

MUSIC FOR ABRAHAM LINCOLN

TEACHER'S GUIDE

This teacher's guide to *Music for Abraham Lincoln* is designed to help educators use the CD and accompanying liner notes, as well as to help students understand the music and history of the time. It contains activities relating to three curriculum connections—American history, music, and English. Teachers are granted permission to print out this teacher's guide for classroom use. Anne Enslow wrote this guide.

Curriculum Connections—American History

1. Listen to the campaign songs on this recording. Campaign songs have one purpose—to stir up enthusiasm for a candidate. How did these songs do that?

“Lincoln and Liberty” does it in a couple of ways. It identifies Lincoln as being on the side of “freedom” and compares him with King David in the Bible. David slew the giant Goliath, using only a slingshot. Like David, the songwriter implies, Lincoln was on the side of righteousness and justice. Therefore he was able to fell “the Slaveocrats’ giant”—that is, to free the slaves. (The song was written in 1860, when Lincoln had not done any such thing, but it identifies what side of the issue Lincoln was on.)

“Lincoln and Liberty” also identifies Lincoln as being from three states to maximize his “favorite son” appeal. What are they? (The lyrics say, “We’ll go for the son of Kentucky, the hero of Hoosierdom through, the pride of the Suckers.” Lincoln was born in Hodgenville, Kentucky, in 1809; moved with his family to southwestern Indiana in 1816, and moved again to Illinois in 1830 at the age of 21.)

“Abraham the Great and General Grant His Mate” capitalizes on the popularity of Ulysses S. Grant, who had begun winning important battles in the war. The song tells voters that with Lincoln, they’re on the winning side.

Finally, “Vote for Abraham” talks about the president’s fine qualities, including his honesty. It says he’s got experience (“He is a tried and honest man”). And it touts his successes in the war with two generals—Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman.

2. Listen to “Honest Old Abe,” which describes the 1860 election as a horse race. In 1860, Lincoln’s name didn’t even appear on the ballot in ten southern states. Why not? How did he win the election? Hint: It helped that the field of candidates was split, between Stephen A. Douglas

(the Northern Democratic candidate), John Breckinridge (the Southern Democratic candidate), and John Bell (of the Constitutional Unionist party).

Have students research the candidates and the election.

3. Listen to “Abraham’s Tea Party.” The songwriter says, “We’ll give a present to the crews of Beauregard and Lee some pepper, grape and canisters of strong gunpowder tea.” Beauregard and Lee, of course, were the Confederate generals Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard and Robert E. Lee. What kind of present is the song talking about? Hint: Pepper shot, grape shot and canister shot are three types of ammunition.

4. Listen to the last verse of “Abraham the Great and General Grant His Mate.” The singer says “we’ll give old Jeff a chance to have a ‘swinging dance,’ and we’ll all ‘see him home’ in the morning.” What does this mean?

On one level, the writer seems to be talking about a square dance. A “swinging dance” would be a fun dance, in which you swing your partner. To “see your partner home” (or “promenade your partner home”) would be to escort your partner back to the place where you started the dance.

But there is a second, very different, meaning here. Old Jeff—the one to whom they’re offering a “swinging dance”—is Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy. It’s possible that the “swinging” in question meant to swing from the gallows and that “seeing him home” meant to send him back to his Maker. Lincoln, however, advocated no such vengeance. Perhaps his most famous words on the subject were at the end of his second inaugural address: “With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.”

5. Listen to “Washington and Lincoln.” Both Lincoln and Jefferson Davis saw themselves as following in the path set by George Washington. Who was the true heir of Washington—Lincoln or Davis? Why?

6. Listen to the songs of mourning on this CD. What feelings do they express? Research the threats that were made against Lincoln during his life and the cruel ways he was described. How did they change with his assassination? (During the 1860 campaign, Lincoln was burned in effigy

in the South. And before his inauguration, threats were made on his life. The Lincolns received anonymous letters with drawings of skulls, a sketch of the president-elect with a noose around his neck, and another showing the Devil stabbing him. Hate mail demanded his execution by gruesome means. Beyond these empty threats, there were rumors of assassination plots, especially in Baltimore. These rumors were taken seriously enough that Lincoln, en route to his inauguration, snuck through Baltimore at night and in disguise.)

7. Research death rituals in the Civil War era. One that became more popular after Lincoln's death was the use of flowers. Lincoln's body was embalmed, but even so, it partially decayed during the long funeral train home to Springfield, Illinois. The scent of flowers helped disguise the stench.

Curriculum Connections—Music

8. Learn some of the songs on this recording. Most of them come from sheet music in the Library of Congress, which is now available online. Here's the link:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/scsmhtml/scsmhome.html>

(When you get to the site, type the title of the song into the keyword search. A list of songs will come up. In almost every case, the song you want will be the first one on the list. Click on the title. This will take you to another page that shows the cover of the sheet music for that song. Click on the cover. This will take you to yet another screen with an enlarged image of the cover and a button at the top that says "Next image." You can print out the cover. Then click on "next image" to go to the next page of the music. In this way, you can print out the covers, along with the complete music.)

9. Listen to the songs on this recording. The campaign songs are fast and cheerful. The laments are slow. Can you explain why? How did the composers use major and minor keys, along with tempo, to set a mood?

10. Even "Abraham's Tea Party," which talks about signing up to fight for the Union Army, is an upbeat song, glossing over the sufferings of soldiers during the Civil War. Discuss the reasons why.

11. Research the music of the Civil War era. Archie P. McDonald's book *Primary Source Accounts of the Civil War* (Enslow Publishers, 2006) includes a chapter on the Civil War in song, which tells the stories of some of the most popular Civil War songs.

