



## **Why Can't We Be Friends? Using Music To Teach Social Justice**

By: **Denise L. Levy** and Daniel C. Byrd

### **Abstract**

Listening to music is an emotional and educational experience that has the potential to shape an individual's values, actions, and worldview. Widely used in elementary education, music can also be a fresh, innovative teaching tool in higher education. Although it can be applied to virtually any subject area, critical reflection and discussion of music can especially complement courses related to the concept of social justice. This paper provides a review of the literature on using music to teach justice-related concepts, an illustration of ways in which the authors have utilized music in their own courses, and conclusions for educators.

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## **Why can't we be friends? Using music to teach social justice**

**Denise L. Levy<sup>1</sup> and Daniel C. Byrd<sup>2</sup>**

*Abstract: Listening to music is an emotional and educational experience that has the potential to shape an individual's values, actions, and worldview. Widely used in elementary education, music can also be a fresh, innovative teaching tool in higher education. Although it can be applied to virtually any subject area, critical reflection and discussion of music can especially complement courses related to the concept of social justice. This paper provides a review of the literature on using music to teach justice-related concepts, an illustration of ways in which the authors have utilized music in their own courses, and conclusions for educators.*

*Keywords: culture, diversity, music, pedagogy*

*Music is a world within itself with a language we all understand, with an equal opportunity for all to sing, dance, and clap their hands. – Stevie Wonder*

*If there is something to be changed in this world, then it can only happen through music. – Jimi Hendrix*

The average person under 18 years old spends 6.5 hours per day listening to or interacting with media (Cahill, 2008). Listening to music is an emotional and educational experience that potentially shapes an individual's values, actions, and worldview. At all levels of education teachers can utilize music to expose students to diverse cultures. Furthermore, instructors can challenge students to critically analyze and deconstruct lyrics both within a historical context and as applied to current social problems. "Whether it's songs of war or peace, music fuses the emotion and logic in a way that moves humans" (Seattle Post-Intelligencer Editorial Board, 2003, para.7). In essence, music can be a fresh, innovative teaching tool that inspires students at every level of education and across many different disciplines. As demonstrated in this paper, music can especially complement courses related to the concept of social justice. Social justice, according to Rawls (1999), is "the basic structure of society, or more exactly, the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation" (p. 6). Song lyrics often include ideas related to social justice such as accepting others, challenging discrimination, examining privilege, and rejecting violence. For instance, the WAR song "Why Can't We Be Friends?" questions why some people only befriend others who are in similar social groups. Although there are many different aspects of music that may relate to social justice, this article will focus solely on song lyrics and will not include a discussion of tempo, rhythm, mood, and so forth. The purpose of this paper is to provide a review of the literature on using music to teach justice-related concepts; a detailed illustration of ways in which the authors have utilized music in their own counseling, social studies, education, and social work courses; and conclusions for educators.

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## I. Review of the Literature.

Teachers and professors utilize popular music in teaching many different subjects, including writing or composition, cultural diversity, sociology, social studies, and social justice. In this review we will highlight literature on the use of music in elementary, middle, and high schools as well as in higher education.

### A. Elementary and Middle School.

In elementary and middle schools, teachers often use music as a medium for teaching. Music teachers may employ music in order to prepare students for “lifelong musical as well as knowledgeable participation in a democratic society” (DeLorenzo, 2003, p. 26). On the other hand, non-music teachers may utilize music in teaching specific subjects like math, English, and social studies. For example, Elvis Presley Enterprises (2009) provided an online lesson plan to teach students “about the life of Elvis Presley and how he overcame poverty ... [and] the importance of setting their own goals and dreams” (p. 1). The plan includes listening to two of Elvis’ songs, *Confidence* and *If I Can Dream*, and analyzing the lyrics for messages about setting goals. Additionally, students may write reflective papers about their own dreams or about a time in which they set and accomplished a goal. Finally, middle school counselors may utilize music and song lyrics when teaching life skills such as problem solving (Vines, 2005).

