

# The Bear is Still Singing: Creating Lyrics with Social Studies

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**T**he title of my article in the 1988 premiere issue of *Social Studies and the Young Learner* was based on a chain song, “The Bear Went Over the Mountain.”<sup>1</sup> Each verse of the song repeats the question, “And what do you think he saw?” I suggested that chain songs and rounds, simple folk and summer camp standards, could be easily transformed with lyrics (written by the teacher or students) that contained useful, purposeful social studies content. I argued then, and still do, that “singing the facts” can add an important “memory hook” to any lesson plan, making the information more easily learned.

The year 1988 was an interesting time to be writing about social studies and music. In that year,

- Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences was being widely discussed and debated by elementary educators.<sup>2</sup> Gardner critiqued the notion that there exists only a single “human intelligence” in *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1983), which listed musical intelligence as one of several ways that students learn. Musical intelligence involves skill in the composition, performance, and appreciation of musical patterns.
- Social studies educators were engaged in debates over educational reform that resulted, six years later, in NCSS publishing *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*.<sup>3</sup>
- Websites did not yet exist (much less iPods and music downloads), but commercial e-mail was about to be born, and the first Internet worm caused some havoc within the scientific community that November.<sup>4</sup>

Today, many educators are comfortable with Gardner’s notion that children have different ways of learning, and that some children may learn better through music than through any other medium. Pitch, tone, rhythm, melody, and rhyming lyrics can all be aids to learning.

Today, we have a set of social studies standards that are solidly established and provide connectivity of purpose to what children should be learning in social studies at various grade levels.

We also have Internet resources that can give us the lyrics, music, and sound recordings of thousands of folk songs, camp songs, historical period songs, and popular music—and a good part of this musical world is available quickly at free (or at low cost) websites (see Resources, below).

While studying the music and songs of any historical era is a great aid to learning history, in this article I focus on teachers or students creating their own lyrics as a method of teaching and learning about any social studies topic.

## Keep the Music Moving

When I wrote, “And What Do You Think He Saw: Using Chain Songs and Rounds,” I looked at simple songs with simple melodies and lyrics that could be rewritten to help children learn important historical and geographic content. I still think that simple is best, and that simple song types work well. As the years have passed, though, I have become aware of the need to get children more involved, to involve kinesthetic learners.<sup>5</sup> One of the music-chant forms that invites the audience to move is the marching cadence. Marching cadences are simple four-step, rhyming couplets. For example, we can list the first four presidents in a cadence to which children can march.

Washington first President,  
To New York is where he went.  
Adams next, then Jefferson  
Madison went to Washington.

With a little creative guidance from the teacher, fourth or fifth graders might compose additional verses until they have learned all the presidents, not a bad thing to know, though not necessarily a requirement. The cadence poem pattern is so easy that we can use it to tell all kinds of stories from history and from different cultures. We can take the cadence to an African

chant to create lyrics based on the picture book *Shaka: King of the Zulus* by Diane Stanley, or have students writing content chants from Conrad Buff's retelling of the William Tell story in *The Apple and The Arrow*.<sup>6</sup>

### Lyrics for Your State

Young students can use chant to help them develop a sense of their location using the tune of "The Wheels on Bus:"

Ohio is in the United States,  
United States, United States.  
Ohio is in the United States,  
A state in a country.

Children can add verses about their county, city, and school. For example, "Hamilton County's in the south," "Cincinnati's in Hamilton County," and "Clifton School's in Cincinnati." With a little poetic license, this formula can work with nearly every state and school. To add motion, the students can outline the shapes of state and local boundaries with their hands and arms.

Another source for rewritable lyrics that can include historical and geographic information are state songs, or songs that have state names in their titles. Many of these have rapid marching rhythms and children can march or exercise as they sing them. "The Yellow Rose of Texas" is just one example.

Here is one example of how the tune of that song might be used to tell some Texas history from the American point of view:

Two hundred sons of Texas died at the Alamo  
Defending Texas freedom against five thousand foe.  
There, Crockett, Travis, Bowie fought bravely 'til the end,  
Defending that small mission; they knew they could not win.

