

The Role of Music in Environmental Education: Lessons From the Cod Fishery Crisis and the Dust Bowl Days

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Abstract

Music is a central feature of popular culture and thus can be a powerful force in the classroom. For decades, musicians lamented life in the fishery, first about the toughness of life on the sea, and later the collapse of the cod stocks. Similarly, folk musicians sang of a crisis in culture and environment on the Great Plains of North America during the 1930s. This paper uses lyrics and musical styles to illustrate the role of music in educating young people about ecosystem fragility and the cultural importance of rural resources. This paper begins with a description of the east coast fishery prior to, and following, the announcement of the Northern Cod fishery moratorium in 1992. Following this, the trend towards migration of people from maritime to prairie Canada in search of employment is analyzed through music. Using the 1930s "dust bowl days" as the historic starting point, music is then drawn from the 1930s to the 1990s to describe the ecological and cultural issues facing Great Plains farmers. The paper concludes that music not only provides a rich data source from which to draw, but that it is also a powerful tool for making connections to real life situations in the classroom.

Résumé

Élément névralgique de la culture populaire, la musique a un potentiel pédagogique de taille. Les musiciens ont longtemps déploré le lot des pêcheurs, d'abord pour l'âpreté des conditions de vie au large, puis en raison de la chute des stocks de morue. En parallèle, les voix du folk chantaient la crise de la culture et de l'environnement des Prairies de l'Amérique du Nord des années trente. Cet article puise dans des textes de chanson et des genres musicaux pour illustrer le rôle de la musique dans l'éducation ayant trait à la fragilité des écosystèmes et à l'importance culturelle des ressources rurales. Il s'ouvre sur une description de la pêche sur la côte atlantique avant et après l'annonce, en 1992, du moratoire sur la pêche à la morue du Nord. Consécutif au moratoire, le phénomène d'exode maritime et de recherche d'emplois dans les Prairies est analysé par le truchement de la musique. Celle-ci, triée sur une période s'étalant depuis l'époque des déserts de poussière jusque dans les années 1990, sert de chronique des problèmes d'ordre écologique et culturel inhérents à la vie rurale dans les Prairies. L'article permet de conclure que la musique constitue non seulement une source importante de données et renseignements, mais aussi un puissant outil pédagogique en raison de la richesse de ses rapports directs avec la vraie vie.

It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words. Well, perhaps a song is worth a thousand pictures or images. Increasingly, educators are expected to develop innovative approaches to classroom instruction, while at the same time, competing with a range of changing technologies such as television (cable, satellite, movie rentals), home and hand-held video games, the Internet, and portable stereos. Living in this ever-changing sea of pop culture makes educating young people about the past more difficult. Morgan (2001) notes an “erosion of the boundaries between schooling and pop culture” (p. 284), concluding there is a need to develop pedagogical tools that merge formal education with pop culture. While Morgan was speaking about the discipline of geography, his arguments are easily translated into other fields such as environmental studies. Examples of interactive techniques include utilizing information technology (Mitchell & Reed, 2001), developing landscape interpretation guides (Medley & Gramlich-Kaufman, 2001), and incorporating pop culture mediums such as television and movies (Morgan, 2001) into the classroom. This paper argues that music, having such a profound impact on culture, can also play an important part in education and in particular, social and environmental studies. Music has two roles to play in this regard. First, music represents analytical documents through information provided in lyrics. As Curtis (1994) notes, lyrics have the potential to be used as a “source of geographic or historic evidence.” In fact, a sub-discipline in the field of Human Geography, referred to as the “Geography of Music,” has emerged in recent years (e.g., Kong, 1995; Smith, 1994; Nash & Carney, 1996; Ramsey, 1999a, 1999b) that provides a reference point linking music and education. Second, drawing from what Morgan (2001) argues, music can also be used as a classroom tool to maintain and/or increase student interest in a topic. This paper uses two examples to illustrate these points, the Northern Cod fishery crisis in Atlantic Canada and the “dust bowl days” on the Great Plains and Canadian prairies. The connection between the two is made with a musical segue that examines the migration of people from eastern to western Canada in search of employment.

