9-1-2006

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Mark Szymanski

Pacific University

Recommended Citation

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Using the Internet to Teach American History through the History of Jazz

Posted on October 1, 2006 by Editor

By Mark Szymanski

Throughout history, U.S. Presidents and the Federal Government have understood the importance of supporting the arts. In 1780, before he was elected President, John Adams, in a letter to his wife, said, “I must study politics and war, that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history and naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, and architecture.”

This vision was formalized in 1965 when President Johnson signed the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act thereby creating the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). President Johnson said, “While no government can call a great artist or scholar into existence, it is necessary and appropriate for the Federal Government to help create and sustain not only a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry, but also the material conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent.” Johnson formalized the U.S. Government commitment to support the release of creative talent. These carefully chosen words gave hope to artists who have traditionally faced censorship and discrimination. In addition, it was consistent with many of Johnson’s actions as President, that gave voice and support to people and art forms that have been denied a voice by the U.S. Government. Jazz was one of these art forms.

The congealing of this vision and support can be seen in one of the NEA’s newest projects, Jazz in the Schools [1]. According to the NEA, the scope and sequence of the curriculum is intended to help students examine jazz both as an indigenous American art form and as a means to understand American history. The units are aligned with national curriculum standards in U.S. history, social studies, arts education/music, civics and government, and geography. The NEA Jazz in Schools web site includes archived video footage and audio tracks that can be viewed in a web browser. The curriculum also includes a DVD toolkit that teachers can order and use if their Internet connections are unable to handle the streaming audio and video.
The curriculum is produced by Jazz at Lincoln Center and partially funded by a $100,000 grant from the Verizon Foundation. “Jazz at Lincoln Center has been committed to creating jazz listeners of all ages through education, concerts, and broadcasts,” said Jazz at Lincoln Center Artistic Director Wynton Marsalis. “It’s our privilege to be working with the National Endowment for the Arts to further this mission, and we’re looking forward to reaching a whole new audience – our American history and social studies teachers and their students. Jazz music gives us a different, more homegrown mythology, with heroes like Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington. Jazz provides a voice for some of our nation’s most significant historic events.”

The curriculum is organized into five units.

1. The Advent of Jazz: The Dawn of the Twentieth Century. This unit traces jazz born from the cocktail of Caribbean rhythms, Midwestern ragtime and parading, Mississippi blues, European classical piano, and gospel, and mixed on the streets in the African-American Community of New Orleans.

2. The Jazz Age and the Swing Era. This unit follows jazz as it poured out of New Orleans; flowed up the Mississippi River; and spilled east and west across America.

3. Bebop and Modernism: This unit takes students through a transition in jazz that reflects our history as a nation and our art. While the visual artists of the time were creating abstract expressionist works, jazz artists were engaging in exploration via syncopation.

4. From the New Frontier to the New Millennium: This unit explores the reflection of the social and political changes as they appear in the spiritual and mystical edge of jazz during this time.

5. Jazz: An American Story. This unit summarizes and connects the themes of the earlier units in the context of a story.

The Internet has facilitated this project. Without the Internet, the dissemination of this curriculum (including the media elements) would have been cumbersome. The content is free, and the delivery and organization take full advantage of the Internet’s most recent capabilities to deliver multimedia content. The ability to deliver content in a way that is true to its original form helps children understand the art form itself and experience its impact on the U.S. Each unit uses the multimedia capabilities of the web that just recently became accessible to a majority of the public and children. Jazz in Schools reflects a trend to develop more web-based curricula.

All of this progress and expression is truly to be celebrated. The U.S. Government has made progress in understanding the profound impact jazz has made on our country. The Government has gone from classifying jazz music as an evil to be taken out of our culture, to understanding it as a truly American art form and a vehicle for understanding American history.

Harry J. Anslinger, Commissioner of the U.S. Bureau of Narcotics from 1930 to 1962 differentiated between “jazz music” and “good music”. “Syncopated taint” was term he used to refer to the rhythmic and moral contamination he saw in jazz. This was a part of his often racist agenda in the United States to demonize drugs and the people who use them. He often targeted
jazz musicians, who he described as “satanic addicts responsible for the spread of marijuana use among the nation’s impressionable youth.” Though syncopated taint was the government label Anslinger gave to jazz, the current statement on the NEA Jazz in Schools site captures the profound impact jazz has had on our culture and gives it all a palpable ironic twist. “The beauty of jazz comes from resolving the tension between the individual and the group in the interest of collective expression. Here is where the democratic process takes on artistic form.”

Reference:

[1] National Endowment for the Humanities: Jazz in the schools
http://www.jalc.org/jazzED/s_jschool.html

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