Composing the Past: Jazz as Historical Evidence with Wynton Marsalis

A Joy2Learn Middle School Social Studies Lesson Plan

Connection to Joy2Learn Professional Development

This lesson applies the inquiry routine introduced in the Joy2Learn professional development mini-workshop, *Expressions of the Past: Using the Arts as Historical Evidence in Middle School Social Studies*:

OBSERVE → QUESTION → INVESTIGATE → EXPLAIN

Students begin with a cultural source, generate historical questions, investigate those questions using context and additional sources, and construct an evidence-based explanation. Contextualization and corroboration are disciplinary practices within INVESTIGATE.

Grade Level

Grades 6-8

Time

60-75 minutes

Social Studies Focus

- Historical inquiry and source analysis
- Reconstruction and African American freedom
- Historical memory and interpretation
- Contextualization and corroboration
- Claims, evidence, and reasoning

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- OBSERVE specific features of a musical/cultural source without immediately treating impressions as historical facts.
- QUESTION what the source suggests and what it cannot establish on its own.
- INVESTIGATE by contextualizing Marsalis's work and comparing it with written historical sources.
- EXPLAIN a defensible conclusion using evidence from multiple sources while acknowledging limits and uncertainty.

Standards Alignment

Primary alignment is to the C3 Framework Inquiry Arc; supporting Common Core literacy standards apply when students read and discuss the written sources.

- C3 D1.5.6-8: Determine the kinds of sources helpful for answering compelling and supporting questions.
- C3 D2.His.13.6-8: Evaluate the relevance and utility of a historical source using information about its maker, date, place, audience, and purpose.
- C3 D3.1.6-8: Gather relevant information from multiple sources, considering context and corroborative value.
- C3 D3.3.6-8: Identify evidence from multiple sources to support claims, noting evidentiary limitations.
- C3 D4.1.6-8: Construct arguments using claims and evidence from multiple sources.
- CCSS RH.6-8.1, RH.6-8.7, RH.6-8.9; WHST.6-8.1; SL.6-8.1.

Materials and Sources

- Joy2Learn video clips:
    - Wynton Marsalis | *History of Jazz - Origins of Jazz*: https://youtu.be/VQKIbK1nsxU?si=w7JYV8Z9YyoCJ97F
    - Wynton Marsalis | Wynton - Early Years: https://youtu.be/70KJZSDwR3M?si=Lz375yNmoOBQmNLX
- YouTube video of Wynton Marsalis' *Black Codes* (2023 Remaster): https://youtu.be/8Rw9bgGPfPU?si=9b01wzpEa1hgv8m3
- Neely Tucker's Library of Congress Blog post, *Wynton Marsalis, 'Black Codes' and Thoughts on the Highway*: https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2023/04/wynton-marsalis-black-codes-and-thoughts-on-the-highway/
- A .pdf of the April 15, 1865 issue of *The Black Republican*: https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83016563/1865-04-15/ed-1/?sp=1&st=pdf&r=-0.272,-0.077,1.545,1.545,0

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1. OBSERVE: Encounter the Cultural Source (10 minutes)

- Play a 2-3 minute excerpt of Wynton Marsalis' Black Codes (From the Underground): https://youtu.be/8Rw9bgGPfPU?si=9b01wzpEa1hgv8m3. Play the excerpt once without background information and without revealing the album cover
- Student prompts
    - What do you notice in the music?
    - What instruments, patterns, repetitions, contrasts, changes, or interactions do you hear?

    - Which moments stand out? Describe what you can actually hear before explaining what you think it means.

- Model the distinction between observation and interpretation: “I can point to a change in volume or a repeated musical idea. Saying that it represents struggle, freedom, conflict, or hope would be an interpretation that I would still need to investigate and support.”

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2. QUESTION: Turn Noticing into Historical Inquiry (10 minutes)

- Reveal the title “Black Codes (From the Underground)” and the album cover. Do not explain the references yet.
- Student prompts
    - What does the title make you wonder?
    - Why might a jazz musician use the phrase “Black Codes”?
    - What historical events, laws, experiences, or traditions might we need to know about to understand this work?
    - What claims might we be tempted to make from the music or title that the source alone cannot establish?
    - What additional sources would we need?
- “The music and title have generated questions. Now we investigate rather than treating our first impressions as historical conclusions.”

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3. INVESTIGATE: Context about Marsalis (15 minutes)

- Play the Joy2Learn video clips:
    - Wynton Marsalis | *History of Jazz - Origins of Jazz*: https://youtu.be/VQKlbK1nsxU?si=w7JYV8Z9YyoCJ97F

    - Wynton Marsalis | Wynton - Early Years: https://youtu.be/70KJZSDwR3M?si=Lz375yNmoOBQmNLX

- Read to students, or have students read, Neely Tucker's Library of Congress Blog post, *Wynton Marsalis, 'Black Codes' and Thoughts on the Highway*: https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2023/04/wynton-marsalis-black-codes-and-thoughts-on-the-highway/
- Regarding Tucker's post, ask students to identify:
    - Who created this account?
    - When was it published?
    - What does it tell us about Marsalis, his New Orleans background, and the historical ideas surrounding the album?
    - How does this context change or sharpen your interpretation of the music/title?
- Explain that contextualization places a historical source in relation to its maker, time, place, purpose, and historical circumstances. Students should revise earlier ideas when new context warrants revision.