Fish and the Fisheries

The “collapse” of the Northern Cod fishery in Atlantic Canada was formally recognized on July 2, 1992, when, then Federal Fisheries Minister, John Crosbie announced a moratorium on commercial fishing. With this moratorium, an entire fishery, and a traditional way of life, was lost. Since this time, a number of studies have examined particular causes in detail, including: domestic over-fishing, foreign over-fishing, weather and climate (i.e., cold water), bureaucratic miscalculations, political interference (e.g., provinces built fish plants which in turn put pressure on the federal government to maintain quotas), and more controversially, a growing seal population (Milich, 1999;

Sinclair, 1996; Hamilton & Seyfrit, 1994; Steele, Andersen, & Green, 1992). Two impacts garnered attention during this period:

- environmental degradation with respect to the decimation and near extinction of a fish species; and
- a loss of a way of life, particularly to Newfoundlanders.

While the harshness of life on the sea, the causes of the collapse, as well as the impacts of resource depletion on environment and society have been the subjects of many songs spanning generations, this paper examines only two: one from the pre-moratorium era and another that was written based on the moratorium. Both songs document the loss of a traditional folk culture, and are expressed through a popular culture medium of music. As such, they represent documents that can inform. Further, because both are also emotional tributes to a loss of a way of life for many Atlantic Canadians, it is argued they can be powerful tools to educators who are teaching young people about the breakdown between environmental conservation and human consumption, as well as the human and community crises that are created as a result of such breakdowns. This paper argues that music can be used to generate student interest in a topic that they may have otherwise disregarded.

Traditionally, folk music about the east coast fishery and culture related stories about the hard life on the sea. However in the post-World War II era, these stories changed to ones about conflicts between offshore and inshore fisheries, lost livelihoods, and fishery collapse. This distinction alone illustrates the importance music can play in documenting the historic as well as contemporary relationships between humans and the environment. The first song to be discussed here was written by Stan Rogers in 1977, fifteen years before the cod moratorium was announced. Although Rogers died in 1983, his legend lives on in most part because of the stories he was able to tell about rural life in Canada. Like folk heroes in Canada such as Ian Tyson, Gordon Lightfoot, and Stompin' Tom Connors, Rogers wrote songs about rural life across Canada. Whether it was grain farming in Saskatchewan ("The Field Behind the Plow"), the migration of Atlantic Canadians to the western oil industry ("The Idiot"), or songs of the fishery ("Make and Break Harbour"), Rogers left behind rich resource documents from which educators can draw.

"Make and Break Harbour" (Rogers, 1977) refers to a time when the cod were still "plenty," but the arrival of large-scale off-shore fishing trawlers meant fewer fish and fewer people. In the first verse, the lines, ". . . Once more we tack home with a dry empty hold" and ". . . make and break, and make do, but the fish are so few" speak to changes in the fishery with small-scale inshore fishers returning home almost empty-handed. This description leads into an explanation of why this occurred. The answer, according to Rogers, is to lay particular blame on the industrialized, large-scale offshore fishery of the post World War II era:

. . . It's so hard not to think of before the big war
when the cod went so cheap but so plenty
foreign trawlers go by now with long-seeing eyes
taking all, where we seldom take any . . .

Rogers then describes the impacts of the offshore fishery and particularly the depopulation of young people and loss of community:

. . . and the young folk don't stay with the fisherman's way
long ago, they all moved to the cities . . .

. . . most houses stand empty. Old nets hung to dry
and blown away, lost, and forgotten.

One year after the cod moratorium was announced, Great Big Sea, a former St. John's, Newfoundland bar band originally named "Rankin Street," released their first CD. This recording includes the song "Fisherman's Lament" that was written by the father of band member Sean McCann (McCann, 1993). Like "Make and Break Harbour," this is an emotional song that speaks to the role of trawlers, political interference, and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) in the fishery collapse. Along with citations and graphics from the academic literature, "Fisherman's Lament" provides a benchmark to any lecture about the crisis in the cod fishery. The fourth verse describes the harshness of life on the sea, and thus, the connection between society and environment:

We challenged great storms and sometimes we won.
Faced death and disaster we rode with the sun.
We worked and we toiled we strained our men brane.
We were a proud people, will we e're be again?

