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# Why Include Popular Music in Schools?

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Robert Woody  
Dale Bazan

# Our Backgrounds and Experiences

- Bob Woody as a kid – concert band trumpeter by day, top 40 junkie by night
- Bob Woody as an adult – began to realize rock dreams, research on participatory musicianship and ear-playing, initiated “rock band experience” for music ed majors
- Dale Bazan as a kid - polka accordionist, improviser on sax, afterschool rocker in junior high and high school
- Dale Bazan as an adult - revisited rock chops, research on Academy of Rock community program, initiated songwriting course for music ed majors
- Bob and Dale together – founded RUBRIC, the UNL music education faculty rock band



## Covering the Basics

- *Increased student motivation* from personal familiarity, cultural relevance, curricular variety, emotional enjoyment.
- Reaching a musically *disenfranchised school population*.
- Interdisciplinary *support for social studies* (e.g., American history post 1950).
- Opportunities for *student creativity* and *expression*.



# Questions for Group Discussion

- What aspects of traditional school music suggest a need to broaden the curriculum? What problems within music education might be alleviated by including popular music?
- What are the skills—musical and otherwise—that popular music experiences can build in students that other more traditional school music activities do not?
- If music educators decide to incorporate popular music in their teaching, what precautions can be taken to head off potential concerns and criticisms of administrators, parents, teaching colleagues, and other music educators?
- How might teacher training programs better equip music education majors with the knowledge and skills necessary to incorporate popular music in their future teaching?



# Issues within Music Education

- Music dropout rates. As few as 10% of high school students elect to take music.
- Non-use of school music skills after graduation. Few opportunities and little interest in continuing.
- Competitive structure. Auditioned ensembles, chair placements, competitions and ratings festivals.
- Limited musicianship developed. Some of the National Standards for Music Education go virtually ignored.
- Bad reputation of school music. The music is “classical” (boring), studied analytically, and difficult to learn.
- Music curriculum vs. the musical world. The narrow range of styles/genres of school do not represent the vast world in which we live.



# Skills of Popular Music Making

- Aural skills...using the ear in various ways
- Composition/arranging...musical decision-making
- Improvisation...creativity in real-time
- Independence...leading one's own music-making
- Collaboration...negotiating roles, finding community
- Expression...handling emotion, message, image
- Versatility...playing more than one instrument, singing
- Contextual understanding...knowing how music reflects history, society, culture
- Artistic range...lyrics/poetry, gesture/dance, fashion/visual art



# Avoiding Pitfalls and Hurdles

- Articulate curricular objectives and outcomes
- Document lesson plans (including assessment)
- Preempt risqué lyrics in covers and student songs
- Build and maintain excellence in traditional aspects of music program
- Avoid competition/conflict between popular music and traditional components of the program



# Changing Music Teacher Training

- Greater distinction between performer training (specialization) and teacher training (breadth)
- “Creativity training” (composition, songwriting, improvisation) for all
- Study on principal instrument includes a variety of skills, e.g., playing by ear, sight-reading, and improvisation
- Ensemble requirements include “chamber” experiences
- Teaching practicum opportunities in nontraditional music classes
- History and theory coursework that gives attention to vernacular music traditions





# Giving Teachers Popular Music Experiences

- Better understanding all the students they serve...  
*"I've always been interested in what it would be like to be a 'normal' person playing music, not being classically trained. Playing in a garage band requires a completely different skill set."* – Mary, string specialist
- Bridging the gap in personal-professional selves...  
*"Ask [music educators] what they listen to, and they say popular music. So why not do that music? We're supposedly the best musicians, but we pigeon hole ourselves to about 2% of the world's music. It's a great 2% but there's so much more to experience."* – Paul, choir director
- Gaining respect for the performance genre...  
*"I have a deeper respect for popular music performance. It's hard to get up in front of a crowd like that. I would say it was harder than performing with a concert band or a choir. I felt more pressure not to disappoint the audience."* – Lynn, elementary general music teacher



## Rediscovering a Love for Music

*"The [songwriting] students in the class were all serious musicians, active on their primary instruments in their own respective studios. I have been in class with most of them for four years now, and I have never seen many of my colleagues so personally invested in their music as they were with the songs they wrote. They carved time out of their dizzyingly busy schedules to create music in which they were personally and emotionally invested. This sparked a musical curiosity which led directly to self-driven learning and appreciation for music that comes only from deep intrinsic motivation."*

– John, full spectrum music teacher.



# Experiencing the Power of Music

**"The songwriting class opened entirely new doors for me, in both my own musicianship and as a future teacher. It was a tool for accessing music in a way that I have never encountered before, and therefore allowed me to tap into a new creativity within myself that I didn't know existed!...Imagine what would happen if middle school and high school students began composing songs on a regular basis. In no other traditional form of music are students able to express their life stories and emotions so completely and in such a rewarding, validating experience. Now having the experience AND some curricular tools under my belt, I plan to incorporate songwriting in my future music program and am confident that it will be successful and meaningful to my students."**

**– Terri, elementary general music teacher.**





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