### B. High School.

White and McCormack (2006) explained that “over the course of students’ years in school, the use of music in the classroom diminishes until it is almost nonexistent in the upper-level classrooms” (p. 125). However, they proposed that music has a definite application to the secondary education, social studies classroom. According to their article, older music can enhance understanding of history and contemporary songs can assist students in critically examining societal problems like “poverty, racism, abuse, and addictions and such global issues as hunger, disease, and war” (White & McCormack, p. 122). Similar to White and McCormack, Stovall (2006) encouraged the use of hip-hop song lyrics for high school courses in humanities and the social sciences, and specifically for social studies classes. Lane (n.d.) suggested the use of rock and roll songs in teaching social studies, and maintained that lessons which utilize rock:

1) build critical thinking skills, 2) deal with social issues and historical happenings, 3) can be used as documents to be studied, 4) are interdisciplinary by their very nature, 5) contextualize art and music by placing them in a societal context, 6) teach artistic appreciation for a more complex art form than usually thought, 7) are highly motivational, engaging, and accessible for the students and 8) . . . will be remembered far longer by most students than lessons crafted in a more traditional mode. (Advantages of Using Rock and Roll section, para. 1)

The use of music to build critical thinking skills, as mentioned by Lane, is not limited to high school. This can also occur in higher education as instructors encourage students “to think—by examining, evaluating, and challenging the assumptions, premises, interpretations, and evidence that others have taken for granted” (Royse, 2001, p. 45).

### *C. Higher Education.*

In addition to elementary and middle school teachers, instructors from many different disciplines use music in higher education classrooms to illustrate various concepts. Specifically, literature highlights four subject areas: composition, Black history, helping professions, and sociology.

*Composition.* According to McParland (2009), “popular songs are socially produced forms of discourse that can stir students toward writing” (p. 101). In his composition course, college students explored issues such as culture and diversity through song lyrics. Starting with a familiar text made students feel more comfortable in exercising their own critical thinking abilities. In their analysis, both the lyrics and the music itself provided students with rich material for discussion.

*Black history.* In 1979, Cooper discussed popular music as a previously untapped resource for teaching contemporary Black history. The oral history dictated through African American music, according to Cooper, provides rich and dynamic material for learning. Further, it assists students in understanding the experience of African Americans throughout various points in history.

*Helping professions.* Incorporating music into counseling, nursing, and human service courses seems natural given the therapeutic nature of music. Literature describing the use of music in these courses focuses in teaching students how to incorporate music into their therapeutic work with clients. For instance, Ohrt, Foster, Hutchinson, and Ieva (2009) describe how music, videos, and film can assist counseling students in developing empathy. They explain that having students read lyrics, watch music videos, reflect, and process their experiences can assist them in understanding the lives of others who are very different from themselves.

In addition to assisting students in developing empathy, counseling programs teach students how to use music therapeutically with clients. Bradley, Whiting, Hendricks, Parr, and Jones (2008) describe how counselors can play music during counseling sessions and encourage clients to share “thoughts and feelings evoked by the song’s rhythm and lyrics” (p. 51). Research indicates that music therapy can be useful for clients experiencing autism, addiction, physical pain, and grief, to name a few (Duffey, Somody, & Clifford, 2006/2007; Haberstroh, 2005; Lim, & Locsin, 2006; Siedliecki, & Good, 2006; Silverman, 2008). Exposing counseling students to music therapy content, and perhaps demonstrating these techniques in the higher education classroom, will encourage students to incorporate music into their own practice.

*Sociology.* Four articles specifically discuss using popular music to teach sociological theories and concepts in higher education (Ahlkvist, 1999; Albers, & Bach, 2003; Martinez, 1994; Walczak, & Reuter, 1994). In the first article, Walczak and Reuter (1994) reported on the effectiveness of song-lyric packets in teaching an introductory sociology course. Their study was based on 23 non-major students ranging in age from 19 to 46 and included 12 men and 11 women. The song-lyric packets provided to students were divided by topic and included a brief introduction, several learning objectives, song choices, and questions for discussion. Although students favored the use of music and song lyrics and overwhelmingly believed that the lyrics made it easier to understand particular sociological concepts, some students explained that they “did not like the recording artist” (p. 267) or thought the music was too outdated or did not include enough variety. Overall, students “found the use of music in the classroom to be a refreshing, relevant, entertaining, thought-provoking, and effective way to learn sociology” (Walczak, & Reuter, 1994, p. 267).

