

Rap and Hip-Hop Bring Folk Music to a New Audience

by Alan Singer (a.k.a. Reces Pieces)

In their 1981 yearbook, students at Charles Evans Hughes High School in New York City included a photograph of me—their teacher—sitting on the front of my desk. My arm was outstretched as I posed a question. In the photo caption, I am asking the class, “Who wants to hear a union song?” One of the students shown in the photograph actually had her hand raised. The rest of the students sat with quizzical looks on their faces.

Teachers frequently ask me how I get students to sing in class, given their level of embarrassment and my inability to carry a tune. I tried persuasion and threats—five points off the next test if you don’t sing—to no avail. One year I asked another teacher to watch my class from outside of the back door, just to identify who was really singing. We spoke to the “singers” after class and discovered that all of them were members of church singing groups. After that, I asked students at the start of the school year who sang in church or a choir. In each class, I created an “expert team” to lead the class in singing. I discovered that students who would never sing along with me were much more willing to join if led by their peers.

My use of folk songs as primary source documents for understanding the lives of ordinary people, both as a teacher and historian, draws on ideas that I learned from the work of [W.E.B. DuBois](#), *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). DuBois analyzed traditional [African American church hymns](#) to better understand the aspirations of Black people in the era of Jim Crow segregation. In a similar fashion, Thompson explored the ideology of pre- and early industrial British workers through their religious and secular music. I once had the good fortune of witnessing Thompson lecture on the [American Revolution](#) and his entire presentation consisted of singing one revolutionary song after another.

My penchant for using folk songs as teaching tools finally paid off for my students in June 1993, when an essay on the New York State United States History and Government Regents exam asked eleventh grade students to identify themes and analyze the

messages in segments taken from a group of folk songs. Of the eight songs, we had actually read and sang seven during the school year. Most of the students taking the test at our high school were puzzled by the question, but my students were quietly humming and singing as they wrote their essays.

Folk songs have a long history of being repurposed to suit new contexts. To hear an example of this, look no further than the melody of the Welsh song “Calon Lân” (A Pure Heart), which has been famously adapted as the coal miners’ song “[Miner’s Lifeguard](#)” and as the Protestant hymns “[Life’s Railway to Heaven](#)” and “[What a Friend We Have in Jesus](#).” Similarly, I have tried different ways to repurpose folk music so that it comes alive for my students. One of the most successful approaches has been having them remix and rewrite traditional lyrics as rap songs that they perform in class.

When I introduce hip-hop folk music to students and fellow teachers, I explain that in Brooklyn, where I live, you don’t have “street cred” if you don’t have a rap name and can’t rhyme. I say, “Kids in Brooklyn call me Reeces Pieces because I’m better than Eminem.”

Sometimes students, without knowing traditional tunes, simply perform Pete Seeger’s “[Talking Union](#)” or “[Paddy on the Railway](#)” as if they were raps. Kevin Dash, a young African American man who lived in a public housing project in Brooklyn, was so moved by Merle Travis’ “[Sixteen Tons](#)” that he completely rewrote the song giving it his own special hip-hop twist.

“Born on the other side of town where the sun don't shine
 Life aint sweet yo
 I gotta work hard to get mine
 I catch wreck
 So don't test
 Cuz it's trouble I was born in.
 Watch yo approach money grip
 I'm like a wolf in sheep's clothing
 So when I step up
 Step aside
 Or else you git got
 Last punk who tried to front is on his back in a box
 Because I got fists of iron and steel
 So if the left don't hit like a Mack truck
 The right will.”

Another student in the same class, Shavis Lespor, also a young African American man, countered Kevin in a “rap-off” with his own rhymes based on “[Union Maid](#)” by Woody Guthrie.

“When the union boys had finally seen
The mad pretty, pretty, pretty union queens
They stood up and sang in the deputies' faces
They laughed and yelled in all of the places
And don't you know what the deputies done?
When they heard this song, they tucked their tails and began to run.
We're sticking to the union (3x)
You can't scare us till the day we die.”

One of my favorite creations was the “New York and Slavery Rap,” a collective effort that sampled the rhythm of “[Keep Your Eyes on the Prize \(Hold On\)](#).” It was written with students from Law, Government, and Community Service High School in Queens, New York, drawing from the [New York and Slavery: Complicity and Resistance Curriculum Guide](#) and performed on the streets of Lower Manhattan during our “New York and Slavery: Time to Tell the Truth Walking Tour” (Singer, 2008).

“Time to tell the truth
Our local history
New York was the land
Of slavery.

Walk down the block
What'd you see
Our schools and streets
Named after slavery.

Founding fathers
They own slaves
Promise freedom
After our graves.

N'York da-City
Never so free
Banker Merchant
Wanted slavery.

In Eight-teen Sixt-y
Time for War
N'York da-City
Brings more slaves ashore

Wood Da Mayor
Backs da South
Take the mon-ey
He has-a no doubts.

War time riot-ers
Grab the Blacks
Dead in the street
These are bare facts.

N'York da-City
Was it free?
A-bo-li-tion
An'-com-pli-ci-ty.

Free or a-Slave
Can-not hide
His-tor-y says
Its-a-gen o-cide.”

Over the years students and I have “updated” a number of other folk songs. These are a few stanzas with our new age hip-hop lyrics to traditional songs that you may or may not be able to recognize.

“**Which Side Are You On?**” Remix

“In the economic battle
There are no neutrals here
We either stand together
Or get kicked in the rear.”

With Apologies to “**Deportees**”

“Where would I be if he stayed in Europe?
Where would I be if they'd locked the door?
It was hard enough when they were legal
Where would I be if they'd said no more?”

To sign off –

“So that’s all for today,
Rhyme Reeces Pieces’ way.”

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