

# Music Lesson

by Dr. Kirk Kassner

© 1999 Dr. Kirk Kassner, Federal Way WA 98023

**Lesson Name:** African American History of Music Survey

**For Grades:** 3-6

## **National Standard Goals:**

2. Performing on instruments, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music.
  - a. Perform in rhythm and maintain a steady tempo.
  - b. Perform easy rhythmic patterns accurately and independently.
  - f. Perform independent instrumental parts while other students sing or play contrasting parts.
4. Composing and arranging music within specified guidelines.
  - c. Use a variety of sound sources when composing.
6. Listening to, analyzing, and describing music.
  - b. Demonstrate perceptual skills by moving, by answering questions about, and by describing aural examples of music of various styles representing diverse cultures.
  - c. Use appropriate terminology in explaining music, music notation, music instruments and voices, and music performances.
7. Evaluating music and music performances.
  - b. Explain, using appropriate music terminology, their personal preferences for specific musical works and styles.
9. Understanding music in relation to history and culture.
  - a. Identify by genre or style aural examples of music from various historical period and cultures.
  - b. Describe in simple terms how elements of music (especially rhythm) are used in music examples from various cultures of the world (African and African American).
  - d. Identify and describe roles of musicians in various music settings and cultures.

**Materials Needed:** poster of important dates in African American history, recordings of African layered drum music [SBG K 6,8], Civil War song [*Battle Cry of Freedom* SBG 5:8,20], dixieland jazz [*When the Saints*, SBG 6:10,19], ragtime [Joplin: *Maple Leaf Rag* SBG 3:1,15], church & protest music [*Lift Ev'ry Voice & Sing*], Gospel singing [*Don't Knock*, SBG 4:5,4], swing band [Ellington: *I'm Beginning to See the Light*, Columbia Records CS 9629], early rock 'n' roll [Little Richard: *Hound Dog*, Everest Records FS 296]. Poster of '50s backbeat shuffle rhythm, bass drum, snare drum, variety of other drums and percussion instruments, poster of African Layered Drum Rhythms, computer & software: *Rock Rap 'n' Roll*.

**Procedure:****Quadrant 1: Why?**

1. America owes a lot to Black people for their many contributions to our way of life, especially in the area of music. Each group will get a reading that tells about some of the musical history of African Americans and will receive 10 points for doing a good job of reading it to the class. Captains choose who will read what parts on the microphone [one person may read the entire passage, everyone may read together, or in any combination the group chooses]. You may have two minutes to prepare. Ask me to help with any words you don't know.

**Quadrant 2: What?**

2. Reading by first group:

Before slaves were brought from Africa, they had a long and rich tradition of music. Music was used for religion and healing. Instruments could only be played by shamans (medicine men and priests). Drums, rattles, wood blocks, and other percussion instruments were very important. Groups of musicians would play complex music. Each musician would play his own rhythm and layer it with other rhythms performed by different instruments. Listen to this example of layered drumming from Africa.

[Follow up question: In that example, there were several drums, a scraping instrument, and a whistle. Can you tell me what the underlying meter pattern was?] [4]

3. Reading by the second group.

President Lincoln declared freedom for all slaves in 1863 and Union armies set slaves free wherever they went in the South. The slaves were afraid to stay on the plantations, so many of them followed the Northern armies. Some armies had thousands of former slaves following them. Some of the freed slaves joined in the fighting. Listen to a popular song from the Civil War sung by soldiers, white and black.

[Follow up question: Instruments from what two families (typically used in the military) accompanied the singing soldiers? (Brass & percussion)]

4. Reading by the third group.

Not all the freed slaves could join the army, because there were not enough guns. To keep the rest of them busy, the army gave out extra musical instruments. Most slaves could not read music, but made up their own music and taught each other by imitation. After the Civil War ended in 1865, the Northern armies went home and the freed slaves didn't know what to do. Many of them went to New Orleans on the Mississippi river. There were good jobs there, especially for musicians. The African Americans made up a brand new kind of music in New Orleans, known as Dixieland Jazz style. Dixieland bands usually have five or six players who all "improvise"--that is, make up the music as they go along without reading the notes. Listen to the Dixieland Jazz in *When the Saints Go Marching In*

[Follow up question: Would you say the instruments repeated the same music over and over or made up new and different fancy notes each repetition of the song?] [new and different]

5. Reading by the fourth group.

New Orleans became crowded with black musicians and many could not find jobs. Some musicians went up the Mississippi River to Saint Louis, Missouri. By 1890, they had changed Dixieland Jazz into a new kind of music, called Ragtime Jazz. Scott Joplin was one of the first black men in America to write down and publish music in Ragtime style. You probably have heard several of his songs, which have been used in movies, commercials, and at pizza restaurants. Listen to one of his most famous songs in ragtime style, called *Maple Leaf Rag*.