Included in the same journal issue as the previous study, Martinez (1994) discussed the use of popular music as a teaching tool in a specific sociology course, *Race, Class, and Gender*. Through music, she was able “to foster class discussion, to create a unique environment for learning, and to make students question assumptions about themselves and others” (p. 263). In addition to incorporating song lyrics into theoretical discourse on prejudice and discrimination, Martinez asked students to focus on specific themes related to race, class and gender found in the selected music. Related to social justice, these three concepts provide a forum in which students can examine notions of privilege and discrimination in their own lives and in society.

Likewise, Ahlkvist (1999) explained that “music offers students the chance to harness concepts, theories, and research findings to analyze cultural objects, much like a cultural sociologist” (p. 126). Rather than solely using music to demonstrate certain theories or concepts, Ahlkvist proposed that instructors challenge students to actively analyze the music itself. This cultural analysis of music is not limited to the lyrics themselves, but can also include the CD or record covers, the typical or average fan of the music genre, and the historical and socio-political context in which songs were released. In the introductory sociology classes described in this article, students explored heavy metal music for themes related to Marxism and Durkheimian traditions; discussed sociological concepts such as masculinity, power, and toughness revealed in heavy metal music; analyzed symbols used in the heavy metal culture; and created a sociological profile of a heavy metal fan.

Finally, Albers and Bach (2003) reported on their experience of playing music in the 5 to 10 minutes prior to each class meeting of a large, introductory sociology course. They encouraged students to question the song choice and make their own connections between particular songs and subsequent course content. Additionally, Albers and Bach allowed students to select the music for the second half of the semester, further engaging the students in this process. Although the instructors played music before the class started, students reported that it made them more comfortable and enhanced their learning. In retrospect, Albers and Bach explained that they could have enhanced the experience by displaying or providing the song lyrics.

## II. Social Justice Across Genres, Artists, and Lyrics.

Instructors can utilize many different components of music to teach concepts of social justice. First, song lyrics can provide text for analysis and discussion. Appendix 1 includes a beginning list of a variety of songs with lyrics related to social justice. Included in the Appendix are lists of the main topics covered in each song. The subjects covered in these lyrics range from war and peace to poverty and discrimination. For example, in the song *Why Can't We Be Friends*, the band WAR refers to discrimination based on race when they sing that “*the color of your skin don't matter to me as long as we can live in harmony. Why can't we be friends?*” Similarly, in the song *Everyday People*, Sly and the Family Stone sing about acceptance of all people despite differences:

*There is a blue one who can't accept the green one  
For living with a fat one trying to be a skinny one  
And different strokes for different folks  
And so on and so on and*

*We got to live together  
I am no better and neither are you  
We are the same whatever we do*

This short passage can provide a starting point for discussion about accepting and living in harmony with all people. Further, it encourages students to examine privilege and consider that no one person is better or more deserving than another based on identity traits such as race or size. A final example, *Man in the Mirror* by Michael Jackson, encourages students to consider what they can do to work toward a more just society. Jackson sings:

*I'm starting with the man in the mirror  
I'm asking him to change his ways  
And no message could have been any clearer  
If you wanna make the world a better place  
Take a look at yourself and then make a change*

The lyrics provided here are just brief glimpses into the vast amount of material that instructors can draw from to teach concepts of social justice.

In addition to song lyrics, instructors may utilize diverse genres of music in order to teach concepts of social justice. According to White and McCormack (2006),

Many people are under the assumption that social commentary in music reached its pinnacle in the late sixties and early seventies. Founded in the eighties, punk, hip-hop, rap, grunge, and alternative are music genres that continue to provide considerable social commentary and historical references. (p. 123)

Instructors may find that students hold stereotypes about certain genres of music, and exposing them to a variety of music can challenge them and enrich their learning experiences. Appendix 1 includes songs from genres such as country, hip-hop, reggae, oldies, rap, classic rock, and so on, and we are constantly looking for music that spans other genres, such as classical compositions. However, instructors are cautioned to purposefully and thoughtfully select songs that will provide the most meaningful discourse rather than solely trying to incorporate varied musical genres (Cooper, 1979).