The second and sixth verses, while also commenting on life on the sea, also describe the feelings of shame from the loss of a way of life and a disdain for government in controlling peoples lives:

. . . And I spent my whole life out there on the sea.
Some government bastard, now takes it from me.
It's not just the fish, they've taken my pride.
I feel so ashamed I just want to hide.

My father is gone now and the fish are gone too.
Our future is managed, oh what can we do?
I'm too old to change, but what of my sons.
How will they know that we weren't the ones?

This particular aspect of the song illustrates the multiplicity of factors responsible for the demise of the cod fishery as well as the finger pointing that was

taking place. This information provides a useful tool for initiating class discussion and debate about resource issues and responsibilities.

The seventh verse argues that not only did DFO admit errors in its calculations but that governments were responsible for developing the offshore, industrial fishery. It is to this verse that the disconnect between society and environment is most evident:

DFO regulations admitted the rape
of our beautiful oceans, from headland to cape.
They brought in the trawlers, they tore up our twine.
Politicians don't care what's yours and what's mine.

While the conflict between the inshore and offshore fishers, as well as the political indifference regarding local control of common property are evident, "Fisherman's Lament" goes further by concluding with a call to Newfoundlanders to reject the compensation system (the "package") announced with the closure of the Northern Cod fishery and return to their boats and go back to the sea:

"You brave Newfoundlanders" now he said to me,
"Shove the package to hell and go back to the sea."
If we don't stand our ground we will fade away.
And the bones of our fathers will turn into clay.

This verse illustrates both a cultural crisis perceived with the loss of a way of life as well as a crisis response to continue fishing regardless of the state of the ecological system. However, it also illustrates that even in crisis, environmental concerns can be perceived secondarily to socioeconomic concerns. The stories that are told, and the emotion that is invoked in both "Make and Break Harbour" and "Fisherman's Lament," make them powerful tools in the classroom, particularly as introductions and conclusions to a unit on the Atlantic fishery or as a technique for fostering class discussion or facilitating a resource debate. The unit itself could be framed upon any number of general textbooks (e.g., Draper, 2002; Dearden & Mitchell, 1998) as well as further reading in a range of regional (e.g., Steele, Andersen, & Green, 1992), sociological (e.g., Sinclair, 1996), and environmental (e.g., Haedrich & Hamilton, 2000) journals.

From the East to the West: Migration of Canadians

One response to overcoming degraded environments in remote regions and the loss of employment and economic well-being is to relocate. Nowhere is this more evident in Canada than with the migration of Atlantic Canadians, particularly Newfoundlanders and Cape Bretoners. "Make and Break Harbour" is one example, with its references to, "long ago, they all moved to the cities"

and “most houses stand empty, old nets hung dry, and blown away, lost, and forgotten.” In the song “The Idiot,” Rogers wrote of Atlantic Canadians migrating to western Canada to seek employment in the oil industry. Ian Tyson also spoke of this eloquently in the Canadian folk standard “Four Strong Winds.” In the liner notes on this recording Tyson stated that “Four Strong Winds” was a commentary on the nature of seasonal labour in Canada (e.g., “think I’ll go off to Alberta . . . got some friends I could go workin’ for . . .”) (1963). As stated by Tyson:

Canada has many seasonal workers and when the weather turns harsh they must move on and find a different type of work. Many of these people cross the country every year—from the tobacco harvest in Ontario to the wheat harvest on the prairies to apple picking in British Columbia. With the advent of fall they move on, perhaps to return with the spring. (In Jennings, 1997, p. 8)

Similarly, James Gordon’s “Harvest Train” (covered by Melanie Doane, a Nova Scotian, in 1993) also describes the movement of Maritimer’s to the prairies. The role of the railway as a mode of transport is central to the song, which includes a reference to W.C. Van Horne (“I curse you W.C. Van Horne”), a builder of the Canadian Pacific Railway (Doane, 1993). The railways connected east to west in Canada and made agricultural settlement on the Canadian prairies a possibility. And so began interprovincial migration in Canada, a phenomenon that has seemingly become part of our culture; that is, moving to where the resources are being developed: fish, forest, mine, agriculture, and more recently, tourism with young people traveling to places such as Banff National Park for employment. The following two verses from “Harvest Train” illustrate the economic struggles faced by Maritimers, the migration from the Maritimes to the prairies, and the impacts of this migration on loved ones:

