**EXTENSION** **LESSON: Songwriter Biographies**

Objectives

Students will read short songwriter biographies to learn how songwriters’ lives influence their work.

Students will research a songwriter to write their own short biography.

Standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.7

Vocabulary

(none)

Preparation

* Choose two **Songwriter Biographies** from the website and make copies for the class.
* Pick one or two of the songs from each biography’s “Listen” list, and locate audio or video versions to play for students. **Note:** Watching a live performance might pique the students’ interest about the songwriter more than listening to a recording.
* Make copies of the **Biography Research Worksheet** and the **Biography Writing Worksheet**.

Free Write (5 minutes)

Discuss Homework (4 minutes)

If applicable, discuss the previous day’s homework.

Brainstorm (1 minute)

Ask students to respond in their journal to this prompt:

If someone were to write your biography, what are the main events that would need to be included? Think of at least three events other than your birth.

Activity (35 minutes)

1. Play the songs selected from the “Listen” lists.

Distribute the **Songwriter Biographies** and ask students to highlight, as they read, the following information in three different colors (if highlighters are not available, students may underline, circle, and star their findings):

* Information that offers insight about how the songwriters’ lives influenced their careers.
* Information about how the songwriters compose their songs.
* Information about the songwriters’ career accomplishments.

Interdisciplinary Connection Opportunity

Many song lyrics reflect the times in which they were written. For example, Alan Jackson’s “Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)” was written in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Janis Ian’s “Society’s Child” addresses interracial dating, a highly controversial topic during integration in the 1960s. Some songwriters also are particularly associated with a certain era – Bob Dylan and the 1960s countercultural movement, for instance, or Woody Guthrie and the Great Depression. If a student selects a biography of a songwriter or a song that reflects a certain era, you can help students make the historical connection by asking them to write in their journals news events and trends they know were occurring during the period in which the songwriter was most prominent. Then ask: How did the time in which the songwriter was writing influence his or her music?

2. Divide the class into pairs of partners and ask the teams to identify songwriters they’ve heard of. Because most of the names listed will also be performers, remind the class that they need to identify artists who definitely write or co-write much of their own music.

Ask students to discuss the following questions with their partners:

* What aspects of these songwriters interests or intrigues you?
* How does their music make you curious about their lives?
* What, if anything, do you know about their work as songwriters?

Conduct a brief class discussion so students can share the variety of names they have generated.

3. Students will choose one songwriter as the subject of a short biography, using the names they have gathered as a starting point. Remind students, if they pick performers, that their subjects should also have an impressive songwriting career. Their subjects also should be famous enough to have generated enough research material for a biography.

Before students begin their selection and research, ask them to respond to the following questions in their journals:

* What makes a biography interesting?
* What makes a biography boring?
* How will you make your songwriter biography interesting?

Initiate a brief class discussion about the responses.

4. Distribute the **Biography Research Worksheet** and the **Biography Writing Worksheet**. Instruct students to use the **Research Worksheet** as they read about their songwriter and the **Writing Worksheet** as they write, or simply fill out the worksheet.

**Note:** Advanced students may not need the structure provided by the two worksheets.

Homework

Students should finish writing the songwriter biography as homework.

Name:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Biography Research Worksheet

Use this worksheet to organize your research about your songwriter.

1. Choose a songwriter. The following resources may be helpful to you in your selection:

American Songwriter – americansongwriter.com

Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum – countrymusichalloffame.org

The Boot – theboot.com

Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame – www.nashvillesongwritersfoundation.com Performing Songwriter – performingsongwriter.com

Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum – rockhall.com

Songfacts – songfacts.com

Songwriters Hall of Fame (national) – songwritershalloffame.com/exhibits/era

2. Research your songwriter’s life using a general Internet search, as well as the resources listed above.

**Note:** You may use Wikipedia as an informal resource, but be sure to check that the facts you use are sourced in the entry’s footnotes. Use the links in the footnotes to locate and review the original sources of information.

3. As you read, make notes of the following facts about your songwriter:

* Birth year (and death year, if applicable)
* Important career accomplishments and/or awards
* Important facts about childhood and early years
* Meaningful quotes from the songwriter
* Meaningful quotes from people who know/knew the songwriter

Biography Writing Worksheet

Use the following prompts to help you write your songwriter’s biography.

Opening paragraph: Hook your readers

* What about this songwriter’s life and work interests you the most?
* What information would be the most interesting to readers and would inspire them to continue reading?

Second paragraph: Distinguish the songwriter

* What makes this songwriter’s work significant?
* What is unique about this songwriter’s work?

Third paragraph: Go back to the songwriter’s beginnings

* What is the songwriter’s date and place of birth?
* How did the songwriter begin his/her life?
* What details can you find that tell how the songwriter was first introduced to music and to making music?
* What may have influenced his/her tastes and interests in music?

Fourth paragraph: Highlight the songwriter’s career accomplishments

* How did this songwriter launch his/her career?
* What are the songwriting highlights of that career?

**Note:** The songwriter may also be a well-known performer. You may mention his or her performing career, but the biography should focus primarily on songwriting.

Fifth paragraph: Summarize the songwriter’s work

* What do musical experts and critics say about the songwriter’s work?
* What insights can you gather about the songwriter’s creative process?
* Is the songwriter deceased? If so, add the date and cause of death. You also may consider writing about how the songwriter’s legacy has endured after his/her death.

Extra

Look for a defining anecdote or turning point in the songwriter’s work or career. Consider including it chronologically in the story of your subject’s life.