

# **Hip Hop Renaissance: The Struggle for Self-expression**

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## **Overview**

### ***Introduction***

The aim of this unit is to enable and encourage students to *be* Hip Hop artists, to understand the essential elements of Hip Hop culture, to understand some of the history of the Harlem Renaissance and the importance of the expressive arts and music in culture and history. It is based on the notion that in today's classrooms are tomorrow's influential artists and thinkers. The project will culminate in the production of a sound recording that will be reproduced in the form of a Compact Disc and sold to members of the community to raise funds for the school's music program. The class will publish a booklet alongside the CD. The curriculum is centered on the music class, but touches on standards in almost all of the disciplines. It is designed for Grades 6-8.

Students will begin by discussing and understanding the essence of Hip Hop. Through viewing video and listening to audio examples, they will see that Hip Hop is made up of: drum beats, sampling, poetry, image, fun, and business. These will be the ingredients that the students will combine to create their project.

The Harlem Renaissance will be introduced as an era in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century during which there was a concentration of African Americans and subsequent explosion of arts and culture among them in Harlem, New York. Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, Marcus Garvey and Duke Ellington are the central figures that will be studied to give an understanding of the times. Music and literature of the period will be presented to the students, not with any preconceived definition of what the meaning of the movement was, but rather in a way that allows the students to discover on their own what the importance or significance is. It is in keeping with the traditions of Hip Hop that they search and discover for themselves, as if digging through the archives, to bring to life artifacts of times gone by and shine new light on them.

To make this project possible, the teacher will need to be familiar with and have access to some sort of digital audio technology, preferably Garage Band, which is part of the basic software package in any new Apple computer. Many schools and music classrooms already make use of this technology, and its usefulness in music education is becoming increasingly recognized. Garage Band allows the user to easily record beats, instruments and vocals, as well as edit and manipulate sounds. Even with one basic

computer a class can be transformed into a recording studio with CD production capabilities.

### ***History and Art***

Learning history is only important as it relates to how we shape our destinies. While Africa has always been a part of American History, African American History is only beginning to find its place in the curriculum of our education system. This history is as significant to all our young citizens as any current and previous histories put forth in conventional texts. People are realizing the need for teaching this aspect of American History, for an understanding of how this nation was founded, and for discovering the meaning of freedom, and for understanding how to co-exist in our time and age.

While many middle school aged people might have a basic knowledge of Martin Luther King, Jr. and perhaps a notion of who Malcolm X was, it is beyond the thinking of many to understand the ideas put forth by other prominent black leaders such as Marcus Garvey. The study of the Harlem renaissance is the link for students to the figure of Garvey, whose ideas about the identity and destiny of Negroes are enlightening in the continued pursuit of African American progress and harmony between people. We see that people like Marcus Garvey and Afrika Bambaataa, while being of different times, and practicing with different materials, have had similar methods and similar aims. Charisma, word power, and physical means were all used to further their own personal notions of what the identity and destiny of their people would be.

The parallels and contrasts between the Harlem Renaissance and Hip Hop are telling of what remains constant through the times, and what has changed in the last 100 years. Harlem in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was the cultural magnet of the black world, which brought a treasure of influential artifacts. Similarly, Hip Hop has become a dominant global force that will shape the future of the world. In both we see that people will work for improved conditions no matter what limitations are set upon them.

Langston Hughes is the main writer from the Harlem Renaissance whose works will be read and recited. He has remained the quintessential writer of the period, and his works will continue to be an inspiration for at least the rest of our lifetimes. Students will read from *The Dream Keeper and other poems* and turn these works into Hip Hop compositions. Other Hughes works from the *Double-take* anthology will be read as well. Students will use these poems to write their own poems, which they will record and perform in the same fashion.

While Hughes remains one of the single most notable figures of the Harlem Renaissance, it is not as easy to attach such a label on a Hip Hop artist. We are living in the day of Hip Hop, and who will make the history books can't be predicted. It's hard to imagine that jazz would have had been as loathed and feared (and yet loved) by the

public as Hip Hop is by some today, but perhaps in time Hip Hop will too gain similar acceptance (the Smithsonian has recently made plans for a Hip Hop exhibit [“Smithsonian Opens Doors”, 2006]). Tupac Shakur is one of the unique Hip Hop artists who were known for both his authentic street persona and his sensitive artistic side. In his life he had a career as both a rapper and an actor, and his style as a writer never strayed entirely from the poetic form. His book of poetry, *The Rose That Grew From Concrete* will be read and recited.