But then at San Jacinto, Sam Houston won the day;  
He captured Santa Anna, whose army ran away.  
Sam Houston charged in shouting, "Remember the Alamo."  
And Texas independence was won that day, you know.

### History and Geography

Motion can also be incorporated into more complicated story songs as well. One of the well-known devices in camp songs is to have a verse that is sung repeatedly, removing a single word each time and substituting an action and/or sound in its stead. This process goes on until there are no words left. One of the most well known is "John Brown's Body." The song was a Civil War Marching song set to the verse of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."<sup>7</sup> Below is one verse with new words and actions that tell of Lincoln's life. Children might invent other verses that describe other events.

Young Abe Lincoln was store-kee-per  
(last word can be replaced by "Ka-ka-ching!")  
Then a lawyer (replace with a pounding gavel motion)  
[Repeat these lines twice]  
Then he rode the train (replace with "choo-choo"  
sounds and train motions) to Washington!

Children today have a wide range of tastes, reflecting both current and past popular music styles of many genres. Educator Cameron White points out that music is a powerful tool for teaching history, and that it is one area where students want to share their voice and engage in history.<sup>8</sup> In 2005, the Organization of American Historians devoted an entire issue of its journal to teaching history with music. In that issue, historian Kevin Byrne pointed out the rich complex nature of American music.<sup>9</sup>

There are a variety of types of country music that we can adapt for our lesson plans. A country song that has enjoyed a resurgence as a result of its use in a motel commercial is "I've Been Ev'rywhere," as sung by Johnny Cash. The song is easily adaptable so that the lyrics name the various U.S. states and rivers, or the countries of any continent. Garth Brooks' "I've Got Friends in Low Places" can be re-titled, "I Know High and Low Places," so that the lyrics incorporate the names of mountains, rivers, and even Death Valley.

### The First Ten (Rockin') Amendments

The classic rock 'n' roll song, "Rock Around the Clock," can be transformed into "Rock Around the Bill of Rights."

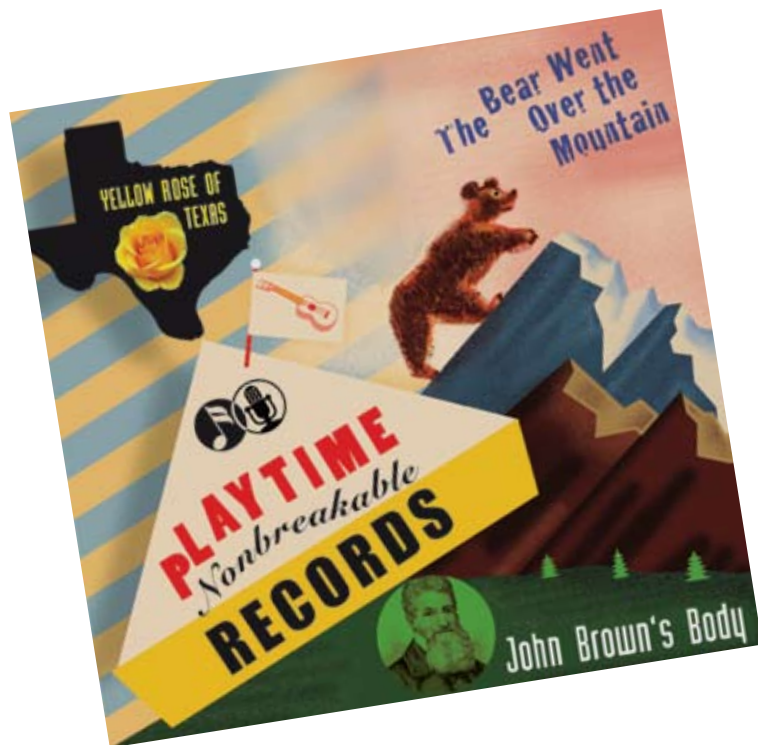
One, two, three rights, four rights, rock,  
Five, six, seven rights, eight rights, rock,  
Nine, ten, the Bill of Rights, amendments that, rock,  
We're gonna rock with The Bill of Rights tonight.

