

Cooper, B. Lee. Images of American Society in Popular Music: A Guide to Reflective Teaching. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1982.

It is probably useful, if one is going to teach social studies, to include popular songs, both as a means of holding students' attention and as a means of showing some aspects of the society in which the songs achieved their success. And yes, it is useful to have a text that provides questions and gives lists of suggested readings and discs. But, no, you can't have it both ways: if it's a text, the appeal is not to the general reader who has a right to expect the book to lead somewhere rather than repeat the same point--albeit a decent one--in chapter after chapter. There is nothing wrong with collecting one's own essays and putting them into a book. But some editing ought to be done so that the reader is not faced with the same point, again and again, frequently in the same words.

B. Lee Cooper is firmly convinced of the usefulness of popular lyrics in helping to teach students social studies. He divides his text into three sections. The first two sections ("Popular Music in the Classroom" and "Popular Music as a Mirror of American Society") are divided into a total of nine chapters, covering such topics as "Challenging Sexism through Popular Music," "Popular Music and Religious Education" (by which he seems to mean exclusively Christian education), "Biographical Study and Popular Music," and "Urban Life and Popular Music." But because these chapters were originally printed as separate essays in various publications, each begins with the same boiler-plate discussion before it segues into the most useful part of each chapter--suggested questions, discs and bibliography.

Part 3 ("Popular Music and the Librarian") gives the reader some new areas to consider, and includes an interview with the head of an audio center, a most useful annotated bibliography of popular-music discographies, and a list of albums a library ought to have when opening a popular music collection. The final chapter, before Notes, a Selected Bibliography, a Song Title Index, and a Subject Index, is a collection of Cooper's record reviews.

I have one major cavil with the book. When I teach poetry, I make note of the distinction between the literal meaning of the words and the tone of the poem, which may be quite different. In analyzing the lyrics of popular songs, Cooper needs to suggest the same, except using the music as tone. Is it possible that the music belies what the words say? In other words, Cooper's decision to handle only the lyrics and not to touch upon the music, means that he is teaching poetry and not "popular music." I have no objection to the technique, although if you are going to teach poetry, why not teach real poetry? The level of the poetry in popular songs is frequently quite low, and the music is needed to give legitimacy to the lyrics, to comment on them, to illustrate them. In short, some musical analysis is crucial to

Cooper's points, and it is nowhere in evidence here.

Otherwise, Cooper has written a text which may prove quite useful for teachers of social studies in need of a means of catching and holding the attention of their students. The lists of discs and albums alone are worth the price of admission.

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