Along with diverse musical genres, instructors can select singers and songwriters with diverse backgrounds in order to highlight different experiences and worldviews. The use of popular music can “bring experiences and voices other than the teacher’s into the classroom” (McParland, 2009, p. 102). Furthermore, it “opens up our awareness of difference and our recognition of similar universal themes and experiences among us” (McParland, 2009, p. 106). For example, instructors can utilize diverse artists such as Dolly Parton, the Beastie Boys, and Michael Jackson.

Finally, the time period in which songs were written can provide historical significance to the song lyrics. It is important for students to be able to understand the context in which songs were composed and be able to apply the lyrical concepts to various points throughout history. For example, Elvis Presley’s *If I Can Dream* and Sly and the Family Stone’s *Everyday People* were both released in 1968. In this historical year Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated and riots broke out across the country in over 140 cities, Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated, countless individuals died in the Vietnam War, the war divided the country, Lyndon Johnson announced that he would not run for another term as president, protesters at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago were mobbed by police, the Women’s Liberation Front protested the Atlantic City Miss America pageant, and Nixon was elected president (Knauer, 2008). Knowing about the political climate in which these two songs were written can certainly

influence how students think about song lyrics. Suddenly, in the context of the Vietnam War and race riots, Elvis singing “*If I can dream of a better land where all my brothers walk hand in hand, tell me why, oh why, oh why cant my dream come true?*” has a deeper meaning.

### **III. Classroom Examples.**

In a University social work course on cultural diversity, the first author, Levy, played one song per week at the end of class. This 3000-level course is focused on cultural competence in the helping professions and includes several course objectives related to social justice. In fact, social justice is one of the core values of the social work profession, and the National Association of Social Workers (2008) *Code of Ethics* mandates that social workers “pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people” (sect. Ethical Principles, para. 3). In the class, Levy provided students with a handout including song lyrics, artist information, discussion questions, and contextual information about the time period in which the song was released (see Appendix 2). As the song played, she dimmed the lights and put up a picture of the band on the overhead screen. In this particular course, the songs were utilized to inspire students at the end of class and did not include discussion or critical analysis. However, she did attempt to select songs that related to the content that was covered during that week’s class meeting(s). For example, during a discussion of gender equality in the workplace, she played Dolly Parton’s 9 to 5. Unless students had heard about the music portion of class prior to the beginning of the semester, they often reacted with surprise and excitement upon learning about this aspect of the class. Students frequently made a point to say how much they enjoyed this part of class and how it was nice to be inspired by the music and take some time to contemplate the week’s content. Midterm and final evaluations of this course always included positive comments about the use of music to teach social justice. Even though there was not always enough time to include discussion or analysis of lyrics, students were still inspired and moved by the music. When there was time to dialogue about the song’s meaning related to social work, students were able to make connections to the profession’s focus on challenging injustice. Further, students were enthusiastic about using music as a medium for support, empowerment, and comfort for their future clients.

In two social studies education courses for undergraduates in their teacher preparation programs, the second author, Byrd, followed a similar instructional approach as that which was described above. He selected music which addressed the main topics covered in each class session as a supplement to other activities. For example, as a means to consider current problems with war, racism, and political discourse, the video for Right Right Now Now by the Beastie Boys was shown at the end of a discussion around these same issues. This album was released during a particularly transformative and contentious period in U.S. history, a characteristic common in music focused on social justice. In this case, informational handouts were again distributed and students were asked to consider the ways they might use songs to address such topics in their own high school classrooms. An effort was made throughout the course to use a wide variety of artists from different genres. Course evaluations indicated a positive reaction to this aspect of the course. The student teachers who chose this instructional approach in their own classrooms reported that their high school students reacting with the same excitement and curiosity about the use of music to learn about social problems, historical decisions, and orientations to people and cultures around the world.