Remember your rights and join me, hon',  
We'll have some fun with ev'ry one,  
We're gonna rock around our Bill of Rights,  
We're gonna rock, rock, rock, 'til we see the light.  
We're gonna rock, gonna rock, around the Bill of Rights.

With amendment one, two, three, and four,  
We get free religion, speech and more,  
We can bear our arms, says the Bill of Rights,  
You don't have soldiers at your house at night.  
No undue search or seizure, says the Bill of Rights.

Well, Amendment five, and amendment six,  
They set up trials that can't be fixed.  
We don't have to witness against ourselves,  
We get speedy public trials, don't sit on the shelves.  
We're gonna rock, gonna rock, around the Bill of Rights.

Well, amendment seven and also eight,



Are to keep us safe from an unfair state.  
If we want a jury trial, we got the right,  
No punishments that are out of sight  
We're gonna rock, gonna rock, around the Bill of Rights.

We end with amendments nine and ten,  
Then we'll rock round the Bill of Rights again.  
Nine guarantees the rest of our rights,  
Ten says what powers are the states' delights.  
We're gonna rock, gonna rock, around the Bill of Rights.

### Rap It Well

Undoubtedly the most fluid and misunderstood music form in "kid culture" today is rap in its various forms and styles. While admittedly, much of rap culture as well as many rap lyrics are offensive, rap itself is a creative form of urban poetry. Children can dance, move, and add sound effects to a rap that they or the teacher have created. Rapping can provide a good vehicle for carrying the content of a lesson.

Although its origin is African American, rap music with its complexity and freedom of pattern and use of repetitive rhymes, easily lends itself to storytelling and to historical content. The content does not have to be modern at all. With African American students, the following rap, which is built from Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech "I Have a Dream," might be worth chanting and discussing.

I'm Martin Luther King and I've got a dream  
I remembered "My Country 'Tis of thee"  
How things don't have to stay the way they seem.  
Let freedom ring, everyone should be free.

I talked about the Emancipation Proclamation  
And finally I said let's leave the past

About discrimination and segregation  
Let America be free at last

I brought up the bank of justice too  
"Thank God Almighty we are free at last!"  
How our check on it shows payment due.

I said I have a dream how we'll live our creed  
"All created equal" will be believed.

I said I have a dream, how the girls and boys  
We'll all hold hands in American joy.

I dream of a land where we judge no one  
By the color of their skin, cause oppression's no fun.

The wonderful thing about reading raps to students is that you can just wait for someone to sneer and say, "That's not the way you rap." Then you have him, because all you have to do challenge him to write a better rap—as long as he includes some historical information and keeps the language and the content suitable. Some of your students probably know all of rap's patterns and styles, so let them set you straight!

There are lots of activities that could involve the use or creation of rap lyrics. Here are just a few.

1. Students can write reports in the form of rap lyrics and deliver them that way (Basic rules: No profanity or sexual references; embed at least eight facts in your report).
2. Create a library of raps, and have the students practice delivering them.
3. Hold discussions in which answers to questions must be delivered in the form of a short rap lyric.
4. In groups of two or three, students can study historic

characters and create “rapper” names for them. They then justify the names based on the individual’s biography.

5. Divide the class into groups of three or four. Give the class a narrative describing a historic event. Assign each group to a part of the narrative, asking each to create a rap that includes all the information in its part of the narrative. The groups then deliver their segments in turn to represent the entire event.
6. Students summarize a unit that they have studied in a rap, and then make props and costumes to stage a performance that can be videotaped.
7. The entire class can work together to create a rap telling the history of your state and put it on the school Internet site.
8. Students interview family members to provide material for creating a family history rap.<sup>10</sup>
9. Students choose an existing rap that tells a story. They must choose one without explicit or implied sex or profanity. They can then choose any event from history and retell it as a paraphrase of the rap they have chosen.
10. Have students study the history of rap, talking about its defining qualities and the story telling traditions it fits into, as well as the different types of rap.<sup>11</sup>
11. During Black History week, students could revise and/or perform a famous literary work by an African American (using, for example, Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech or Maya Angelou’s poem “Phenomenal Woman”).<sup>12</sup>

## Reflection

Songs embody our history, values, and cultural identity. Walt Whitman (whose poems use more than two hundred different musical terms<sup>13</sup>) could “hear American singing” in 1855. I believe that all of us today, young and old, can hear America singing, except that now we listen to the whole world.