### ***Hip Hop***

The lessons will put forth a definition of Hip Hop as shaped by some of its major figures including Afrika Bambaataa, Run-DMC, Queen Latifah, P. Diddy, Tupac Shakur and others. Students will learn that Hip Hop is a musical form that allows for many different kinds of participants. It defies the idea that to be a musician one has to play an instrument, take lessons and perform recitals. In Hip Hop, if you can flip a switch, turn a knob, recite a speech or a poem, play records, dance, paint, take a stance, or otherwise have a vision, you can be a player. The accessibility of the art form results in a proliferation of produced material, and even though there is an “anybody-can-do-it” approach, this does not mean there is no skill involved. In fact, the culture is built on a system of natural selection, where battles leave only the strongest surviving and audiences can be ruthless toward performers who don’t meet the standard.

Categories and genres are merely things we use to speak about phenomena, and what is known as Hip Hop is just the latest incarnation of African American music. Historians of Hip Hop agree that the genre is based on African traditions of drumming and storytelling, the latter in the form of the griot of West Africa who is the keeper of oral tradition in a community (Haskins, 13). Rapping and call-and-response in American popular music has been around since the earliest recorded music, from Cab Calloway to Shirley Ellis, and the advent of Hip Hop in the 1980s was only the latest incarnation of these forms rooted in African music (Matarazzo).

People have always used whatever means were available to them, especially when their conditions were in need of improvement. The founders of the United States used the pen to draft new governing documents to free themselves from colonial rule, African Americans have aimed to maximize the tools at hand in their struggle for freedom. Rebel slaves such as Nat Turner have fought for rights (Franklin & Moss, p. 134), African Americans served in the military during the Civil War as a way of finding freedom (Franklin & Moss, p. 195), served in government during Reconstruction, and writers and musicians in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century struggled to demonstrate their value as human beings to the dominant culture. Every generation has had its share of such leaders, and in the “MTV generation” these leaders are the heroes of Hip Hop.

The element of television is essential to Hip Hop music. The advances in broadcasting and cable networks that were coming about in the 1970s and 80s were a key ingredient in the success of African American music of the time. Hip Hop, which was an underground phenomenon, proved to be of interest to television viewers, who were intrigued by the colorful styles and unusual scenes of this small subculture (Karunaratne).

### ***The Connection***

The Harlem Renaissance is a time period that can be seen as a rebirth of African American arts and culture. It is a significant part of American history, in which the feelings and ideas of African Americans first surfaced into mainstream culture and were recognized. Access to media gave people the voice to express themselves and their needs and wants, as it continues to do.

As an outcome of this unit, students will understand the idea that people in various phases of history have used tools and technology at their disposal in order to preserve their liberty, make social change and pursue their dreams.

### **Rationale**

The unit is designed with a specific student population in mind, based on the experiences of one middle school music teacher in the southwest region of Philadelphia. Teachers whose students identify strongly with Hip Hop culture will understand the importance of teaching such lessons, and the significance these issues have for their students. At the same time, there are universal themes expressed in Hip Hop culture, and indeed the so-called “architects” of Hip Hop envisioned the culture as a universal language that crossed boundaries and served to bring people together (Matarazzo).

This notion has become muddled in recent years, and many people associate “Hip Hop” with violence, sexism and materialism. There is the question of whether such music is simply a vehicle for partying or whether it is necessary for it to carry a social message, and, if the idea of people getting together and having a good time is of social value (especially in schools with high rates of violence). Either way, the force of Hip Hop is an influence on both urban and non-urban youth. And ultimately, the aim of the project is to put the power into the young people’s hands - the power to move, to speak, to create – and teach them to use that power for positive results.

### ***Historical Study***

Students today are becoming increasingly detached from history. The information they have gathered in their lifetimes has come largely from television and Internet sources. Educators should understand the influence of today’s technology on the minds of students. Every year brings new changes that effect young people’s lives. The advent of

inexpensive mp3 players, for example, can mean that students have non-stop access to vast supplies of musical material that can be easily transported wherever the student goes. The significance of these advances should not be underestimated, as the sights and sounds that enter the mind leave impressions.

Many students have been exposed to so much material from the past 5 or 10 years, but have very little knowledge or understanding of the history of our culture, and the importance of knowing and understanding the achievements and accomplishments of those who have come before. It is a very difficult task for teachers to inspire interest in students to study history. Students are struggle with many problems in their lives due to poor social conditions, and when combined with the overload their senses experience, they can't be bothered to learn about things outside of their scope.