By the time I heard that evening train
he was gone, gone, gone
Headed for those fields of grain
in the far Saskatchewan
Oh the times they were so hard
and the fish were few
Oh, what’s a Maritimer gonna do

Oh my heart, the C.P.R. has taken
Every good man in Nova Scotia
Gone away on that Harvest Train
to the Prairies Golden Ocean far from me . . .

The migration articulated by both Tyson and Gordon illustrates the traditional reliance on resource-based economies in Canada, as well as the impacts of migration on those who are left behind. This movement from one resource (e.g., fishing) sector to another (e.g., farming) provides a segue to describing

the role of music in teaching about great plains ecosystem and culture. As stated by the Tragically Hip, it is “at the 100th Meridian, where the Great Plains began,” a song which itself includes mention of the slaughter of the bison [buffalo] with the peopling of the prairie landscape (Tragically Hip, 1992).

The Dust Bowl Days as an Ecological Crisis and Human Tragedy

The term “dust bowl” was first used in a byline to a news article describing the dust storms in Oklahoma (Curtis, 1994; Gold, 1995). In arguing that the Dust Bowl experience provides lessons with respect to contemporary environmental issues, and in particular with respect to soil erosion, Lockeretz (1981) points out that, “during the dust storms great clouds containing hundreds of millions of tons of dust blocked the sun at noon for days at a time and interfered with air traffic two thousand miles away” (p. 11). Just as the causes of the decimation of the cod fishery were many, it is generally agreed upon that there were multiple causes to the dust bowl phenomenon in the 1930s, including: a drop in grain prices, increased mechanization, the stock market crash of 1929, the intensive cultivation of grasslands into crops, a lack of conservation practices on these cultivated lands, and a seven year drought (Braeman, 1986; Lockeretz, 1981; McDean, 1986; Fanslow, 1998).

Along with the drought came the tragedy of people being forced from their farms, as well as the loss of jobs for tenant farmers and labourers who were reliant on agriculture for employment. Migration is often associated with the “dirty thirties,” “dust bowl refugees,” and “hoboes riding the rails,” etc. Most migration was westward to California because of the mild climate and long growing season meant longer labour opportunities, diversity of products, songs and stories of California as the “veritable promised land,” advertising for workers in the worst off areas, and the existence of an east-west thoroughfare connecting the dust bowl region to the central valley of California (also referred to as “Route 66,” “The Mother Road,” “Main Street of America,” and “Will Roger’s Highway”) (Fanslow, 1998; Logsdon, 1970).

The events of the “dust bowl days,” including both the drought and the migration, have been documented in many ways: from the academic and public policy literature to entertainment. The classic novel by John Steinbeck (1939), *Grapes of Wrath*, and John Ford’s (1940) movie interpretation of the same name, remain powerful interpretations of the struggles encountered during the dust bowl days. However, it was Woody Guthrie, a singer/songwriter/folk musician, as well a dust bowl resident and later, migrant, who compiled perhaps the richest resource base for documenting first hand accounts of the trials and tribulations of that era. Essentially, Guthrie’s work can be placed into four categories: children’s songs, union movement, federal program propaganda, and the dust bowl ballads (Rodnisky, 1976).

Guthrie is perhaps best remembered for his dust bowl ballads because he was commissioned by Alan Lomax of the American Library of Congress

to record them. Fourteen of these were recorded in 1940 on a single volume compilation entitled “Dust Bowl Ballads.” In order to focus the analysis of Guthrie’s work, further classifications have been made of his dust bowl songs. For example, Gold (1995) classifies Guthrie’s dust bowl songs into three landscape-based categories:

- the transition from agricultural region to desert landscape;
- the highway landscape of migrants leaving the dust bowl; and
- the perceptions and realities of life in California.

