

Inspiring Citizen Action with Motion Pictures

Danna Bell and Lee Ann Potter

*What is America to me?
A name, a map, or a flag I see?
A certain word, democracy?
What is America to me?*

In 1942, Abel Meeropol (who used the pen name Lewis Allan) wrote these and the rest of the lyrics to a song entitled *The House I Live In*. With music composed by Earl Robinson, it first appeared in the Broadway musical *Let Freedom Ring*. When the *New York Times* reviewed the play on October 6, 1942, Brooks Atkinson claimed that it was the best song in the play, and described it as “a quiet and homely invocation to America.”

Three years after the first performance of the song on Broadway, Frank Sinatra sang *The House I Live In* in a 10-minute film by the same name that was commissioned by the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and released by RKO-Radio. Made to oppose anti-Semitism after World War II, the film was widely distributed and received an honorary Academy Award and special Golden Globe Award. And in 2007, the Librarian of Congress selected the film for inclusion in the National Film Registry. It is available online from the Library of Congress at www.loc.gov/item/mbrs00009167/.

In the film, Frank Sinatra stars as himself, and while taking a break during a recording session, he stops an attack on a young boy being bullied by a group of other boys because of his religion. Sinatra prevents a presumed fight by helping the boys recognize that in America, differences are to be celebrated. Part of what he uses to convince the boys, seven minutes into the film, is the song *The House I Live In*.

The song and the film could serve as points of entry to a wide variety of student research investigations: from domestic issues of the post-World War II era to reflections of national identity in popular culture; from the civic roles played by musicians, film makers, and performers, to the impact of film on how people share and experience information and opinions. Some possibilities:

- Invite students to view the film and explore the relevance of *The House I Live In* at the time the movie was made. Encourage them to investigate what events were taking place at home and abroad, and to consider who Frank Sinatra was and why the film's creators selected him to star in the film.

Invite students to also consider whether the film and the title song are still relevant today and/or suggest how they might be modified to become more relevant. Be sure to discuss with students elements of the film that, if produced today, would be considered inappropriate.

- ♦ To extend this activity, consider creating a timeline of major events, social movements, or turning points in history and how information was simultaneously shared (including the use of town criers, sheet music, plays and performances, radio, film, television, and social media). Ask students if they think one style of mass communication was/is more effective than another; or, if hearing a song on the radio would have a greater benefit than seeing a music video; or, whether a broadly shared Tweet is more effective than a TV commercial. Deepen the discussion by exploring the possible benefit of using famous performers, sports figures, or other notables in motion pictures and other media presentations to spur citizens to take action.
- Ask students to list the roles played by various individuals in the creation of a film (e.g., director, producer, screenplay writer, etc.). After watching *The House I Live In*, direct students to take a closer look at the credits at the beginning of the film and list the names of the individuals and organizations responsible for it. Assign groups of students to conduct research about each of them and how their civic values may have been reflected in their work. Invite students



If you try these suggestions, or a variation of them, with your students, tell us about your experience! During the second week of November 2018, the Teaching with the Library of Congress Blog at blogs.loc.gov/teachers will feature a post tied to this article and we invite you to comment and share your teaching strategies.

to share their findings with the class.

- ◆ To “jump-start” this activity: Abel Meeropol, the song’s lyricist, was the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, and an English teacher in the New York City Public Schools. In 1936, he wrote the lyrics for the Billie Holiday song “*Strange Fruit*,” and explained that he did so after seeing a photograph of a man who had been lynched. In 1954, he and his wife adopted the two sons of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg after they were tried, convicted, and executed by the federal government for being Soviet spies.

The film was produced by Frank Ross and Mervyn LeRoy and directed by Mervyn LeRoy. Its screen play was written by Albert Maltz, one of the Hollywood 10 who was jailed in 1950 for refusing to testify in front of Congress in 1947 about his alleged involvement with the Communist Party. Ross, LeRoy, Maltz, Sinatra and RKO contributed their time and Meeropol and Robinson waived their royalties for the use of the song in the film.

The Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith commissioned the film. ADL was founded in 1913 to stop the defamation of Jewish people.

- Encourage students to find the complete lyrics to the song, *The House I Live In*, and compare the written lyrics to those sung in the movie. Students will notice that a stanza envisioning a neighborhood in which black and white neighbors would live together was not included. Explain to them that the lyricist, Abel Meeropol, was very upset by this omission. Lead a class discussion about why the stanza might have been omitted in the 1945 film. Encourage students to find other occasions where this song was fea-

tured and whether the complete lyrics were included. [For example: In 1947 noted baritone Paul Robeson recorded a version that included all of the original lyrics. This version can be found on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/U3syulBjknq>. Other artists who have performed or recorded the song include: Sonny Rollins, Mahalia Jackson, Sam Cooke, and Josh White. Sinatra continued to perform the song for many years, most notably at the concert prior to the inauguration of John F. Kennedy and at the rededication of the Statue of Liberty in 1986.] Finally, invite students to write their own lyrics to a song describing what America is to them.