The aim is to attract students to the notion of studying the history of arts and culture by using contemporary means to create living art works that themselves can be preserved for times to come. Many history lessons treat students as observers or researchers, whereas this unit makes students active participants. By giving them access to today's latest technology, and instructing them in the ways of Hip Hop, students can find their own value in the works of the Harlem Renaissance.

### ***Words and Power***

Writers of the Harlem Renaissance often sought to bring their particular experiences to the conventional forms of essays, plays, poems, and stories. Of course, they pushed boundaries and were ahead of their times, but the forms they used were mainly those of the mainstream. Jazz, while distinctly African American, has its origins in ragtime and minstrel music, which were geared toward a white audience. Popular songs of the dominant culture were played in a syncopated, lively style, which would become known as jazz (Landeck, p.131).

Hip Hop from its origins was a style that was uniquely African American. The turntable had never been used as a musical instrument, and lyrical style had never been so free and non-melodic. Hip Hop was not aimed at proving black mastery over white forms, or with adding black style to white material, but is a form which is intentionally true to the very nature of the African past. Repressed expressions came to the forefront in the Hip Hop era, aided by the interest of the culture at large. Its not that African styles were never expressed before, but that they surfaced with a new freedom and an agenda of expressing a long-buried truth.

Students should be able to hold on to this art form, and develop it for the sake of their own empowerment and for the sake of preserve this genuine history. Verbal skills are essential to the educated person, and the arts are as well.

## ***Self-sufficiency***

The lesson of producing a product that is marketable is invaluable. Students need real life projects that teach them skills and solve real problems. In our consumer society, we take for granted the work behind the products we buy. Young people must understand what it takes to create something that is worth money to others.

## **Objectives**

Students will use language to express themselves. They will gain an appreciation for the power of words, and understand how words can be used to affect the world. They will learn to be critical of their own works by creating a portfolio. This portfolio will allow them to reflect upon what they've learned for years to come, and it will also be a valuable tool for presentation to others.

Students will understand the Harlem Renaissance period's significance in the course of American and African American History. They will see connections between their lives and the lives of people from that time and other times. One of the goals is that students realize that they are a living part of history.

Students will be introduced to the poetry of Langston Hughes. They will appreciate it from an emotional perspective, and from an analytical perspective. They will be responsible for studying, practicing and reciting the poems.

Students will learn what Marcus Garvey contributed in the realm of African American History. They will learn of his writings, speeches and influence, and see how his personality became a focal point for a Pan-African movement. The connection will be made between Garvey, his Jamaican ties, and the notion of a universal black race. In addition, we will see that Hip Hop was a product of Jamaican musicians and DJs impacting the New York street culture in the late 1970s (Afrika Bambaataa).

Students will read and relate to the poetry of Tupac Shakur, and use it to inspire them to write their own poetry. They will understand it from an emotional and analytical point of view. They will explore techniques for creating poetry and using words to express themselves.

Students will learn to understand Hip Hop as a legitimate art form that incorporates rhythm, poetry, samples, and found materials. They will understand the importance of technology in the creation of art and the transmission of ideas.

Students will make comparisons and contrasts between the Harlem renaissance and Hip Hop culture, specifically with Hughes and Shakur.

Students will know the geography of African American History, as it relates to Harlem, the migration of people from southern regions of the U.S., from West Africa to the Americas, and the emergence of Hip Hop from New York and subsequent developments in Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, Atlanta, Houston and elsewhere.

Students will experience the production and sale of their own material. They will understand the importance of managing one's own business affairs, and see that self-sufficiency is one of the key features of Hip Hop.

## **Strategies**

### ***The Beginning***

The aim is to get students to perform and produce their own poetry and versions of Harlem Renaissance poetry. The backbone of the project will be the Hip Hop beat, which by enticing people to bob along in rhythm promotes the acceptance of ideas put forth. To grab the interest of the students we will dive straight into a lesson on the essence of Hip Hop. We will discuss their knowledge of Hip Hop, which will yield many unknown contributions. With the teacher's guidance, they will fit their knowledge into a framework that defines Hip Hop as a link in African American culture that combines rhythm and poetry, recycled and found materials, attitude and self-sufficiency.

From the beginning, students must feel energized and excited about the project, and must find success and joy in producing the first product. For this reason, they will be introduced to the musical tools available in Garage Band, and will create a composition made of only sound and rhythm, and focused more on feeling than thinking. For added effect, they will bring in basic Hip Hop catch phrases and short chants that aim to excite and move the listener. Students will work in groups of 4 or 5 and will start to build a group identity by giving themselves a name.