As this paper argues, music can be used to describe both ecological and human impacts of resource crises, and in doing so, recognize the out-migration that often results with the loss of a particular resource. That is, the connection between society and environment (i.e., migration) is illustrated by describing the disconnection between society and environment (i.e., agricultural practices). In this paper, Guthrie’s dust bowl ballads have been placed into three categories: environment, migration, and personal pain and tragedy. What makes Guthrie’s music important archival documents for analyzing and teaching about the dust bowl era is the fact that he both lived in and migrated from the dust bowl region. Born in Oklahoma in 1912 (Romanowski & George-Warren, 1995), Guthrie was 17 years old when the stock market crashed in 1929. Thus, Guthrie himself represents a practical example to illustrate to students what people went through at a young age during that period. To use his own words, Guthrie was quoted as saying:

I’ve lived in these dust storms just about all my life. I mean I tried to live. I met millions of good folk trying to stay on and to stay alive with the dust cutting down every hope. I am made of this dust and out of this fast wind. (In Curtis, 1994, p. 256)

As Curtis (1994) states, “academic accounts of the dust bowl have tended to concentrate on the causes, affects, and resulting efforts of conservation” (p. 257). However, more research is needed which “describes the storms, the reactions, meanings, and interpretations” (p. 257) of them. In response to Curtis’s call, the following songs are used to describe the aforementioned three elements of the dust bowl days. All songs are taken from Guthrie’s re-released “Dust Bowl Ballads” anthology (Guthrie, 1988).

In addition to providing the dates and geographic extent of the dust storms, Guthrie’s ballad “The Great Dust Storm” also vividly describes the storms themselves:

On the 14th day of April of 1935,
There struck the worst of dust storms that ever filled the sky.
You could see that dust storm comin’, the cloud looked deathlike black,
And through our mighty nation, it left a dreadful track.

From Oklahoma City to the Arizona line,
Dakota and Nebraska to the lazy Rio Grande,
It fell across our city like a curtain of black rolled down,
We thought it was our judgement, we thought it was our doom.
The radio reported, we listened with alarm,
The wild and windy actions of this great mysterious storm;
From Albuquerque and Clovis, and all New Mexico,
They said it was the blackest that ever they had saw.

At the farm scale, Guthrie's "Dust Bowl Blues" is another telling account of the physical power of the dust storms and the impact of these storms on farms and farmers:

. . . I've seen the dust so black that I couldn't see a thing,
And the wind so cold, boy, it nearly cut your water off.
I seen the wind so high that it blowed my fences down,
I've seen the wind so high that it blowed my fences down,
Buried my tractor six feet underground.
Well, it turned my farm into a pile of sand . . .

With the loss of the farm, as well as the opportunities for work on farms, many were forced to migrate with whatever possessions they could carry. Two verses from "Dust Bowl Refugee(s)" illustrate the movement of dust bowl residents to California (i.e., "peach fuzz") to seek out farm labour:

I'm a dust bowl refugee,
Just a dust bowl refugee,
From that dust bowl to the peach bowl,
Now that peach fuzz is a-killin' me.

Yes, we wander and we work
In your crops and in your fruit,
Like the whirlwinds on the desert
That's the dust bowl refugees.

Along with ruined farms and the migration were stories of personal pain and tragedy. In addition to the personal pain of losing one's home and employment, were ballads describing the respiratory health conditions caused by the years of drought. Like "Dust Bowl Blues," two other songs can be offered which make reference to health. "Dust Can't Kill Me," speaks to the impact of the dust storms on family:

That old dust storm killed my family,
But it can't kill me, Lord
And it can't kill me.

"Dust Pneumonia Blues" rather, describes the respiratory ailments caused by the prolonged nature of the dust bowl days:

. . . I got the dust pneumony, pneumony in my lung,
An' I'm a-gonna sing this dust pneumony song.

. . . I went to the doctor, and the doctor, said, "My son,
You got that dust pneumony an' you ain't got long, not long."

