



Music as an Expression of Self: How Music Supports Our Perception of Identity

Curriculum Unit 16.02.10

by D. Scott Stewart

Rationale

The year 2016 was a highly emotional one for fans of popular music. The deaths of musical artists such as Natalie Cole, David Bowie, Glen Frey, and Prince have left indelible marks on the lives of many around the world. Why do we feel such a loss over individuals with whom we have no direct connection? A common theory explaining this phenomenon is that we do not feel a loss because of any insightful, personal understanding of who that artist was, but because of how that artist and their music helped us understand ourselves. Throughout the course of history, people have struggled to answer the fundamental question of, “Who Am I?” How do we define ourselves and how do we want others to perceive us? Over the course of this seminar participants have discussed how we can explore the notion of “identity”. The seminar focused on the childhood through adolescent experience. At no other time in a person’s life does one search for a sense of identity, a sense of self, more than during adolescence. It is during the middle and high school years that youth are given opportunities to step outside of parental/guardian influence that had a significant impact shaping identity since birth. This is the first time our sense of self and our views on others’ identity are challenged. Youth are continually bombarded with information trying to influence identity for a myriad of sociological reasons. They are continually searching for and experimenting with the idea of identity, and their choices in music often reflects this chaos. To an outside observer this can indicate a psychological and emotional fragility as identity appears to change almost indiscriminately. Because of this it is not surprising many youth and young adults flounder through their middle, high school, and even early college years, unable to achieve a solid foundation on which to achieve stability when it comes to feeling confident in their identities. Youth often feel trapped or constrained by what they perceive as an immutable situation and seek out avenues through which they can support their journey towards an identity. During these formative years identities are often viewed by our students as concrete paradigms against which the struggle to break free can be in, and of itself, a way of declaring how we see ourselves and categorize others. My supposition is that while we can examine the concepts of identity through books, identity is also often expressed through our choices in music. There is an innate, natural connection between the written word and the aural experience in music. Combination of words, sentences, and entire pieces, particularly when discussing the genre of poetry, are often compared to elements of music, be it beat, rhythm, or flow. Music has the ability to help us understand ourselves intrinsically and to aid in grounding our feelings and thoughts in relation to events

occurring in the world around us. Music is often seen as a safe way to both analyze and project one's ideas and feelings. Music often supports what psychologist David Elkind refers to as "Personal Fable". Elkind originally coined the term, "Personal Fable" 1967 and it is generally defined as a development during adolescence of a belief that the individual is unique or special with this view often being accompanied by feelings of invulnerability. Music supports the creation and projection of an outward facing persona that can, and often will morph as needed while creating bonds with others through a perceived common interest regardless of socio-economic status.

Content Overview and Objectives

Throughout the chaotic, unpredictable, and often messy process of discovery, one method people consistently use to identify oneself is through music. Music supports identity, from active participation in its creation to the personal experience of making a connection with an artist or song. Because music, like literature, has the potential to be interpreted through a myriad of lenses, no two individuals need to have the same concepts in order to have a piece of music support their current identity. Music allows a range of meaning to be projected based completely on the needs centered on the self. As we mature and learn more about ourselves and those around us we find identity is not static, but continually evolving. Our continued exposure to new ideas shapes and influences our world view and previously unforeseen combinations of identity become possible. No longer strangled by preconceptions with a limited range of attributes, we have the ability to refine our self-identities and our conceptions of others' identity according to a larger world-view. Acceptance of what we may have at one time believed to be outside personal tolerance becomes the norm. Despite this process, or perhaps because of it, a particular aspect of identity that modern society is currently struggling to process is that of non-binary gender/sexual identity. For this curriculum unit I have categorized three catch-all areas for the scope of identity: personal, projected, and perceived. Personal identity is defined as how an individual sees themselves. Projected identity is how an individual wishes others to identify them. Perceived identity is how we view another individual's identity. Lessons are presented in a specific order. Modifications can be made as needed based on your unique classroom environment; however, it is suggested that the overall arc of the curriculum retain its integrity from the micro to the macro in order to maintain cohesive scaffolding across the unit.

The learning goals for each category focus around:

1. Personal – An understanding of the basic tenets of what influences and defines "identity", methodologies through which individuals self-identify, and ways music is used to support these ideas.
2. Projected – Participants will explore how music is used to convey an outwardly projected identity. How do we wish to be seen by others in relation to how we identify ourselves? Do we listen to music to be "cool"? How does external musical input affect our identity?
3. Perceived – Participants will examine how personal musical choices influences their concept of others' identity and how society-at-large impacts and benefits from this interplay.

