

Kansas City Jazz Reflection

Rachel Wilbanks

UMKC ID: 16063558

The book *Kansas City Jazz* highlights the compounding factors that influenced the unique style of jazz that made Kaycee a haven and inspiration for the jazz community in the United States. The leadership that took place during the Jazz Age, the political structure established, and the economic construction of the Kansas City area all impacted the development of the music industry during the Jazz Era.

Frank Driggs and Chuck Haddix are not shy about revealing the character of each musician highlighted in their text. Their honesty presents a prime opportunity to discuss character education with students within the context of social studies. Studying musicians like Count Basie and having students explore the potential reasoning behind the decisions Basie made with regard to the quality of individuals he surrounded himself by as well as his consumption of alcohol despite his wife's apparent discontentment with his choices (Driggs & Haddix, 127). Students are able to compare Basie's experiences to other musicians during this time period and identify some events from his past that led him to make the choices he did. The students could evaluate Basie using the district's mandated *Character Counts!* curriculum to determine if the decisions he made were wise. Students will also look at band leaders like Andy Kirk who began leading his band, Clouds of Joy, after the original band leader abandoned the group with all their money (Driggs & Haddix, 67)! The students could evaluate the difference in leadership between the original band leader T. Holder and Andy Kirk. Students would then determine what character traits were necessary for a band leader to possess given the climate of the music industry during this time.

In *Kansas City Jazz*, Eddie Durham remembers Bennie Moten being "one of the greatest leaders that ever was - He just knew what to do and how to treat the men, everything like that. And he was the same with the men, exactly 100 percent (134)." Students could evaluate the character traits emphasized in the district's character education program and find examples of these traits within Moten. The students could also look at how Moten's leadership progressed overtime and what situations may have helped Moten become the great leader that Durham remembered.

While looking at character it would be beneficial to consider racial and gender discrimination during the Jazz Age. A gifted pianist, Mary Lou Williams played second string in the Clouds of Joy to the less reliable Marion Jackson (Driggs & Haddix, 88). Women were the minority in the music industry during this time and it took sheer talent and determination to excel in this male-dominated profession. Throughout the book several groups struggled while on the road. In addition to the typical gruel of traveling, African American groups faced the challenges of segregated railroad cars on trains as well as discrimination in hotels. Battered band members weary from a rigorous travel schedule would frequently rest on the trains by sleeping while sitting on their luggage. Progressive steps were made as African American groups broke through racial lines, playing for white audiences in impressive venues and topping the national music charts.

Students could easily compare the discrepancies that occurred between the value and treatment of African American artists.

Students could investigate the treatment of African Americans and women throughout the course of American history and draw their own conclusions about whether these groups are still discriminated against today. Working in small groups, students could develop their own *60 Minutes Special* investigating this concept. Students could pull information from the Jazz Age to show the progress that has been made or the habits that were established during this time that have impacted the treatment of these groups today.

As prohibition swept the nation shutting down bars in its path, many musicians found themselves struggling to find work. Kaycee's political machine boss, Tom Pendergast, ensured that while other cities' entertainment industries struggled Kansas City continued to thrive (Driggs & Haddix, 5). Pendergast used his political clout to make sure that speakeasies stayed open, alcohol flowed, and gambling remained a past-time for Kansas City patrons. While bars continued to operate, this sustained steady work for jazz musicians making Kansas City a hub for progressive music.

The idea of political corruption and "exceptions" to the rules provides a prime opportunity for speaking to students about the rise and fall of political machines. We could discuss what relationship government has with business and consider who they believe is more powerful, leaders in the government or business. Students could explore checks and balances within the government as well as loopholes to public policy. We could speculate whether loopholes are intentional or an oversight and use historical examples to justify their opinions. Students could also compare Tom Pendergast to New York City's political machine boss, Boss Tweed. They could draw parallels between the two and determine what caused these two men to retain such a vast amount of power over their respective cities.

The story of Tom Pendergast appears so over the top that it would be interesting for students to create a mini-movie of his story. You could assign one group to focus on his rise to wealth, another his affinity of societal vices, a third group could concentrate on his role as the boss of the Kaycee's political machine, and finally his eventual fall that tosses him to Leavenworth Prison after being charged with tax evasion. I would then show students a short video clip of Bernard Madoff and his ponzi scheme. Students could compare the two wealthy, powerful men and compare and contrast the two and how their individual situations influenced their choices.

Kansas City, Chicago, New York City, and eventually Los Angeles all became popular options for jazz musician to reside as well as travel. The importance of these cities to the Jazz Age can be attributed to the following: the industrial development of these areas, the establishment of metropolitan areas surrounding the city thus increasing the population available to enjoy the music, and the establishment of quality transportation. The latter allowed for musicians to travel with greater ease. As music labels were established it became imperative for musicians to be mobile in order to audition for various companies, record their songs, and promote their music on tours that their agents would schedule.

Students could practice their geography skills by being provided with a blank map of the United States (the only information provided on the map being an outline of the individual states). Students would also be provided with four blank transparencies. The students would be instructed to tape one blank transparency over the map and then identify the cities that were integral to the jazz industry and next to these cities list the population of the city and its greater metropolitan area in 1920, 1930, and 1940. The students could remove this transparency and replace it with a fresh one; this time marking all of the major railways and road systems developed in the United States during this time. On the third transparency students would identify which cities jazz musicians hailed as their hometown and chart the geographic path they took as their career progressed (ie. The cities they would reside in as their careers evolved.). The final transparency could identify the music corporations that rose and fell during the jazz era. Students could then overlap the transparencies in a variety of combinations and evaluate the relationship these factors had on the progression of jazz as a whole.

Kansas City Jazz presents a valid, raw description of the jazz scene in Kansas City during the height of jazz music. It allows for students to peek back in time at the area they presently reside and see how this former "sin city" turned into the more docile area it is today. The political and economic institutions in this community as well as the leaders highlighted in the text lend themselves to easy, educational evaluations for students. These themes were also the reason why this Midwest city was able to maintain such a stronghold over the jazz industry.

Works Cited

Driggs, Frank, and Chuck Haddix. Kansas City Jazz From Ragtime to Bebop - A History. New York: Oxford UP, USA, 2006.

***Kansas State Standards implemented in potential lessons:**

Economics Standard: The student uses a working knowledge and understanding of major economic concepts, issues, and systems applying decision-making skills as a consumer, producer, saver, investor, and citizen of Kansas and the United States living in an interdependent world.

Benchmark 3: The student analyzes how different incentives, economic systems and their institutions, and local, national, and international interdependence affect people.

Geography: The student uses a working knowledge and understanding of the spatial organization of Earth's surface and relationships between peoples and places and physical and human environments in order to explain the interactions that occur in Kansas, the United States, and in our world.

Benchmark 1: Geographic Tools and Location: The student uses maps, graphic representations, tools, and technologies to locate, use, and present information about people, places, and environments.

Benchmark 2: Places and Regions: The student analyzes the human and physical features that give places and regions their distinctive character.

Benchmark 4: Human Systems: The student understands how economic, political, cultural, and social processes interact to shape patterns of human populations, interdependence, cooperation, and conflict.

Benchmark 5: Human-Environment Interactions: The student understands the effects of interactions between human and physical systems.

History Standard: The student uses a working knowledge and understanding of significant individuals, groups, ideas, events, eras, and developments in the history of Kansas, the United States, and the world, utilizing essential analytical and research skills.

Benchmark 4: The student engages in historical thinking skills.

*Standards courtesy of Kansas State Department of Education website [Kansas State Department of Education](#)