

Writing a Music Review

Summary

In this lesson, students will research and discuss the structure of music reviews, then write their own music reviews of one of today's popular bluegrass musicians.

Objectives

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- recognize the characteristics of modern bluegrass music
- identify some of today's popular bluegrass artists
- explain the role of women in the bluegrass community
- apply knowledge of language structure and language conventions to compose a written critique of a musical selection
- use a variety of technological resources to gather, synthesize and communicate knowledge

Time

1-2 periods

Background

Today, interest in bluegrass music is stronger than ever. Musicians are creating new bluegrass styles and sounds, both by bringing new instruments into the bluegrass mix, and by adapting traditional bluegrass instruments to other musical genres. In addition, women are playing an increasingly important role in today's bluegrass music scene. The top-selling bluegrass artist in the world today is singer and fiddler Alison Krauss, who with her band Union Station has won many Grammy awards and has had one multi-platinum and several gold records. Musical movements like the "jamgrass" phenomenon are also helping to spread interest in bluegrass music. Similar to the more widely-known "jam bands" that have arisen in the rock music world, bluegrass bands like Yonder Mountain String Band and Leftover Salmon are combining the instruments and repertoire of bluegrass with the casual, extended improvisations of the "jam band" format. As more and more festivals appear around the country, bluegrass is also gaining greater exposure daily, and, with that, an increased fan base that is keeping the music industry in tune with the bluegrass sound.

Teacher's Notes

This lesson requires that you gather several materials in advance, most importantly, music samples and music reviews. The lesson will be most effective if students are able to listen to several examples of music from today's popular bluegrass artists. A number of musical web resources are available in the Resource section at the back of this guide; if you prefer, you may also use audio clips from the past eight weeks of Bluegrass Live! Many of the best-selling bluegrass CDs are also available at your local library or record store. If it is difficult for you to get multiple CDs, you can play one CD in your classroom and allow everyone to write his or her own review of the music. This approach makes the lesson less time-consuming, but still allows a variety of opinions on the same album.

Vocabulary

Debut, ensemble, genre, Grammy, improvisation, instrumentalist, repertoire, virtuoso, vocalist

Materials

Access to the sitesALIVE! website, copies of the *Music Review Worksheet* (**provided**), music reviews from recent newspapers or magazines, writing utensils; **Optional:** overhead projector, overhead transparency of music review examples, CDs of current bluegrass musicians

Procedure

1. Have students work independently or with partners to read this week's online essays and journals about the modern bluegrass music scene.
2. Ask students to identify some of today's popular bluegrass musicians, in order to gauge both their prior knowledge of bluegrass and their comprehension of the online content.
3. Ask students to volunteer to talk to the class about a recent concert experience or their current favorite CD (it doesn't have to be bluegrass!). As they talk, prompt them to be more descriptive and encourage other students in the class to ask questions that will help the speaker to describe the concert experience or CD more clearly.
4. Show students recent music reviews either on an overhead projector or in newspapers and magazines. After students have had a chance to look at the music reviews, lead a discussion to highlight some of the details that seem to appear consistently in the reviews (e.g., musical genre, style, tone, or mood; song descriptions and themes; musician's character; etc.).
5. Pass out copies of the *Music Review Worksheet*, then explain to students that they will be writing their own music review of a current bluegrass musician or band. The worksheet will help to guide them in their writing.
6. Have students listen to some current bluegrass songs, preferably ones that you have chosen ahead of time. If you have chosen examples on CDs (and you have enough CDs to go around), you can have students use headphones and play the CDs in the CD-Rom drive of a computer. Have students jot down key information and impressions in the appropriate worksheet section as they listen to the music.
7. When students have finished listening to their chosen song or songs (they may need to listen to the music more than once), have them use their worksheet notes to compose a written music review.
8. When students have completed their assignment, have them share their music reviews with the class.

Extend the Experience

Have students exchange their music reviews. Next, have each student imagine that they are the musician discussed in the review. Have them write a letter from the perspective of the musician, responding to the review.

Music Review Worksheet

Directions: While listening to your chosen bluegrass song or CD, use the outline below to help you prepare to write a music review. You do not need to address all of the suggested topics or questions, but use them as prompts in order to write an informative and thorough music review.

I. Introduction

- A. Name of musician/band:
- B. Name of song/CD:
- C. Type of music:
- D. Overall impressions:

II. Musician/Band Background

- A. List of participating musicians and instruments used:
- B. Background (How long have they been around? Are they well known in the music scene?):
- C. Previously released CDs or songs:
- D. How does this CD or song compare to others by this group or artist?

III. Song/CD

- A. Explain the meaning of the song or CD:
- B. Quote some lyrics:
- C. Explain how the song is a reflection of the musician or band:

IV. Impressions and Opinions

- A. Impressions after thorough listening (justify your opinion):
- B. Unique elements of the song or CD:
- C. Comparison to another band, song, or artist:

V. Overall rating and final comments

- A. Rate on a scale of 1-10 or give a letter grade:
- B. Will fans be happy or disappointed?
- C. Concluding comments: