NIRVANA AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF PUNK

Subject: Ethnographic study of Punk music as a component of recent and contemporary popular culture; Observing popular culture as an anthropological picture.

BIG QUESTION: What were the conditions that allowed for Punk music to evolve in the Pacific Northwest during the 1980s?

Grade Level: 9-12 (and beyond)

Learning Standards: WA State EALR 4 Music — The student makes connections within and across the arts (dance, music, theatre and visual arts), to other disciplines, life, cultures and work. 4.4) Understands how the arts influence and reflect cultures/civilizations, place and time

Learning Objectives: (1) Understand and implement ethnographic research methods applied to a musical genre, (2) Determine and interpret specific attributes of music that shape culture and/or history, (3) Select and compare specific musical works that have shaped culture/history.

Resources
   Applied Social Research Methods series volume 17
2. “Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography,”
   John Van Maanen
3. “Punk Rock, an Oral History,” John Robb
4. “Kurt Cobain ‘Oh Well, Whatever, Nevermind,’”
   Jeff Burlingame
5. “A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America,” Ronald Takaki
   (an example of the use of letters, songs, and stories in the telling of history)
7. www.menc.org/lessons

Materials
1. NIRVANA: Taking Punk to the Masses EMP exhibit
4. DVD player
6. Vocabulary sheet
PRE-VISIT:  1.) Review the ways of telling through the lens of an ethnographer.

**Ethnography** is an attempt to tell a holistic (well-studied) story about a culture, subculture, or program—however, it can never tell the whole story. The ethnographer observes the culture through different lenses: **Observer** (from the outside looking in), as a **Participant-observer** (an outsider looking from within a new group/community) and a **Member-observer** (looking from the inside out). One can tell the story as an impression (observer), a realistic telling (personal experience of something new) or a confessional (personal habit-patterns).

Ethnography has roots in social fieldwork as well as literary criticism, biography, and journalism. Featured characteristics include:

1. **Well-studied context** of the case in question:
   - Explore the musical culture of punk, grunge and the impact of Nirvana on American music history.
   - Describe the cultural terrain of Kurt Cobain and the members of Nirvana (i.e., life in Aberdeen, Washington, circa 1970).

2. **Observable data**. (What do you see, hear, feel, notice?) Listen to *Nevermind* LP.

3. **Formal and informal interviews (oral history techniques)** of your parents, grandparents, friends, neighbors and, perhaps, people from Aberdeen, WA.

4. **Descriptive telling** of the data (rather than quantifiable numbers) with many choices regarding the “style” of telling.

5. **Interpretation of the observations** including different meanings of events and actions of the different members, with empathetic presumption of intentions.

6. **Triangulation of evidence** by checking multiple sources.
2.) Distribute and review vocabulary sheet

**VOCABULARY**

- **Alternative music** - A branch of Rock 'n' Roll genre that has roots in punk rock. This style of music does not fit in any mainstream musical categories (i.e. folk, jazz, classical, Broadway; students may search for/discover standard categories in a music store).
- **Chord** - Three (triad) or more musical notes played at the same time creating harmony or dissonance.
- **Compilation** - Samples of work from various artists on one recording/album.
- **Cover** - A new version of a previously recorded song.
- **Disc Jockey (AKA DJ or Deejay)** - A person who plays recorded music for an audience (radio or live).
- **Fanzine** - Small magazine intended for fans with a particular interest.
- **45/LP** - Vinyl musical records (a 45 is small with one song on each side and an LP is a Long Playing recording). 45s were named as they spin 45 revolutions per minute on a turntable.
- **Generation X** - Label for the group of Americans born from the year 1965 through 1975. Character descriptors for this group have included rebellious, self-absorbed, shallow, and lacking in work ethic.
- **Grunge** - A form of alternative music noted for the use of strong, aggressive drumming, heavy guitar lines, primal-like vocals, very loud volume. The literal definition of grunge is “dirty, inferior or obnoxious.” (Riverside Webster’s II Dictionary)
- **Heavy metal** - A genre of popular music characterized by loud playing, distorted sounds, and screamed vocals.
- **Liner Notes** - Information about the music and musicians found on or inside a record, cassette, or CD. Production information, credits, and appreciations are usually included.
EMP Visit

1. Observe the artifacts in the EMP|SFM Nirvana: Taking Punk to the Masses exhibit.
2. Determine Primary and Secondary Source evidence.
3. Describe the types of artifacts (Primary and Secondary Source evidence).
4. Check out the Oral History library in the Sound & Vision Artists Tell Their Stories exhibit.

Post-Visit

1. Listen to selections from the Discography:
   - Bleach (Sub Pop, 1989)
   - Nevermind (DGC, 1991)
   - Incesticide (DGC, 1992)
   - In Utero (DGC, 1993)
   - MTV Unplugged in New York (DGC, 1994)
   - From the Muddy Banks of the Wishkah (DGC, 1996)
   - Nirvana (DGC, 2002)
   - With the Lights Out box set, 3 CDs, 1 DVD (DGC, 2004)
   - Silver: the Best of the Box (DGC, 2005)
2. Tell Your Tale: write your report and share with the class or school news/journal.
3. Post your writing on The SoundBoard (at soundboard.ning.com)

Additional Resources

- Nirvana Live guide www.nirvanaguide.com
- The Internet Nirvana Fan Club www.nirvanaclub.com
- List all resources and artifacts as either primary or secondary source evidence.

ARTIFACTS:

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<th>Oral histories</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
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<td>Diaries</td>
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<td>Letters</td>
<td>Phone messages</td>
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Primary Source Evidence

1
2
3

Secondary Source Evidence

1
2
3
Smells Like Teen Spirit (from the LP *Nevermind* by Nirvana)

Load up on guns bring your friends
It's fun to lose and to pretend
She's over bored, self-assured
Oh no, I know a dirty word

hello, hello, hello, how low (4x)

(CHORUS)
With the lights out, it's less dangerous
Here we are now, entertain us
I feel stupid and contagious
Here we are now, entertain
us A mulato
An albino A
mosquito
My Libido
Yay

I'm worst at what I do best
And for this gift I feel blessed
Our little group has always been
And always will until the end

Hello, hello, hello, how low (4x)

CHORUS

SOLO

And I forget just why I taste
Oh yeah, I guess it makes me smile
I found it hard, it was hard to find
Oh well, whatever, nevermind

Hello, hello, hello, how low (4x)

CHORUS