Written works (*Grapes of Wrath*), photographic images (Lange, 1935), video documentation (*Grapes of Wrath*), as well as academic studies of both an ecological (Lockeretz, 1981) and cultural (Gold, 1995) nature, describe aspects of the dust bowl days. Woody Guthrie's descriptions of events relating to the dust bowl days as well as to the impacts of the storms themselves on person and property, are also recognized as both historically accurate and relevant given their documentation in the Library of Congress. Furthermore, Guthrie's music provides educators with a tool to place students on the journey from the dust bowl regions such as Oklahoma, along the migration routes such as "Route 66," to California.

The Dust Bowl Metaphor: Looking for a Hero

While numerous accounts of the historical importance and imagery of the dust bowl metaphor can be found in the literature (e.g., Lookingbill, 1994; Riebsame, 1986), the power of the dust bowl metaphor is perhaps best illustrated by examining a selection of post 1950s North American folk music. In the 1960s, young people were in search of folk heroes. Places such as Greenwich Village in New York, Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco, and Yorkville in Toronto were cultural hearths for young people searching for life's answers or simply looking for a good time (Jennings, 1997). In terms of the music scene, young musicians drew upon the work of Woody Guthrie in particular. Given that times were indeed changing, the dust bowl metaphor seemed a lyrical attraction not only in the 1960s but also on into the 1990s. This metaphor is but one example illustrating the powerful influence that music has on society. Table 1 illustrates the element of wind, dust, and "changin'" times as indicated in a variety of styles of music (folk, rock, country) over a period spanning from the 1960s to the 1990s. Table 1 also provides an indication of the power of music in sending messages about a variety of issues (e.g., farming [Eaglesmith], anti-war sentiment [Dylan], family struggles [Merchant]).

Bob Dylan's first album (self-titled) in 1961 included only two original compositions, one of which was titled "Song to Woody" (Romanowski & George-Warren, 1995). One year later, Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" marked a change in the entire North American folk music scene. It was even an inspiration to Ian Tyson who saw Dylan perform it in Greenwich Village (Jennings, 1997). It could be argued that from a popular culture perspective it was the power of Guthrie's influences, as much as the dust bowl occurrence itself, that

established a metaphor that has lasted more than sixty years. In addition to the songs of Dylan and Tyson, two other musicians are referred to as illustrations of the power of the dust bowl metaphor (Table 1).

Decade/Year	Artist	Song Title
1930-40s	Woody Guthrie	<i>The Great Dust Bowl</i> <i>Talking Dust Bowl Blues</i> <i>Dust Can't Kill Me</i> <i>Dust Pneumonia Blues</i> <i>Blowin' Down the Road</i> <i>Dust Bowl Refugees</i> <i>Dust Bowl Blues</i> <i>Dusty Old Dust</i> <i>Tom Joad</i> <i>This Land is Your Land</i>
1960s	Bob Dylan Ian Tyson	<i>Blowin' in the Wind</i> <i>The Times They are a Changin'</i> <i>Four Strong Winds</i> <i>This Land is Your Land</i>
1980s	Natalie Merchant	<i>Dust Bowl</i>
1990s	Fred Eaglesmith	<i>Things is Changin'</i> <i>End of the Road</i> <i>Harold Wilson</i>

Table 1. Wind blowin' through changin' times: The dust bowl metaphor.

In 1989, Natalie Merchant, then of the 10,000 Maniacs, used the dust bowl metaphor to speak about difficulties raising children on a meager budget with high health care costs and trying to fulfill the needs, wants, and desires of one's children. She describes particular struggles in each verse, all which end with:

I try and try but I can't save.
Pennies, nickels, dollars slip away.
I've tried and tried but I can't save.

Merchant (1989) summarizes the struggle in the chorus by making specific comparison to the experiences of dust bowl days, and in doing so draws upon the analogies and convictions of Bob Dylan twenty-five years prior:

There's a new wind blowing they say
it's gonna be a cold, cold one.
So brace yourself my darlings
it won't bring much our way but more dust bowl days.