[Follow up question: What instrument was featured? (Piano) Is the tempo of ragtime music rather fast or slow?] [slow]

### 6. Reading by the fifth group.

When they were slaves, African Americans were forced to go to church. They learned to sing the same church songs as the whites. After gaining freedom, they kept on going to church and singing white people's songs, but also started writing their own songs. As we learned earlier this year, the poet James Weldon Johnson wrote *Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing* in 1909. This song is in the same style as white people's music, and is sung nearly every Sunday in black churches across America. It is so popular it has earned the nickname, The Black National Anthem.

[Dr. K will play a little of LEV to remind everyone what it sounds like, then continue reading]

A new kind of music developed out of this church singing, called Gospel Jazz style. Gospel combines church singing with African rhythms. Listen to *Don't Knock, Just Walk Right In* and note how the energy of African music fits together with church singing style.

[Follow up question: Call and response is a prominent feature of African American music, in which one person sings part of the song and a group echos or completes the phrase. Was the call in this song sung by a man, a woman, or a child?]

### 7. Reading by the sixth group.

When Henry Ford established his assembly line to build cars in Detroit, many black people moved North to get good-paying jobs. When they finished work in the evening, they liked to go to night clubs to dance. Bands with 30-40 players performed a new kind of music, called Big Band Jazz style. This was very popular in the 1920's, '30's, and '40s. Many black instrument players and black singers performed in dance bands and traveled all over the country. The music was fast, loud, and exciting--full of energy from Africa and played by musicians of fantastic skill. One of the most popular big bands was lead by Duke Ellington. Listen to his composition, *I'm Beginning to See the Light*.

[Follow up question: Every instrument family was represented in the Ellington band and this tune. Which instruments did you hear in his band that have strings? (string bass, piano) Which are made of brass? (trumpet, trombone) Which have reeds? (Saxophones) Which produce sound by hitting it? (Drums, cymbal)]

Teacher finishes reading:

After World War II, big bands were replaced by smaller groups that were playing even faster and more exciting music. Listen to Little Richard perform *Hound Dog*--an early example of Rock 'n' Roll style.

[Follow up question: What is the meter? With what adjective would you describe the tempo? What term do musicians use that means fast? (Allegro, presto, vivace)]

8. Rock 'n' Roll developed and split into the many kinds of rock we know today: soft rock, acid rock, gospel rock, country rock, etc. Virtually all rock is in four meter. The rhythmic pattern that characterized all of the 1950's early rock was called the 'backbeat' pattern. Look at the poster: stomp your foot on counts 1 & 3. On count two, clap your hands once and on count 4, clap your hands twice quickly. That's the backbeat pattern. Transfer your foot pattern to a bass drum and your clap pattern to a snare drum and you have the drum pattern that goes with all 50's rock 'n' roll.

### Quadrant 3: How?

9. Allow different groups to try playing the backbeat pattern on the drums while rock music plays on the stereo.

10. Let's see if you can play some African layered rhythms, which are even more complex. [have each group choose a rhythm and a percussion instrument, learn their pattern, then try to put it together.] As you can see, it is not easy to keep your pattern going with all the other instruments confusing you.

**Quadrant 4: What if?**

11. What if we could combine rhythm and pitch patterns from Africa into our own song. The software, *Rock Rap 'n' Roll* will allow us to do that. [introduce software, then let each group 'compose' an African sound piece. Discuss what 'worked' and didn't work so well in each composition.]

**Method of Evaluation:**

Teacher continuously observes students' listening attention and their answers to questions about what they heard. Teacher observes students' ability to maintain beat and pattern when performing on percussion instruments. Teacher observes students' efforts at composition and their evaluation of their own and others' work.