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4. INVESTIGATE: Corroborate with a Historical Source (15 minutes)

- Show the .pdf of the April 15, 1865 issue of The Black Republican: https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83016563/1865-04-15/ed-1/?sp=1&st=pdf&r=-0.272,-0.077,1.545,1.545,0.
- Read to students, or have students read a short excerpt from the Prospectus, in which the publishers describe the paper as serving the advancement of Black Louisianans and connecting freedom with education and public voice:
    - "This paper will be issued weekly, on Saturday. The price will be $5 per year — 10 cents single copy. It will be conducted by American colored men. It will be printed in the English tongue, the tongue that brought us freedom It will be devoted to the religious, moral, social, political and material advancement of the colored people. It will be the true organ of the American colored people of Louisiana. Through this paper the poor as well as the rich, the freedmen as well as the freemen will be heard … People of color, rally to the call! Come in your

own might to establish ‘The Black Republican,’ our own paper. Freedom and schools, books and newspapers, go hand in hand. Let us secure the freedom we have received by the intelligence that can maintain it.”

- Student prompts
    - What does this 1865 source reveal about the priorities and concerns of Black New Orleanians at the end of the Civil War?
    - What does it add that the Marsalis source cannot tell us?
    - Does it corroborate, extend, or complicate any ideas raised by the music, title, or blog post?
    - What important questions remain unanswered?
    - What additional source would you seek next - for example, an actual postwar law, a freedpeople’s testimony, or another newspaper? Why?
- Teacher emphasis: Corroboration does not mean finding a source that merely “proves” the first source correct. Historians compare what different sources can contribute, where they converge, and where their purposes, dates, or perspectives require caution.

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5. EXPLAIN - Construct an Evidence-Based Historical Account (15 minutes)

- Writing prompt: What can Wynton Marsalis’s “Black Codes (From the Underground),” considered alongside the written sources, help us understand about the relationship between history, freedom, and cultural memory?
- Required structure:
    - Claim: State a defensible historical interpretation.
    - Evidence: Use specific evidence from at least two sources, including one written historical source.
    - Reasoning: Explain how the evidence supports the claim.
    - Limits: Identify one thing the available sources do not allow you to conclude with confidence.

- Teacher reminder: Students are not asked to claim that an instrumental composition documents Reconstruction directly. A strong explanation distinguishes what the 1980s Marsalis source reveals about historical interpretation and memory from what the 1865 source reveals about its own historical moment.

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6. Reflection and Transfer (5 minutes)

- How did your thinking change after you added historical context and another source?
- Which source was useful for which kind of question?
- What would have been risky about drawing a historical conclusion from the music alone?
- Where else could a cultural source – music, dance, artwork, performance, or oral history – open an inquiry in social studies?

Assessment

Formative evidence

- OBSERVE notes distinguish audible/visible details from interpretation.
- QUESTION notes identify historically investigable questions and source limitations.
- INVESTIGATE notes use context and comparison across sources to revise or deepen thinking.

Summative evidence

The EXPLAIN response is assessed for the quality of the claim, relevance of evidence across sources, reasoning, and recognition of evidentiary limits.

Criterion	Proficient	Developing	Beginning

OBSERVE	Identifies specific source details before interpreting.	Mixes some observation and interpretation.	Relies mainly on reaction or unsupported interpretation.
QUESTION	Generates historically productive questions and identifies limits of the first source.	Generates relevant questions with limited attention to source limits.	Questions are mostly factual, personal, or disconnected from the source.
INVESTIGATE	Uses context and multiple sources to confirm, extend, complicate, or revise understanding.	Uses additional sources but makes limited connections among them.	Treats sources separately or accepts one source as a complete account.
EXPLAIN	Constructs a defensible claim with evidence, reasoning, and a stated limitation.	Provides a claim and evidence with partial reasoning or attention to limits.	Provides an unsupported conclusion or summary.

Differentiation and Access

- Replay the music excerpt and allow students to mark a simple timeline of changes they hear.
- Provide sentence frames:
    - “I notice...”;
    - “This makes me wonder...”;
    - “This source adds...”;
    - “Together the sources suggest...”;
    - “We still cannot know...”

- Chunk written sources and preteach only vocabulary needed to access them; avoid front-loading the historical conclusions students are meant to investigate.
- Allow collaborative oral rehearsal before the EXPLAIN response.
- For extension, add a fourth source such as a post-Civil War law or freedpeople's testimony and ask students to revise their explanation.

Source Notes

Library of Congress reporting on Marsalis notes that the *Black Codes* album deliberately invokes U.S. racial history and that Marsalis drew on family and New Orleans musical influences. The Library of Congress also preserves *The Black Republican*, a Black-run New Orleans newspaper begun in April 1865. Its prospectus presents the paper as a vehicle for the social, political, and material advancement of Black Louisianans. Teachers should review and excerpt sources for grade-level accessibility and local curricular requirements.