

Social Justice Songwriting Workshop

Unit Objective: Use the tools of songwriting to convey, in song, a message which fights for social justice.

Grade: 9-12

Residency designed for 4 lessons, 45 min each (but times are adaptable)

Lesson 1:

Goal: Analyze song lyrics so see how they fight for social justice

Sequence of Activities:

1. Play a song of mine, and share what I do as a professional singer/songwriter
2. Go over plan and purpose for the residency: to learn and use the tools of songwriting to convey, in song, a message which fights for social justice
3. Game: "Whopper." Each person writes down two truths and one lie about themselves. Go around the room, each share the three things. The class tries to guess which is the "whopper."
4. What is social justice? What are some of the themes/issues? (e.g. race, gender, LBGTQ, poverty, religion, ethnicity, the environment).
5. Look at and listen to songs that fight for social justice
 - a. "This Land is Your Land" by Woody Guthrie (socioeconomics)
 - b. "Heartspark\$" by Everclear (race)
 - c. "On Every Corner" by Ani Difranto (homelessness/AIDS)
 - d. "Killing in the Name of" (edited) by Rage Against the Machine (race/police violence)
6. Questions for songs:
 - a. What are they fighting for?
 - b. How do they use songwriting to convey their point?
 - c. Why are songs a good tool for fighting for these issues?
7. Assignment: Bring in a song that YOU care about. Bonus points if it has a social justice component!

Lesson 2

Goal: Working in groups, write the chorus to a social justice song

Sequence of Activities:

1. Go over song structure, and the function of each part. Begin by asking students if they know what the different parts of a song are.
 - a. Chorus (repetition)
 - b. Verse (rhythm and rhyme)
 - c. Bridge (departure from the rest of the song)

2. Select a few of the songs that students brought in. Listen to the song, and examine the lyrics
 - a. Where is the chorus? Verse? Is there a bridge?
 - b. What is this song saying?
 - c. How is this song communicating its message? (imagery, repetition, rhyme)
3. Organize groups, according to thematic interest
 - a. Write topics up on the board (race, gender, sexual orientation, class, etc)
 - b. Have students write their name on a slip of paper with top three choices
 - c. Organize into groups according to theme/issue
4. Generate word bank
 - a. Have students call out random imagery words, concrete words, nouns and adjectives that have a visual component (“Don’t think, just write!”)
 - b. I write them on the board, forming a word bank
 - c. Why is concrete imagery important in songwriting?
 - d. Challenge: your group must use 5 of these words in your song!
5. Write a chorus!
 - a. Instruct each member of every group to write a chorus, using one of the following prompts, in 30 seconds or less (“Don’t think, just write!”). Keep your group’s social justice issue in mind, but don’t worry try to hard to address it directly. Chorus prompts:
 - i. I’m not gonna _____, but I’m gonna _____
 - ii. I come from _____/but I’m going to _____
 - iii. I’m going down to _____Town
 - b. Have the members of each group share what they’ve written with each other.
 - c. Each group choose the one they like the best.
 - d. Now that you’ve chosen this chorus, what do you think the message of this song is? What does it mean to you?
 - i. Explain the different between the thesis for an essay, and the message of a song
 - ii. Explain how sometimes in songwriting, you only realize what you are trying to say after you write it (the opposite of essay-writing!)
 - e. Decide how many times to repeat the line (2X, 3X), and presto, they have a chorus!

Lesson 3

Goal: Using songwriting tools (repetition, rhyme, imagery), write one verse of a social justice song

Sequence of Activities:

1. Game: sentence-in-a-circle game
 - a. With each group sitting or standing in a circle, someone starts a sentence, saying a single word. They next person says the next word in the sentence, and so one around the circle until the sentence feels like it’s come to an end. Then the next person says “Period.”
 - b. Repeat this several times, the last couple times having them incorporate words that I give them, based on social justice relevant words from previous lessons.
2. Brainstorm on chosen chorus/theme

- a. In each group, read aloud the chorus from the day before
 - b. For 60 seconds, each member of the group write as many words as they can, reacting to the chorus (there are no right answers! This is just to get the creative juices flowing!).
 - c. Pass your list to the person next to you, and read them aloud to the group
 - d. Challenge: use three of these words in your song verses.
3. Begin writing the first verse
- a. Remind them of the challenges, to incorporate words from the word banks.
 - b. Instruct each member of every group to write the first line to the first verse, beginning with one of the following prompts, in 30 seconds or less ("Don't think, just write!")
 - i. Don't wanna...
 - ii. Woke up this morning...
 - iii. I come from...
 - iv. Not gonna... (but I'm gonna)
 - v. May you never...
 - vi. When the...
 - vii. I wish I were...
 - c. Have the members of each group share what they've written with each other.
 - d. Choose the line you like the best, and proceed to write the 2nd line of the verse
 - e. When stuck, return to the songwriter's two best friends:
 - i. Repetition
 - ii. Rhyme
 - f. I will circulate to help when students get stuck, and give them feedback, encouragement, and additional prompting
 - g. Keep going, until you have a full first verse (4-6 lines)
4. Setting it to music
- a. When a group has their chorus and 1st verse completed, they should flag me over
 - b. I will ask them to choose
 - i. An instrument
 1. Banjo
 2. Guitar
 3. Mandolin
 - ii. A genre/style of music
 1. Folk
 2. Blues
 3. Rock
 4. Punk
 5. Country
 - c. On the spot, I will compose music to their lyrics, and record it for reference
5. If time, start on 2nd verse

Lesson 4

Goal: Write, re-write, and edit the remaining lyrics to a social justice song

Sequence of Activities:

1. Check in: go around the whole class, and have each student/teacher report, in 5 words or less, how they are doing, how they feel at this moment.
2. Return to groups, and continue writing verses to song
3. I will circulate, offering support, prompting, feedback, and encouragement.
4. Editing/tweaking.
 - a. When several verses have been completed, the editing/tweaking begins
 - b. I will sing through the whole song, and together we will listen for what might make it sound better, or support the message of the song better
 - c. How can the song's social justice message be made sharper, clearer, louder, simpler, or more poignant?
5. Share completed songs with the rest of the class!
 - a. Have a member of each group give the title, and introduce the topic of the song
 - b. Get out a recording device
 - c. I will sing the completed song for the class
6. Conclusion: have students share one thing that they got out of this workshop, either in terms of songwriting, or in terms of learning about social justice