### ***Getting Underway***

As we move into the study of history and literature, we will continue to make the project vivid and exciting. The Harlem Renaissance will be presented in all its glory, as a time of prosperous culture. Any possible connections through the years should be brought in to demonstrate the influence this time period has had. For example, many students are familiar with the Apollo Theater, and the television shows broadcast from there. Stevie Wonder's 1976 "Sir Duke" pays tribute to some of the greats of jazz, including Ellington.

Unusual techniques will give an extra spark to new material. Writings by Zora Neale Hurston, Marcus Garvey, Countee Cullen, Hughes and others can be introduced by handing out portions of the texts to individual students and having them contribute their parts to form the whole pieces, or by having students write portions of texts in colorful

and artistic ways to display on the wall. In this way, the group will be automatically engaged in the process of discovering these pieces. Jazz music can be played as a backdrop.

The class should begin getting into the habits of working in poetry circles. Small groups can share readings from *The Dream Keeper*. Each group will choose one poem to insert into a Hip Hop track.

### ***Becoming Poets***

Tupac Shakur is a well-known rap personality that many young people seem to respect. Perhaps his death at a young age adds to this reverence. Yet many do not know him as a poet. The introduction in the book *The Rose That Grew From Concrete* gives some interesting insight into the life and impact of Shakur, and the poems make him accessible to today's urban students. Selections from his musical career, and from a collection called *The Rose: Music Inspired by Tupac's Poetry* should be given close listening.

The class should continue working as poetry circles. Small groups can share readings of Tupac's poems. Reciting the works of others will help build the courage for students to present their own original works. The teacher should coach the class on the creative writing process. This can be done by treating words as entities unto themselves, detached from the person who uses them. The class can create a grab bag of words and phrases, select them randomly and experiment with building ideas off of them. Eventually this process can become more specific and intimate, encouraging students to express themselves with creative writing.

### ***Culmination and Post-production***

By now, groups have created musical compositions based on the works of Hughes and Garvey, and have written original poems. To complete the recording sessions, a live event will take place, in which students will display their original works over pre-recorded backdrops. The classroom will be transformed into a place resembling the nightclubs of classic Harlem, refreshments will be served, and students will take on stage names. The event will be recorded and segments added to the collection of tracks.

The final phase of the project will be the creation of a booklet of liner notes to accompany the CD. This will include a cover, photographs of the artists and a diagram comparing and contrasting the Harlem Renaissance with Hip Hop.

### **Classroom Activities**

Introduction of project to class. Discuss the desired outcome: class will create CD with booklet exploring the Harlem Renaissance and Hip Hop to sell to community to raise



money for music program. For all sampled works we will need permission from the owners of the copyright. For all original work we will put our own copyright on it.

## ***Lesson 1***

Essential question:

What are the basic elements of Hip Hop?

Culminating Assessment:

Students are able to identify the basic elements in various Hip Hop songs.

Before:

Ask students to define Hip Hop in one or two words. Stretch your imagination - don't state the obvious. Each student contributes to a mural of words defining Hip Hop.

During:

View *Afrika Bambaataa* video. Set forth the following key elements of Hip Hop:

- drum beats
- samples
- poetry
- image
- fun
- business

Match up students' defining words with these categories.

View Run-DMC's *Rock Box* video, Queen Latifah's *Ladies First* video, P. Diddy's *Mo Money, Mo Problems* video, Miri Ben-Ari's *Showtime at the Apollo* video. Discuss these 6 essential elements in relation to the videos, and create diagram.

In groups of 4 or 5 students combine drumbeats, samples and fun to create short musical compositions. Students experiment with the tools available in Garage Band, especially trying to use them in ways they may not have been originally intended, such as playing with volume.

After:

Class listens back to the compositions and offer feedback.

## ***Lesson 2***

Essential Question:  
What is the Harlem Renaissance?

Culminating Assessment:  
Class discusses the Harlem Renaissance as defined by writer such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, and by jazz musicians such as Duke Ellington and Billie Holiday

Before:  
Play jazz music from the Harlem era in background, such as Duke Ellington and Billie Holiday. Ask students what they know about Harlem or the Harlem Renaissance.

Hand out individual lines of Zora Neale Hurston's *Passion*. Adjust it appropriately for the number of students so that each has one line of the complete poem. Read it aloud to class. Then have them stand in order and each say their line as they hang the lines around the room.

Hand out individual lines of Langston Hughes' *Jazzonia*. This time have students copy the lines in colorful and beautiful lettering, and hang them together on the wall. Read aloud, and offer for students to participate.

During:  
Break into groups. Give each group a copy of *The Dream Keeper* and have group members take turns picking poems and reading aloud to group.