Teaching Strategies (& Risks)

I have endeavored to lay out the lessons in this curriculum unit in a reasonable sequential pattern; however, they are not intended to be broken down by schedule of completed tasks. Educators are encouraged to pace lesson plans based on class need, not on a scheduled timetable. While there will invariably be some overlap in content, participants should have sufficient time to feel comfortable with the material in order to facilitate understanding of the material.

Exploring how individuals use music to identify themselves and also how they categorize others should be done with extreme care and with the full understanding that this curriculum unit is not an attempt at psychoanalysis by the class, nor the educator. The outcome of the lessons in this unit is not intended as a judgment, nor as an indictment of an individual's choices. The goal of the curriculum is to examine how human beings create and support an identity for themselves through music as well as to raise awareness of preconceptions on another's identity based on observed behaviors and how external stimuli influence our views while raising awareness of music's impact on our identity, both consciously and subconsciously.

The literary tie-ins suggested in this unit are taken from the readings and discussions that occurred over the course of this unit at Yale and used in the district of New Haven, CT. Please feel free to substitute literature from within the district in which you teach and is at the appropriate level for your students. The length of the unit is suggested to take the full year in order to incorporate sufficient analysis and discussion of the literature; however, if you are restricted to a semester-length course or you are not allotted enough time to cover all the literature, I suggest providing synopsis with supplementary, targeted excerpts. In addition, there are abridged versions of a majority of "the classics" suitable for the classroom. For teachers who are not Language Arts focused, or if you are looking to get collegial input, talk with your Language Arts teachers and collaborate on a cross-disciplinary unit. Ultimately, if you are under time constraints, you do not need to use all three literary tie-ins. The units should be able to be modified so that teachers can import questions or topics from one section into another.

The methods used in this unit are based on understanding of respectful open inquiry. Students must feel safe to discuss topics that will challenge ideals. This unit is designed with high school students, targeting juniors and seniors, in mind because of the subject matter and level of discourse required to have a mature discourse. Idea hooks will be included to allow for all high school levels to be involved. Discretion will be left to an individual teacher on how to incorporate these ideas into an 8th grade unit plan.

In your classroom, be aware of student discomfort at certain topics such as, but not limited to, gender, sexual, and socio-economic identity. The facilitator should be careful to balance open discussion while being cognizant of student body language and inappropriate behaviors. You know your students and unique situations. When in doubt, consult with your peers and administration.

Lessons Section 1: “Getting to Know You” - Who Am I?

Essential questions - “What purpose does having an identity serve?”

The goal of this section is to have students understand how we self-identify and how we choose the music that supports our view of what makes each of us individuals. The unit should begin with an exploration of what “Identity” means and the ways through which students identify. In order to start a conversation about identity, it is important to understand, at a basic level, how individuals identify themselves. Identity is initially filtered through the personal experience and only when one can extrapolate meaning beyond one’s self, go beyond our “personal fable”, can we then identify with others. Our connection to music is not always so linear. Exposure to music is rarely achieved in a vacuum; it is often discovered first through close peers and key influences such as parents or relatives. However, meaning and emotional connection to a particular piece of music is generally achieved through something resonating on a personal level.

Where to begin?

As a starting point in the curriculum, the class will discuss how people categorize themselves to facilitate the creation of identity. One cannot fully understand the relationship we have with music without understanding how music relates to aspects of their identity. Begin the journey with two simple queries, “What is your name? and tell us something about yourself.” We all have a name and we all have some detail about ourselves that we believe to be unique and which we are comfortable sharing. While this may seem innocuous at first, establishing a trust between all participants is important and this simple bit of information can serve as a gateway to expanding the conversation. You will most likely find that several participants share common interests or that what was once thought to be unique is in actuality a broad life experience with common threads across the class. While the focus of this section is on the self, planting seeds of inquiry that touch on expanding the idea our connected experience of self-identity to others would not be inappropriate.

