American Popular Music Activity

Background

Just as the population of the United States is large and diverse, the country's music is made up of many styles and genres. These different types of music are often associated with particular regions and communities. This activity helps students explore the question: what is American popular music?

Audience

- Grades 5-8

Procedures

1. Split students into groups, and ask each group to choose a musical style or genre to focus on for their projects (consult list below for possible genres, or choose your own).
2. Ask students to consider the music's key artists, featured instruments, and any related dance styles.
3. Have students examine how each musical style grew in the U.S. in association with communities in particular places.
4. Have students collectively make a timeline to show when each style was developed. (For example, students choosing zydeco could research its origins in Louisiana; its founding artists, including Amédé Ardoin; the instruments used, such as accordions and washboards, etc.)

List of some possible genres for research:

- Delta blues
- Appalachian ballads
- Zydeco
- Polka
- Western swing
- Conjunto
- Bluegrass
- Salsa
- Country
- Gospel
- Hip hop
- Tejano
- Chicago blues
- Soul
Extensions

- Have students bring in representative audio or video examples of their chosen musical style and share them with the class.
- Have students plan a trip across the U.S., indicating what music they would learn about in each city, town, state or region based on class projects.