- ◆ For an alternate comparison activity, lead a class discussion comparing the lyrics of *The House I Live In* by Meeropol with the words of the poem *Let America Be America Again* by Langston Hughes.

In 2007, the film *The House I Live In* was named to the National Film Registry. The Registry preserves films that are deemed “culturally, historically or aesthetically significant.” These films are considered to be of “enduring importance to American culture” that reflect who we are as a people and as a nation. It recently became one of more than 300 titles included in the new Library of Congress National Screening Room (see sidebar on p.281 for more information). Invite students to view another film included in the Registry (For dozens of selections, see: www.loc.gov/collections/selections-from-the-national-film-registry/about-this-collection/) and write a brief explanation of the film’s cultural, historical, or aesthetic significance. 🌐

DANNA BELL is an Educational Resources Specialist, and LEE ANN POTTER is the Director of Educational Outreach at the Library of Congress. For more information on the education programs of the Library of Congress, please visit www.loc.gov/teachers/. MIKE MASHON is Head of the Moving Image Section at the Library of Congress Packard Campus for Audio Visual Conservation in Culpeper, Virginia.

Announcing the National Screening Room!



Mike Mashon

The Library of Congress holds the world's largest collection of film and video items—more than 1.5 million reels of film and video recordings—ranging from the earliest motion pictures registered for copyright in the 1890s through today's movies and television shows. The Moving Image Research Center on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., has long been the Library's primary access point for researchers, and more recently the Library has begun partnering with several DVD distributors to bring more of the treasures to the home market. For example, the Library released two significant multi-disc box sets through Kino Lorber: *Pioneers of African-American Cinema* and, more recently, *Pioneers: First Women Filmmakers*, both of which shed new light on largely neglected corners of cinema history. The Moving Image Section also oversees a robust loan program, sending 35mm prints preserved by the Library's film preservation lab to theaters around the world.

In the fall of 2017, the Library launched an ambitious online access initiative called the National Screening Room (NSR) [See:www.loc.gov/collections/national-screening-room/]. The Library has quite literally thousands of public domain and rights-free films in its collections, and the NSR is the way by which educators, students, scholars, and movie fans can watch—and, in most cases—download them for viewing. There are a little more than 300 titles in the NSR as of fall 2018, but the Library plans to add more every month.

So what are the kinds of films you and your students can see in the National Screening Room? Some examples:

Paper Prints. These are the Library's oldest films, made between 1894 and 1912, registered for copyright on rolls of photographic contact paper. The Paper Prints are a crown jewel of the Library's collections, an unsurpassed visual documentation of the turn of the twentieth century. Here you will find films documenting the Spanish-American War, the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906, and the evolution of narrative cinema through the work of noted directors including Edwin S. Porter and D.W. Griffith.

Sponsored and Educational Films. The Library has a particularly rich selection of films made for a wide variety of industrial purposes such as advertising, training, propaganda, and classroom use. The NSR launched with two "playlists" that provide excellent examples of this type of filmmaking. One is called

"Made to Persuade," which features such gems as *The Middleton Family at the New York World's Fair*, a beautiful Technicolor short from 1939 that doubles as a terrific travelogue and a paean to the glories of capitalism and Westinghouse appliances. The other playlist features a set of films made primarily in the 1950s about mental health. Some were made for health professionals, while others were geared towards general audiences, sensitizing them to the poorly understood illness.

National Film Registry. Every year the Librarian of Congress names 25 films to the National Film Registry, titles that are deemed to be of special cultural, historic, or aesthetic significance. While the Registry is full of beloved classics like *The Wizard of Oz*, *Star Wars*, and *Casablanca*, it also honors experimental films, home movies, and documentaries—the depth and breadth of American cinema. The National Screening Room has over 60 Registry titles, including *Memphis Belle*, William Wyler's 1944 documentary about the legendary bomber plane and her crew; *Master Hands*, a mesmerizing industrial symphony produced for General Motors in 1936; *St. Louis Blues* (1929), Bessie Smith's only film appearance; and *The Hitch-Hiker*, a 1953 film noir feature co-written and directed by Ida Lupino.

The National Screening Room is intended to be classroom-friendly, which is one reason almost every film on it is available for download in both modest MPEG-4 and higher resolution ProRes LT versions. The Library hopes making these formats available will make the films easier to edit for presentations and projects, and the Library will continue to refine the NSR to make it even more useful!

MIKE MASHON is Head of the Moving Image Section at the Library of Congress Packard Campus for Audio Visual Conservation in Culpeper, Virginia.