Similarly, Fred Eaglesmith, who in the past has stated he is neither a folk nor a country musician, but rather someone who writes and performs "rural music" (Clever, 1991), uses historic descriptions and language to

describe the hardships of farming. Examples include, “living in two room shack, with an old tin roof that leaked when it rained” (Eaglesmith, 1991), “goin’ down to a kitchen like in 1935” (Eaglesmith, 1993), and “there’s bound to be a storm, now it’s blowin’ in all directions” (Eaglesmith, 1993). In the tradition of Guthrie and Dylan, Eaglesmith has evoked the dust bowl metaphor, both implicitly and explicitly, into his music as he describes the hardships of farming in southern Ontario. Given the connections between the metaphor and farming, and the emotion he extends in his music, Eaglesmith provides a contemporary source for educating students about the vulnerability of farming and the impacts of this vulnerability on farmers and farm families. That is, it ensures that the topic is not simply perceived as a history lesson.

In “Things is Changin’,” which also illustrates the metaphorical connection to Dylan’s “The Times, They are a Changin’” (see Table 1), Eaglesmith makes a direct connection between farm life in the 1930s and issues facing farmers in the 1990s:

Can't get a job
Couldn't buy a job to save your life
So you go down to some kitchen
just like 1935
You've got a couple of children
And a tear-stained wife
And you ain't trying to get ahead
You're just trying to get by
Things is changin' . . .

Similarly, in “Go Out and Plough,” Eaglesmith describes the pain and embarrassment of the last days on a farm that has been declared bankrupt. While the song makes no direct comparison to the dust bowl days, the emotional style of the song and the story that it tells illustrates the impact of farm failure on families. This is best illustrated in the chorus:

And he'd go out and plough,
but the tractor's broken down
and the day's almost spent anyway.
He pours himself a drink, sits on the porch to think,
whatever are the neighbours gonna say.
Drinkin' don't take the place,
the banker does with an empty face.
He tells you 'bout a job up the road,
and leave the keys in the mailbox when you go.

Together, the selected examples from Merchant and Eaglesmith provide an indication of the continued power of the dust bowl metaphor. As Lockeretz (1981) argued that from a scientific point of view, the dust bowl experience was relevant to understanding contemporary agricultural issues, this paper illustrates the importance of music in a similar fashion: as documents and as educational tools.

Conclusion

This work is an idea in progress. It stems from my days in high school as someone who spent a great deal of time listening to music and much less time studying. Like many, I found school less than inspiring. In my first two years of university teaching, first at Mount Allison in New Brunswick, then at Brandon University in Manitoba, I experimented with music in class. At Mount Allison University, I would simply play a song to introduce and conclude lectures on everything from farming in Cultural Geography and the fishery in Natural Resource Management. In the latter class, I even began a lecture on noise pollution by playing “Rock and Roll Ain’t Noise Pollution” by AC-DC in front of 160 students. In more senior classes I would play a song such as Roger’s “Make and Break Harbour” to introduce a seminar discussion about the impacts of the fishery crisis on communities in Atlantic Canada. Students came to expect my arrival with a portable stereo. Similarly, in Introduction to Human Geography at Brandon University, I played Eaglesmith songs to illustrate the impact of the farm crisis on families. It has been my experience that incorporating music into the class—at least at the university level—increased student interest in the topic. This was evidenced not only in written comments in course reviews, but also in general comments made to me by students encouraging me to continue the technique.

Beyond evaluations, however, I also noted an interest in the topic matter through citations of music in assignments that made connections between environmental crisis and cultural impact. Students also came to me with other music they felt would help to illustrate points in class. This allowed me to then provide them with a reference to a journal article, book, or news item. I am not saying that music should replace traditional sources, teaching styles, or educational tools, but rather, music has supplemental value with the potential to grasp their attention. It is up to educators to assist students in then learning more about the particular topic through traditional sources. This paper has illustrated the important role that music can play in documenting particular issues, past and present, which affect our lives. As a powerful influence in our society, music is there for the taking as a tool that can make both teaching and learning more interesting.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to first thank the many students who encouraged him to continue using music as a teaching tool. Second, he thanks the many people who gave positive and critical feedback to a version of this paper that was presented at the EECOM 2000 Conference in Riding Mountain National Park in Manitoba. Thanks also to the two anonymous reviewers whose comments have improved the quality and relevance of this paper.

Notes on Contributor

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