

Overview:

"We Americans," a song by The Avett Brothers, provides an interpretation on American life and culture. In this activity, participants will listen to the song/read the lyrics and discuss how their worldview affects their reaction to it.

Objectives:

As a result of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Critically analyze and interpret the music and lyrics of a culturally significant song.
2. Reflect on the significant role of cultural and societal critique.
3. Engage with a song via their worldview and the worldview of others.
4. Understand the complexity of worldview elements important to members of their own and other cultures.

Time:

30 minutes

Group Size:

Entire group

Materials:

A recording of the song and means to play it (e.g. computer speakers, stereo, etc), copies of the lyrics and interview excerpt handouts, copies of discussion questions handouts, writing utensils.

Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:

- Denial
- Polarization
- Minimization

AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:

Cultural Self-Awareness:

- To articulate insights into own cultural rules and biases (e.g., seeking complexity; aware of how their experiences have shaped these rules, and how to recognize and respond to cultural biases, resulting in a shift in self-description).

Openness:

- To initiate and develop interactions with culturally different others.
- To suspend judgment in valuing interactions with culturally different others.

Knowledge of Cultural Worldview Frameworks:

- To demonstrate sophisticated understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs & practices.

Other Skills:

Friendship; Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Activity Instructions:

Prepare the students for this activity by discussing the important role art, and especially music, has had in critiquing, challenging, and reflecting the history, beliefs, values, and practices of its society and culture.

Emphasize the importance of sharing honest impressions made by the song. Try to establish guidelines for sharing and receiving these impressions and opinions in a non-judgmental way so that everyone feels comfortable sharing.

Provide students with the lyrics to the song, "We Americans," by the Avett Brothers. Play the song asking the students to listen and take note of how the song makes them feel, their thoughts, reactions, and any associations that come to mind.

Depending upon your objectives, you may choose to have students pair off and share their responses to the discussion questions prior to a group discussion. During the discussion, and following question #5. *What is the singer advocating? Or arguing for? Is it okay for them to do this?*," ask the students to read the interview excerpt below and respond to the additional questions.

Following the group share of the discussion questions, lead the students in a debriefing of the activity using the debrief questions provided. It is recommended that you adjust and tailor these to the group's needs.

Lyrics:

[Verse 1]

I grew up with reverence for the red, white, and blue
Spoke of God and liberty, reciting the pledge of allegiance
Learned love of country from my own family
Some shivered and prayed approaching the beaches of Normandy
The flag waves high and that's how it should be
So many lives given and taken in the name of freedom
But the story's complicated and hard to read
Pages of the book obscured or torn out completely

[Chorus]

I am a son of uncle Sam
And I struggle to understand the good and evil
But I'm doing the best I can
In a place built on stolen land with stolen people

[Post-Chorus]

Blood in the soil with the cotton and tobacco
Blood in the soil with the cotton and tobacco
Blood in the soil with the cotton and tobacco

[Verse 2]

A misnamed people and a kidnapped race
Laws may change, but we can't erase the scars of a nation
Of children devalued and disavowed
Displaced by greed and the arrogance of manifest destiny
Short-sighted to say it was a long time ago
Not even two life times have passed since the days of Lincoln
The sins of Andrew Jackson, the shame of Jim crow
And time moves slow when the tragedies are beyond description

[Chorus]

I am a son of uncle Sam
And I struggle to understand the good and evil
But I'm doing the best I can
In a place built on stolen land with stolen people
We are more than the sum of our parts
All these broken homes and broken hearts
God, will you keep us wherever we go?
Will you forgive us for where we've been?
We Americans

[Post-Chorus]

Blood on the table with the coffee and the sugar
Blood on the table with the coffee and the sugar
Blood on the table with the coffee and the sugar

[Verse 3]

I've been to every state and seen shore to shore
The still open wounds of the Civil War
Watched blind hatred bounce back and forth
Seen vile prejudice both in the south and the north
And accountability is hard to impose
On ghosts of ancestors haunting the halls of our conscience
But the path of grace and goodwill is still here
For those of us who may be considered among the living

[Chorus]

I am a son of God and man
And I may never understand the good and evil
But I dearly love this land
Because of and in spite of We The People
We are more than the sum of our parts
All these broken bones and broken hearts
God, will you keep us wherever we go?
Can you forgive us for where we've been?
We Americans
We Americans