Allow the students ample time to come up with sufficient attributes through which society identifies itself and how we put ourselves into categories. Guided discussion should encourage participants to come up with as many possibilities of identity categorization using a hierarchical organization for ease of comprehension. A small sample of identity categorization from which to start discussion would be:

Gender

Sexual Orientation

Ethnocentric

Socio-economic

National & Regional

Education

Religion

Peer group sub-culture

Extracurricular (Hobbies/Sports)

Because music allows us to transcend the restrictive, isolating demographic parameters normally used to establish identity it holds a unique place as an art form and means of expression. While genres and styles of music are often categorized using these same generalized concepts used to define identity, inferred and sometimes openly declarative meaning associated to music often cuts through social and economic barriers. It is precisely because we have the ability to imprint our personal experience onto music that it becomes a medium through which one can claim as a representation of an individual's unique identity, supporting the "Personal fable," while simultaneously acting as a representation of a larger group, even extending its meaning to an entire culture.

Initial profile

In order to set a base-line, students will begin with the creation of a semi-private journal. These journals will be seen only by the student and you as the teacher. Journals will begin with a self-profile of how the participants identify themselves, starting with the information shared at the beginning of the section. Students should feel free to modify the identity categories at any time; however, students need to present new ideas to the group prior to making changes so the class has a common understanding of vocabulary.

Playlists

Students need to identify their current musical tastes and how they feel their musical preferences support their declared identity. Students should be prepared to share out at least one or two selections with the class as part of group discussion. Students should identify songs and artists/groups. Discussion about an artist's public persona is appropriate during this section of the curriculum unit as it will hook into future lessons. Conduct one-on-one meetings with students to discuss why music choices influence and have meaning for each student's self-identity.

Guiding suggestions/questions:

1. Are selections based on a general emotion, ideal, or philosophy or are the pieces of music associated with specific events that the student feels are particularly influential to the development of their self-awareness/identity?
2. Is there a music genre they feel is antithetical to their current understanding of their identity?
3. Do they believe peers listen to the same music for personal reasons?

Literary tie-in: Frankenstein (1831 edition)

An additional exercise would be to have students choose a character from a piece of literature and create a personal identity profile for that character. As part of this seminar's examination of identity, we studied Mary Shelley's book Frankenstein, specifically the personas of Victor Frankenstein and his creation - the creature. Mary Shelley sprinkles the story with details regarding specific books that influence the identities of both characters.

Expand this idea to music. What kinds of music would these two characters listen to? Be careful to keep the

focus on what might have been their personal choices, not what others believe they would have listened to. Remind the students that at this point they are looking at self-identity and what musical choices someone makes for themselves. What music might Victor and the creature listen to that supports their understanding of self-identity?

As the novel progresses, the creature is one of the only characters we see have an evolution of their understanding of how their identity is *perceived* by others, and *projects* that identity to match. An interesting line of inquiry would be to discuss whether or not the same can be said of other characters, specifically Frankenstein.

The very nature of analyzing personal identity lends itself to the infinite. Regardless of how we project ourselves to others, as human beings we inherently view ourselves as unique, valuing our individuality while at the same time struggling to conform. Only music holds a unique place in our lives that allows us a completely valid personal connection without devaluing another's interpretation.

Guiding questions:

1. Why and how are identifiers used, both negatively and positively?
2. Which attributes of identity are non-negotiable, such as skin color? Can these identifiers be transcended or is an identity indelibly tied to them?
3. Do these identifiers signify different meanings when used as personal, projected, or perceived identities?
4. How does categorizing provide commonality and differentiation between individuals?
5. What aspects of music allow individuals to create meaningful connections distinct from someone else's experience?
6. Can music have a unique identity or does it reject or transcend the constraints we place on people?

Lessons Section 2: "People Are Strange" - How music supports personal identity

Essential Question - "How does music support the evolution of your personal identity?"

In order to understand connections between identity and music, the class must also explore attributes of music itself. In the previous section students created an initial list of music they think reflects their self-identity while discussing identity categories and attributes. The goal of this section is for students to understand how music supports the various aspects of identity but also assists in its evolution.

Playlists

Using the songs generated during discussion in Section 1, students will create a list of genres of music that are directly related to the individuals to the class. Once the class feels that the list is accurate, the facilitator should note which genres are missing and help expand the list to any missing genres that the broader age

group demographic would listen to. The list will likely not remain static over the course of the unit as students' understanding broadens and discussion becomes more inclusive towards previously rejected genres.

The next step is to explore how the list of identity attributes generated in Section 1 can be associated with particular genres. This process will likely expand the original list of identity as students discuss how music crosses the boundaries of the three scopes of identity: personal, projected, and perceived. As music has the inherent ability to freely cross these areas of scope, students need to understand that a single genre must, by definition, contain attributes necessary to have a meaningful experience across diverse identity structures.