As part of an education and teaching course for high school students in a summer enrichment program, Byrd devoted one entire class meeting to using music as an entry point into social justice issues. Once again, students responded with enthusiasm and noticeably more interest in the ideas presented within each selection. Artists that were featured included the Black Eyed Peas, Cat Stevens, and the Beatles. When discussing the potential value of this instructional method, those who voiced their opinion agreed that music is a unique medium whose diversity of genres is both an affirmation of cultural responsiveness and a collection of various styles which inevitably appeal to many different listening preferences. This particular class consisted of students from different high schools, and interestingly, none reported having experienced music as an avenue to discuss social problems in any of their previous courses.

In addition to the examples listed above, instructors can have students write their own poem or lyrics based on what they have learned in class or even have students bring in their own music to share (Albers, & Bach, 2003; White, & McCormack, 2006). Students may also enjoy having a copy of all of the music played during the semester, though instructors will need to adhere to any applicable copyright laws. Finally, instructors may decide to post songs online and create listening logs and discussion forums for students in order to preserve class time for other topics.

#### **IV. Conclusion.**

In conclusion, many disciplines can utilize music as a teaching tool. The content is not limited to social justice and can be extended to subjects such as mathematics, history, religion, philosophy, psychology, science, and beyond. Instructors who wish to integrate music can do so in a variety of ways. First, songs can simply be an enjoyable supplement to reinforce course material. Alternatively, the context behind each song, the songwriter's personal connections, and the social problems addressed by the lyrics can be explored in greater detail. Lastly, music as a medium to transmit thoughts and ideas can also be compared with other forms of expression and information such as books, television, journal articles, and online resources. The possibilities are multiple and, as such, lend themselves well to instructors adapting music in whatever format they deem beneficial for their own students.

Additional research is needed in order to fully understand the impact of using music to teach social justice. Although this article does not intend to prioritize pedagogical decisions or teaching methods, understanding students' experiences with music would provide valuable information regarding the generalization of justice related content taught in this manner. It may be the case that other methods work equally as well and a combination of many techniques stands the greatest chance of connecting with students around issues of equality and human rights. Although additional research is needed, existing literature clearly demonstrates that music can be a powerful and creative way to examine content related to social justice. Our students have been pleasantly surprised by the use of music in our classrooms. We have found that it stimulates critical thinking and reflection, generates thoughtful discussions, and leaves lasting impressions.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Examples of Songs.

Artist	Song Title and Year	Main Topics (index below)
Ani Difranco	Crime For Crime (1995) Subdivision (2007) 'tis of Thee (1999) Willing To Fight (1997)	PA, P, R A, PA, P, R PA, P PA, A
Beastie Boys	In A World Gone Mad (2003) Right Right Now Now (2005)	PA, WP PA, R, WP
Ben Harper	Better Way (2006)	A, PA
Black Eyed Peas and Justin Timberlake	Where Is The Love (2003)	A, P, R, WP
Bob Dylan	Blowin' In The Wind (1963) The Lonesome Death Of Hattie Carroll (1964) The Times They Are A Changing (1964)	WP A, P, R PA
Bob Marley	Get Up Stand Up (1973) One Love / People Get Ready (1977)	PA A, PA
Charles Neblett	If You Miss Me At The Back Of The Bus (1963)	PA, P, R
Cat Stevens / Yusuf Islam	If You Want To Sing Out (1984) Peace Train (1976)	PA PA, WP
Christina Aguilera	Beautiful (2002)	A, S
Country Joe & The Fish	I Feel Like I'm Fixin' To Die Rag (1967)	PA, WP
Credence Clearwater Revival	Fortunate Son (1969)	P, WP
Dolly Parton	9 To 5 (1980)	PA, S, WR
Doobie Brothers	Takin' It To The Streets (1976)	A, PA, P
Elvis Presley	If I Can Dream (1968)	A, PA, WP
E. Y. "Yip" Harburg and Jay Gorney	Brother, Can You Spare A Dime? (1931)	PA, P
Garth Brooks	We Shall Be Free (1992)	A, PA, P, R
James Weldon Johnson and John Rosamond Johnson	Lift Every Voice And Sing (1905)	PA, R
Janet Jackson	Rhythm Nation (1984)	PA, P, R
John Lennon / The Beatles	All You Need Is Love (1967) I Don't Wanna Be A Soldier (1971) Imagine (1971) Give Peace A Chance (1969) Power To The People (1971) Revolution 1 (1968) So This Is Christmas (War Is Over) (1971)	A, PA WP A, PA, P, WP AC, WP PA, P, S, WR A, PA, WP A, PA, P, R, WP
Kanye West	Don't Look Down (2010)	PA, P
Living Colour	Open Letter (To A Landlord) (1988)	PA, P

