

# Finding Lessons In Popular Music

By Bryan Powell

For my first year-and-a-half as general music teacher in East Harlem, NYC, I used the pedagogical methods that I was taught to employ: start with notation and rhythms and gradually bring the students along. In this way, music was something I was “giving” to them, not something that they already had inside them. This was how I was trained—and the way that my father, a band director, was trained.

But, in my second year of teaching, despite positive feedback from students and administrators, I couldn’t shake the following two ideas; 1. My students were passionate about music. 2. The musical experiences that I was facilitating in the classroom bore no resemblance to their musical lives outside of school.

In the 10 years since that realization, I have shifted my teaching approach to encompass all genres of music, but focus primarily on popular music. By “popular,” I mean music of the people—in this case, the music of my students. This has led to deeper, more engaged experiences with my students, and dare I say it, more fun!

Teaching popular music has allowed me to teach music in context. Looking at the artist or band, their influences and how they relate to music and culture in general has allowed me to incorporate social studies and writing into my teaching. In Tune offers this context in its “Frontrunner” and “Influences” columns, (among other places). Reading and discussing these articles gives students



Amp Up NYC students and organizers

tools to better understand the music they’re listening to and learning.

In my current job as the Director of Programs for Amp Up NYC (see “Music News”), I’m able to work with public school teachers to expand Modern Band education, a new instrumental and vocal music program that focuses on teaching kids to perform, improvise and compose popular musical genres on instruments including guitar, bass, keyboard, drums, vocals, and computers. The Amp Up NYC initiative trains public school teachers to use the music that the students know and love to get them making music, composing, and improvising—all while bridging the gap between the music inside and outside the classroom.

Popular music in the classroom doesn’t replace traditional music

ensembles, it enhances them! It is not a “this or that” situation. On the contrary, the use of popular music brings in students who would not have previously participated in band, choir, or orchestra. And perhaps more importantly, popular music in the classroom validates the musical preferences of our students. If music is a reflection of culture, and the soundtrack to our lives, it should be our job as music educators to expose our students to new musical experiences while validating our students’ musical identities. ◆



**Bryan Powell D.M.A** is Director of Programs for **Amp Up NYC** for **Little Kids Rock**