I think that all types of music can be used as a vehicle for storytelling, and real-life stories are what the social studies is all about. The well-told story pulls together new and old experi-

ences. You do not need to be a musician to appreciate music of some type, to observe how music affects others, and to use lyrics as a vehicle for teaching social studies content. Having your students recite—or challenging them to write—catchy lyrics can be fun as well as memorable.

So when I see that bear coming over the mountain, I still see a singing bear. I hear it warbling (in a low register) about history and geography and government and society and culture and economics—all the disciplines that compose social studies learning. What’s more, I still believe that the singing bear is ready to help children learn. 🐻

## Notes

1. Thomas N. Turner, “And What Do You Think He Saw?” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 1, no. 1 (September/October 1988): 22-24.
2. Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1983). *Intelligence Reframed* (1999) contains a twenty-year update on the theory of multiple intelligences.
3. NCSS, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994).
4. Hobbes’ Internet Timeline, [www.zakon.org/robert/internet/timeline/](http://www.zakon.org/robert/internet/timeline/).
5. Carol Glynn, *Learning on Their Feet: A Sourcebook for Kinesthetic Learning Across the Curriculum K-8* (Shoreham, VT: Discover Writing Press, 2001) was reviewed in *Middle Level Learning* May/June 2003.
6. Diane Stanley, *Shaka: King of the Zulus* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1988); Conrad Buff, *The Apple and the Arrow* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).
7. Civil War Songs, [www.pdmusic.org/civilwar2.html](http://www.pdmusic.org/civilwar2.html).
8. Cameron White, “Integrating Music into Music Education,” *Academic Exchange Quarterly* 9 (2005): 2.
9. Kevin Byrne, “Listening for History,” *Magazine of History* 19, no.4 (2005): 7.
10. Alison Parker, “Visiting and Interviewing Older Adults,” *Middle Level Learning* 15 (September 2002): 3-7; Susan Pass, “Teaching About Immigration, Past and Present,” *Middle Level Learning* 20 (May/June 2004): 10-15.
11. Rap and Hip Hop Resources, [www.colum.edu/cbmr/hiphop/](http://www.colum.edu/cbmr/hiphop/).
12. Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman?” (1851), [www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sojtruth-woman.html](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sojtruth-woman.html); Maya Angelou, “Phenomenal Woman” (1978), [www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/).
13. David Kresh, “Commentary on ‘I Hear America Singing,’” Library of Congress, [memory.loc.gov/](http://memory.loc.gov/).

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## Internet Resources

American folklore. [www.americanfolklore.net/american-folksongs.html](http://www.americanfolklore.net/american-folksongs.html)

Coco Jams African American Civil Rights (Freedom) Songs. [www.cocojams.com/freedom\\_songs.htm](http://www.cocojams.com/freedom_songs.htm)

Folkways Archive at the Smithsonian Institution. [www.folkways.si.edu/index.html](http://www.folkways.si.edu/index.html)

Lyrics.com. [www.lyrics.com/](http://www.lyrics.com/)

Music of the American Civil War. [www.pdmusic.org/civilwar.html](http://www.pdmusic.org/civilwar.html)

Music of the Great War. [www.melodylane.net/ww1.htm](http://www.melodylane.net/ww1.htm)

Parlor songs of World War I. [parlorsongs.com/insearch/worldwar1/ww1no1.asp](http://parlorsongs.com/insearch/worldwar1/ww1no1.asp)

Poetry and Music of the War Between the States. [www.civilwarpoetry.org/](http://www.civilwarpoetry.org/)

Songs of Revolution Protest and Solidarity. [www.montana.edu/webquest/socialstudies/grades6to12/popiel/](http://www.montana.edu/webquest/socialstudies/grades6to12/popiel/)

U.S. Scouting Service Campfire Songs. [www.macscouter.com/Songs/CampfireSongs.asp](http://www.macscouter.com/Songs/CampfireSongs.asp)