

Jazz Oral Histories As Primary Sources in the Middle School Classroom

Introduction to Jazz Oral History Project

The Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Project includes over 85 interviews with NEA Jazz Masters. These Jazz Masters are living legends who have made exceptional contributions to the advancement of jazz. They include senior jazz musicians, performers, relatives, and business associates.

Using The Audio Clips and Transcripts

Each interview subject has three or more audio clips of audio (downloadable MP3), along with a transcript (PDF) containing all of the words spoken in the entire interview. To locate the text of the audio clip within the transcript, open or download the PDF. Within the PDF, use CTRL+F to open the “Find” tool. Type in a prominent word or phrase from the audio clip and press ENTER to find where that word or phrase is used within the PDF.

Visiting the Web Page

The full URL for the oral history page is http://www.smithsonianjazz.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=22&Itemid=114. The shortened URL <http://bit.ly/JAZZoh> (cap-sensitive) also directs to the same page.

Standards

Through examining the interviews of the Jazz Oral History Project, students can develop their skills under the following standards:

NCHS 5–12 United States History Standards

Era 7, Standard 3C: The student understands how new cultural movements reflected and changed American society.

Era 8, Standard 1B: The student understands how American life changed during the 1930s. (Explain the cultural life of the Depression years in art, literature, and music.)

Era 9, Standard 1B: The student understands how the social changes of the postwar period affected various Americans.

NCHS 5–12 Standards in Historical Thinking

2B: Reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage

2F: Appreciate historical perspectives.

3B: Consider multiple perspectives.

4A: Formulate historical questions.

4B: Obtain historical data from a variety of sources.

Common Core Literacy in History/Social Studies (Grades 6–8)

1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

6: Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author’s point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).



How To Select An Oral History

If your main goal is to encourage students to exercise the skill of analyzing oral histories, you may be open-minded about which interview subject to examine. Consider selecting an interview subject who was popular at a time period you are currently studying, who was born in your home state, or who played an instrument that you or one of your students plays.

Teacher Preparation

Prior to using an interview subject's audio clips and/or transcript:

- Review the clips and/or transcript for any vocabulary terms that you think may be unfamiliar to your students.
- Determine the amount of time it will take to listen to each of the clip(s) you intend to examine.
- Consider identifying the page (or pages) of the transcript where the audio clip's text is located.
- Decide if you will have all of the students examine the same interview subject or if each student will examine a different subject. By studying a variety of sources, the class may be able to develop broader generalizations.

Classroom Introduction

If this is the first time your students are using oral histories as primary sources, you may want to introduce them to the concept of a primary source, the definition of an oral history, and the strengths and weaknesses of the oral history format. For outstanding descriptions and charts, see pages 35 to 36 of the guide, *Engaging Students with Primary Sources* (historyexplorer.si.edu/PrimarySources.pdf).

Student Questions

Ask students to answer the following questions, citing specific evidence from the audio clips and/or transcript. These questions are also available on a student worksheet at http://smithsonianjazz.org/documents/oral_histories/oral_history_worksheet.pdf.

- How does listening to the audio compare to reading the transcript? Does the rhythm or emotion of the person's voice offer any information?
- How might this story sound if it was told by someone else? Is there another perspective from which this story could be told, and if so, how do you imagine it might be different?
- As Toshiko Akiyoshi states, "Jazz is a social art." What interpersonal relationships are a part of this story?
- How does this person's unique story fit into the broader history of America? Does it contrast with or support your previous knowledge of events, places, or ideas in American history?
- Do you get the impression that this person's experience was common or "normal" for his/her place in history? What makes you think that? What parts might have been uncommon?
- What new questions do you have after listening to this oral history? How might you find the answers to those questions?

If your students are mostly examining the audio clips, you may suggest that they examine the rest of the transcript to seek answers to some of their questions.

Conclusion

- Ask students to compare their answers to the questions. If several students examined the same interview subject, encourage them to explore ways their answers varied. Take the opportunity to discuss how historians interpret the past.
- Talk about what other sources of information might be useful in order to do additional research on the topics covered in the interview. Sketch out plans of how students might go through the process of locating and analyzing those other sources.
- Discuss any themes that seemed to extend across multiple oral histories.