[Post-Chorus]

Love in our hearts with the pain and the memory
Love in our hearts with the pain and the memory
Love in our hearts with the pain and the memory
Love
Love in our hearts with the pain and the memory
Love in our hearts with the pain and the memory
Love in our hearts with the pain and the memory
Love in our hearts with the pain and the memory
Love in our hearts with the pain and the memory
Love in our hearts with the pain and the memory
Love
Love in our hearts with the pain and the memory
Love in our hearts with the pain and the memory
Love in our hearts with the pain and the memory

Excerpt from interview in the following CBSNEWS online article: "The Avett Brothers talk new album 'Closer Than Together' and cautiously get political" by Cara Korte

How present was any kind of fear or hesitation that being in any way political would alienate people?

With a lot of the songs that I write, before I bring him to the table, before Scott hears them, if they're in full or an idea — especially if they're in full — I come to him with a song pretty much fleshed out.

With "We Americans," the song is certainly more of an essay than it is a song, really. [I] worked on it for a long time, maybe a year of active working on it. Because it does feel heavy with responsibility and heavy with history and heavy with storytelling and all of that.

We talked a lot about what are the reasonable interpretations of these songs? Is there anything in there that is threatening to us in any way? Or is there anything in there that that bothers us? That it might be seen a certain way? I think that we kind of did our due diligence on that.

If you're being responsible with your sharing, you know what's sort of senselessly button pushing, and what is just fair game in terms of artistry and in terms of making something and sharing it. And I think we're within those realms pretty squarely.

Korte, Cara. (2019). The Avett Brothers talk new album 'Closer Than Together' and cautiously get political. *CBS News*. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/avett-brothers-talk-new-album-closer-than-together-and-cautiously-get-political/>

Instructions for pair-sharing and/or group discussion:

While this activity can be done with the text only, ideally the participants would hear the lyrics and music from the original recording by the Avett Brothers.

Critical analysis of the music:

1. Point out the genre of the song as folk music, albeit modern folk, and identify the context of folk music.
2. What does folk music sound like?
3. Who plays folk music?
4. What is folk music usually about?
5. What if this had been a rap or hip-hop song? What if this song had been sung in Spanish and you were provided a translation?

Critical analysis of the lyrics and interview:

1. Why does a song critical of American history begin with statements of patriotism? What is patriotism? How do you define patriotism? Are there other definitions?
2. How did you feel at the end of the first verse? How did you feel at the end of the second verse? Would it have made a difference if you heard verse 2 before verse 1? Why?
3. What is the difference between patriotism and nationalism?
4. What historical events are mentioned? To what do they refer? What happened? What do these events mean historically? What do they mean in a contemporary context? What do they mean to you? (Group discussion – or have students look up info about they don't know)
5. What is the singer advocating? Or arguing for? Is it okay for them to do this?
 - Read interview excerpt. Does this change your answers? If yes, why?
 - Do you agree or disagree with the song writer's assertion that these topics are "fair game" for music?
6. What if this song had been written in the 1960s? What is the significance of it having been written in the 2010s?
7. What does this say about American culture?
8. Can you think of similar historical contexts with other countries and their histories?

Debriefing Questions:

As we begin to understand that worldviews are constructed through a shared cultural experience, we can investigate those experiences that define our culture and thus our worldview. Likewise, we can begin to explore the worldview of others.

	Developing	Emerging	Proficient
Knowledge <i>Knowledge of cultural worldview frameworks</i>	Demonstrates partial understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs and practices.	Demonstrates adequate understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs and practices.	Demonstrates sophisticated understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs and practices.

Now that you have completed the "We Americans" activity, I would like you to reflect on your worldview and your reaction to voices critical of American culture. Either as written reflection or as a whole group discussion, answer the following questions:

1. If you are an American student, how do you feel about this song? If you are an international student, how does this song influence the way you see Americans?
2. What do you feel was the most significant and/or surprising thing you learned about your worldview?
3. Were there any historical or political events that you realized influence how you see the world that you perhaps had never considered before?
4. How might you take what you've learned here and apply it to new interactions in the future?
5. How is understanding conflicting perspectives within your own culture beneficial to you? In school? At work? Traveling abroad?

Related Tools:

Similar tools:

- [Changed or Not?](#)
- [Music and Memories](#)
- [Synthesis Through Song](#)