Lupe Fiasco	Conflict Diamonds (2006)	PA, P, WP
Michael Jackson	Black Or White (1991) Man In The Mirror (1988)	PA, R, WP PA, P
No Doubt	Just A Girl (1995)	PA, S
Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder	Ebony And Ivory (1982)	PA, R
Pete Seeger	We Shall Overcome (1947)	PA, R
Phil Collins	Another Day In Paradise (1989)	PA, P
Public Enemy	Fight The Power (1989)	PA, R
Ray Stevens	Everything Is Beautiful (1970)	A, PA, R
Robert Palmer	Every Kinda People (1978)	A, PA, P, R
Rod Stewart	The Killing Of Georgie (1976)	PA, H
Run DMC	Proud To Be Black (1986)	PA, R
Scorpions	Wind of Change (1990)	PA, WP
Stevie Wonder	Happy Birthday (1981)	A, PA, R
Sly And The Family Stone	Everyday People (1968) Thank You (1969)	A, PA A, PA
Sweet Honey In The Rock	Ella's Song (1983)	PA, S, R, WP
The New Seekers	I'd Like To Teach The World To Sing (1971)	A, PA, WP
The O'Jays	Love Train (1973)	PA, WP
The Original Caste	One Tin Soldier (1969)	PA, WP
WAR	Why Can't We Be Friends (1975)	A, P, R
Willie Nelson	A Peaceful Solution (2007) Cowboys Are Frequently Secretly (2006)	PA, WP PA, H
Woody Guthrie	This Land Is Your Land (1940)	PA, WP

### Index of Topics Covered

- A Acceptance of All People
- H Homophobia
- PA Political Activism
- P Poverty
- R Racism
- S Sexism
- WP War and Peace
- WR Workers' Rights

## Appendix 2. Example of Handout.

### Imagine

In June of 1971, John Lennon recorded the song *Imagine* in just three takes (Fricke, 2002). A ballad for human rights, advocacy, and peace, *Imagine* continues to be relevant nearly 40 years later. Just a few years after the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, 1971 also included numerous historical events. China joined the United Nations, the Nasdaq stock index was born, the voting age was changed from 21 to 18, Walt Disney World opened, 60% of Americans were against the Vietnam War, Greenpeace was created, Charles Manson and three of his accomplices were found guilty and sentenced to death, Jim Morrison was found dead, Texas Instruments marketed its first pocket calculator, and popular musicians included the Doors, James Taylor, Michael Jackson, the Rolling Stones, the Who, and Janis Joplin (The People History, 2009).

*Imagine there's no heaven  
It's easy if you try  
No hell below us  
Above us only sky  
Imagine all the people  
Living for today...  
Imagine there's no countries  
It isn't hard to do  
Nothing to kill or die for  
And no religion too  
Imagine all the people  
Living life in peace...  
You may say I'm a dreamer*

*But I'm not the only one  
I hope someday you'll join us  
And the world will be as one  
Imagine no possessions  
I wonder if you can  
No need for greed or hunger  
A brotherhood of man  
Imagine all the people  
Sharing all the world...  
You may say I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one  
I hope someday you'll join us  
And the world will live as one*

### Discussion Questions

1. How does knowing about the context in which the song was written influence your thoughts about the song's meaning?
2. In thinking about specific lyrics of this song, what would society be like if these imagined goals were realized?
3. Is this song still relevant for today's society? What are some additional lyrics or topics that could be added?
4. Is the song encouraging us to simply imagine a better world or to actually do something to make the world a better place?
5. What can we do in order to work toward the goals mentioned in the song?

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