Groups choose one or more poems to incorporate into a new Garage Band track. Use jazz era samples. Students can create samples out of their voices and manipulate these samples within the track.

After:  
Class listens back to the compositions and offers feedback.

### ***Lesson 3***

Essential question:  
Who is Marcus Garvey?

Culminating Assessment:  
Students discuss Marcus Garvey as a black leader who put forth ideas of universal black rights and who influenced many people in the African Diaspora.

Before:

Play Burning Spear's *Marcus Garvey*, and other like reggae songs. Survey students' knowledge of Garvey, and other well-known names in black history. Discuss the significance of such figures and why it is important to learn about such historical people. Discuss Marcus Garvey and the United Negro Improvement Association and show pictures. Discuss his life in both New York and Jamaica, and his connection with Rastafarian culture and reggae music from Jamaica.

During:

Discuss the drafting of documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and compare such to Garvey's Declaration of Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World. Draft a Declaration of Rights of the Students of School. Have each student propose a new right that they believe they should have, such as the right to dress in ways that express their own sense of style, or the right to have free access to water fountains and bathrooms.

The class records one long Hip Hop track using reggae samples, and individuals state their declarations over it.

After:

Class listens back and critiques.

#### ***Lesson 4***

Essential Question:

Who is Tupac Shakur and how does his poetry inspire?

Culminating Assessment:

Students share their thoughts and feelings about Tupac's poetry and how it inspired their writing.

Before: Play selections from *The Rose Volume 2: Music Inspired by Tupac's Poetry*. Find out what students know about Tupac Shakur. Make graphic organizer with results.

During:

Ask students what they think the meaning of the title *The Rose That Grew From Concrete* means.

Hand out copies of the Preface, Forward and Introduction and read aloud, or have students participate in reading. Discuss what understanding we can gain from these portions of the book.

Groups read from copies of the book to one another. Each student chooses four interesting words from within the poems and writes them on individual papers. Class puts words in grab bag and each student chooses one word and builds an idea around that word. Teacher shows by example. Students can also come up with other words not in the poems if they want. Students experiment with words and forming larger thoughts from them.

Students write a minimum of four original lines, unlimited by rhyme or meter.

Groups compose tracks and record themselves reciting poems over the tracks.

After:

Once they are recorded, groups rehearse reciting poems so that they will be able to perform the poems live while the background track plays.

### ***Lesson 5***

Essential question:

How does one perform original poetry and music?

Culminating assessment:

Students create atmosphere inspired by Harlem Renaissance cabaret and perform and record original poetry.

Before:

Create Harlem cabaret atmosphere in classroom. Prepare background tracks for poetry and sequence of performers. Dress in costume of choice and take on stage names. Invite community members.

During:

Stage live poetry performance and record audio.

After:

Celebrate.

### ***Lesson 6***

Essential question:

What is necessary to complete the production of a marketable CD?

Culminating assessment:

Class creates and reproduces CD of unit with liner notes booklet and sells to community members.

Before:

Discuss what is needed to complete project: final mixdown of songs, photographs of artists, diagram comparing and contrasting Harlem Renaissance and Hip Hop.

During:

Class has photo shoot of groups. Class creates Venn diagram comparing and contrasting the two phenomena. Class makes graphic for cover of booklet. Class compiles booklet and reproduces CD. Teacher and students request permission for copyrighted materials.

After:

Students distribute CD to community.

### **Annotated Bibliography/Resources**

Teacher's Sources:

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Motion Pictures:

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### **Appendix/Standards**

ELA

Reading 2.1 Read, respond to, and discuss fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and drama.

Writing 2. Write in order to enjoy the writing experience and use as leisure-time activity.

Speaking 2.1 Speak clearly and audibly.

Viewing .2 Recognize the effects of mode of presentation on viewer.

## MATH

Problem Solving Reasoning .2 Apply problem solving strategies to meaningful problem in home, community, and school.

## SCIENCE

Designed World .6 Identify and discuss new technologies that can change values and social behavior.

## SOCIAL STUDIES

Culture .4 Explain how written and oral traditions, literature, the arts, architecture, artifacts, beliefs, values, and behaviors contribute to the development and transmission of culture.

## MUSIC

Compose and Arrange Music 4.2 Use a variety of traditional and non-traditional sound sources such as found sounds, environmental sounds, and electronic media when composing and arranging.

## VISUAL ARTS

Subject Matter, Symbols, Ideas 3.1 Identify and discuss subject matter, symbols, and ideas that visual images communicate