Should the class believe that a genre of music is isolated to a particular identity category, take the opportunity to focus in on that genre, forcing students to analyze what separates that genre for a singular purpose. Does country music only associate with "rednecks" or "hillbillies?" Is rap isolated to an African-American demographic? If time permits, I would highly suggest an exploration of spoken word/rap in non-western cultures as a means to break down ethnic/socio-economic preconceptions about this particular genre. As discussion drills deeper into the potential associations, a visible web of interconnected attributes and how they support a wider array of identities than initially considered should become clear.

Guiding questions:

1. What genres of music are associated with the identity variables defined in class?
2. Can the same genre be associated with differing, or outright opposing, identity attributes?
3. Do we associate genres of music with specific emotions? Can these genres contain conflicting emotions?

Literary tie-in: American Born Chinese

This activity serves two purposes: first is to engage students in a discussion around how music is associated with cultural, both ethnic and socio-economic, identity. Secondly, students will examine how the music has the ability to transcend unique identifiers and associations supporting a broad range of commonly experienced situations.

American Born Chinese, a graphic novel by Gene Luen Yang, chronicles a journey of self-discovery by its main character Jin Wang. One of our first books used in the seminar, it explores cultural identity through the lens of a Chinese-American youth struggling to find his own identity as he navigates middle and high school. I will guess that most, if not all, of the students participating in this curriculum unit had some sort of cultural identity as a cornerstone of their initial *personal* identity profile in Section 1. Cultural or ethnic associations are the primary and most common means youth create identity. If not explicitly discussed previously, this is an opportunity for your class to discuss culture and how it is used as a means to create identity.

The graphic novel's narrative develops over what initially appear to be three distinct story threads separated by rotating chapters that become interwoven into a single narrative as the arcs progress. These three sub-divisions of the story focus on how the main character wishes to *project* their identity and how they feel they are *perceived* based on non-negotiable identity attributes. By discussing each of these seemingly independent threads in conjunction with the greater narrative discussion should enable the introduction of these topics in relation to a *personal* identity.

Having looked at other graphic novels, the idea of producing a thematic soundtrack is becoming common. In small groups, students will create a soundtrack for the graphic novel. Each chapter can only have one or two

songs. Characters may have more than one song if details in the novel support the music choices. Groups should be separated to prevent accidental usage of the same music selections in order to provide sufficient diversity in material for discussion.

Guiding questions:

1. How does your song choice reflect the theme of each chapter?
2. What details from the graphic novel support your song choices that reflect a character's identity?
3. How do different group's choices in music reflect the same source material?
4. Can we change how we identify ourselves?

Expanded profile

The purpose of this activity is to have students document connections between music and unique events in their life, develop and understanding that these events have common threads across the class, and gain insight into how another's musical connection may significantly differ without impacting the meaning of the event itself.

Over the course of the story, Jin Wang experiences many common life events associated with adolescence including fitting into a new school, navigating personal relationships between relatives and friends, a first love and its corresponding rejection. Students in your class should be able to relate to most, if not all of these experiences. Through discussion of the graphic novel, if not already considered, students should expand upon their own profile to including any cultural attributes they feel are relevant while looking over their playlist and cross-referencing those songs they feel are unique identifiers of their cultural self-identity.

One thing that you as the educator must be aware of is that students may relive or react to previous life events of a tragic nature. It is encouraged to reiterate that these items journaled for the curriculum unit will remain private between you and the student. Should a student wish to journal about an event and not share with you make it explicitly clear that it is acceptable for them to do so separately.

Guiding questions:

1. What events in the graphic novel have you experienced or can relate to on a personal level? How did these events shape your self-identity?
2. What kinds of music do you listen to when experiencing a particular emotion and can that music be used to support any other emotions?
3. What life events have you personally experienced in which music was an important role? How did that music influence the event and impact your self-identity as a result?

Lessons Section 3: "Express Yourself" - Musical choice as an outward projection of identity.

Essential Questions - "Does our self-identity match our projected persona?"

As somewhat rational, but primarily emotional beings, youths and adolescents have an inherent need to belong. Peers have a significant influence over the formation of identity at this stage of development. The

goal of this section is to examine how individuals tailor self-identity to the group we wish to associate with, what impacts or modifications these outside influences on our belief systems we are comfortable with allowing, and how the reconciliation of the two influences an evolving identity.

