

Joy of Playing – This aspect of jazz speaks for itself.