It's interesting to see how many songs had multiple sets of words. One of the most popular Northern songs, "The Battle Cry of Freedom," was given an alternate set of Confederate lyrics. By the same token, one of the most popular Southern songs, "The Bonnie Blue Flag," was given Northern lyrics. Why did people write alternate lyrics for these songs? Do the alternate words generally work as well?

12. Listen to "Do Not Leave Me, Mother Darling." The song uses the harp for accompaniment. Why? (It's a blatant use of a stereotype—the harp to represent angels in heaven, since the song talks about Tad Lincoln on his deathbed.)

13. The piano was very popular during this period. How was the piano different from its predecessor, the harpsichord? The two instruments also sound different, because they use different mechanisms for sounding the strings—the piano hammering the strings, while the harpsichord plucks them. (Hint: Its full name—pianoforte—literally means "soft, loud." The harpsichord could not produce differences in dynamics.)

14. Learn the polka and waltz—two dance forms represented on the CD ("The Rail Splitter's Polka" and "Lincoln Quadrille: Waltz"). How do the musical rhythms—4/4 for the polka and 3/4 for the waltz—fit with the dance steps? Could you do a waltz to a polka tune?

Curriculum Connections—English

15. Listen to "Honest Old Abe." Today it's not unusual to refer to a political campaign as a horse race—and to a candidate with little chance of winning as a "dark horse." This song goes one step further. Each candidate is described as a horse—the Colt from Kentucky, the Tennessee Stallion, the stubby-tailed horse. Why does this imagery work well in the song? (The candidates were recognizable to listeners of the day—one was really from Kentucky, another from Tennessee, a third was short.)

What is some of the other racing imagery in the song? ("Though your candidate's running for glory, he's not making very good speed . . . A tall Sucker is taking the course, who

will wind up the race in a hurry and distance your stubby-tailed horse . . . will distance their bravest and best.”)

The choruses of campaign songs often say “hurrah” for the candidate in question. But the “hurrahs” work particularly well in this song. Why? (It’s normal for viewers of a horse race to be in the stands cheering for their horses. In the nineteenth century, the shout of “hip, hip, hurrah” would have been common.)

16. Listen to “Farewell Father, Friend and Guardian” and read the words. Now look up Walt Whitman’s poem “O Captain! My Captain.” What was Whitman’s reaction to Lincoln’s assassination? How does its imagery compare with that in “Farewell Father, Friend and Guardian”? Compare and contrast the two. Can you find other songs and poems written in reaction to Lincoln’s assassination?

17. Listen to the song “Oh! Why Should the Spirit of Mortal Be Proud?” People like to think they’re better than our ancestors, but this song says we’re all the same. Do you agree? What does this song say about the fragility of life? Does awareness of mortality make us appreciate life more?

This was one of Lincoln’s favorite poems. What do we learn about Lincoln from this? (You may want to look up the original poem, “Mortality” by William Knox. The poem has more verses than the song.)

18. What was the attitude toward death in Lincoln’s day? Today we largely avoid the subject. But in the mid-nineteenth century, death was a common topic of conversation. This is hardly surprising. People generally died at home, and infant and maternal mortality were common. In addition, Queen Victoria’s elaborate mourning for her husband glorified mourning rituals.

19. “President’s Hymn” was written for Thanksgiving. How does it compare with Thanksgiving hymns today? What imagery specifically links the song to the Civil War?

20. Look at activities 1, 3, and 4 under Curriculum Connections—History. These will work for English classes, too.

Further Listening

Chris Vallillo, *Abraham Lincoln in Song* (Gin Ridge Music, BMI, 2007). Available on amazon.com.

Sparky and Rhonda Rucker, *Blue and Grey in Black and White* (Flying Fish Records, 1992). Their latest CD, *The Mountains Above and the Valleys Below*, also includes a couple of Civil War songs, with liner notes on the Civil War in east Tennessee. An order form is on their website, at www.sparkyandronda.com, or send email to ruckweb@aol.com.

Kim and Reggie Harris, *Steal Away: Songs of the Underground Railroad* (Appleseed Records, 1998) and *Get On Board! Underground Railroad and Civil Rights Freedom Songs, vol. 2* (Appleseed Records, 2007) Available on amazon.com.

The Civil War—Traditional American Songs and Instrumental Music Featured in the Film by Ken Burns: Original Soundtrack Recording (Nonesuch, 1990), featuring Jay Ungar and Jacqueline Schwab. Available on amazon.com.

Cathy Barton, Dave Para, and Bob Dyer, *Johnny Whistletrigger: Civil War Songs from the Western Border* (Big Canoe Records, 1993) and *Rebel in the Woods: Civil War Songs from the Western Border, vol. 2* (Big Canoe Records, 1995). Includes extensive liner notes on the Civil War in the Western Border states, especially Missouri. An order form is available at bigcanoerecords.com.

Further Reading for Young People

Fleming, Candace. *The Lincolns: A Scrapbook Look at Abraham and Mary*. New York: Schwartz and Wade Books, 2008.

Holzer, Harold. *The President Is Shot!: The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln*. Honesdale, Pa.: Boyds Mills Press, 2004.

Holzer, Harold, ed. *Abraham Lincoln the Writer: A Treasury of His Greatest Speeches and Writings*. Honesdale, Pa.: Boyds Mills Press, 2000.

Judson, Karen. *Abraham Lincoln: "This Nation Shall Have a New Birth of Freedom", Revised Edition*. Berkeley Heights, N.J.: Enslow Publishers, Inc., 2008.

Sandler, Martin. *Lincoln Through the Lens*. New York: Walker Books for Young Readers, 2008.

Rabin, Staton. *Mr. Lincoln's Boys*. New York: Viking Children's Books, 2008.

Enslow Publishers, Inc.
40 Industrial Road
Box 398
Berkeley Heights, NJ 07922
USA