Identity in youth and adolescents can be a fragile thing. It is continually evolving at the conscious and subconscious level with little-to-no awareness of when or how their concept of who they are changes. Our students regularly struggle to balance an unsure definition of self against an unsteady bombardment of external influences on how they should behave in often dichotomous or sometimes outright conflicting social environments. Musical choices often reflect this tumultuous time.

Expanded playlist

In this exercise students consider what music they listen to specifically because the musical choices are directly influenced by external factors. This does not preclude that a student cannot ultimately enjoy and connect with the music on an intrinsic level, but that the primary reason for adding the selections into their identity is due to peers. As part of ongoing one-on-one meetings, students should be able to explain how this music helps them connect to the peer group. While students are encouraged to share and discuss a selection of these songs with the class as they are meant as a reflection of their projected identity, they should not be required to indicate to the class which songs are not reflective of their self-identity.

Guiding questions:

1. Do your personal choices in music match what you listen to amongst your peers?
2. Are there songs/genres that you believe necessary to include in order to belong to a peer group?
3. Are there “guilty pleasure” songs you do not share with others because of the need to project a particular identity?
4. Do you have different/multiple peer groups based on musical taste?

Literary tie-in: Monster

In the seminar, we examined the mid-grade novel *Monster*, by Walter Dean Meyers. The novel is written in a first-person perspective of the main character, a young African American teenager Steve Harmon, with significant portions of the novel presented as a screenplay written by Harmon himself as he is processing the events of his trial for murder. The purpose of this exercise is to have the students work together in small groups to create a soundtrack for the novel that reflect all three elements of identity: personal, projected, and perceived.

Guiding Questions:

1. Steve Harmon is the only character from whom we experience an internal viewpoint. What songs create a playlist that reflects his self-identity, his projected identity, and the perceived identity? Is there any overlap?
2. Can we create a playlist for any other characters that provide insight into their self-identity?
3. Can we include music on the soundtrack representing the projected and perceived identities of other characters in the novel?

Culminating project

Regardless of which literary tie-ins are selected, a suggested culminating project for this unit should be the creation of a time capsule; the goal of this activity being the distillation of the journal the students created during this curriculum unit into a reflection of their current identity and a projection of how they envision their identity may evolve as they enter early-adulthood. Students create a kind of “time capsule” by completing a reflection centered on how they currently identify, what they project as their identity, and how they envision their identity to have changed in the next 4-5 years using music to support these ideas. The format of this reflection paper should reflect the standards for student work established by your school’s Language Arts Department. Seal the capsule in an SASE envelope with the intent to mail back to the student in after the allotted 4-5 years have passed. If mailing the journal is not feasible, sufficiently seal in packing tape with “DO NOT OPEN UNTIL:” clearly written across the face of the packet.

Appendix A: Supplementary activities

Below are suggested supplementary activities that can be used to supplement the unit based on your needs or to spark your own ideas around music and identity.

1. Fictional characters.

The goal of this activity is to have the students use characters from books they personally select for reading. Can they find examples of where a character actually talks about the music they prefer? Based on details in the book, what kind of music do you think they would like to listen to?

2. Examination of popular musicians’ projected identity

The goal of this activity is that students will be able to examine the projected identity of public figures in contemporary popular music and reflect on how those personas are managed in order to connect with a variety of demographics. Students need to use a variety of sources to support class discussion.

3. Songs about Identity

There are songs across multiple genres that explicitly deal with identity ranging from an individual singer’s declaration of their own identity to broader themes of a united cultural or national identity. An internet search on “songs about identity” will garner several resources from which to develop activities related to a use of music as an explicit affirmation of personal and projected identity.

Appendix B: Connecting with National Arts Standards

- Anchor Standard #7. Perceive and analyze artistic work.
- Anchor Standard #8. Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
- Anchor Standard #11. Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

Appendix C: Implementing District Standards

English Language Arts Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening

- ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1 Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

English Language Arts History/Social Studies Grades 9-10

- ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.
- ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary describing political, social, or economic aspects of history/social science.
- ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.8 Assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text support the author's claims.

English Language Arts History/Social Studies Grades 11-12

- ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
- ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.3 Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

Resource List

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Web Sites

Due to the fluid nature of the internet, these references are provided as cited resources as of 6/2016, but may not be available at the time of your viewing.

10 Classic Teenager Growing Songs (<http://www.mademan.com/mm/10-classic-teenager-growing-songs.html>)

What Can Songs Tell Us About People and Society? (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/songs/question5.html>)

Songs About Identity and Self Awareness (<http://www.playlistresearch.com/themes/misc/identity.htm>)

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

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