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## AMERICAN Educator Spring 2004

### Cultural Literacy Rocks

#### *How Core Knowledge Can Help You Understand and Enjoy Rock Music ... and Much, Much More*

By Matthew Davis

*"What if you knew her  
And found her dead on the ground?"*

That's the question rock musicians Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young (CSNY) asked in their hit song, "Ohio." When the band released the song in May of 1970, every young person in America knew exactly what that question meant.

At the time, the nation was engrossed in its long, painful struggle over the Vietnam War. On campuses across the country, college students had been protesting against the war. In some places, the National Guard had been called in to preserve order. Then, on May 4th, National Guard troops on the campus of Kent State University opened fire on anti-war protesters, killing two men and two women.

Neil Young read about the shootings in the papers. A few days later, the moody Canadian went for a walk in the woods. When he walked out, he had a melody and some lyrics in his head. The refrain was "Four Dead in Ohio," but perhaps the most pointed line in the song was a question aimed right at the listener and focusing on one of the young women killed in the shooting: "What if you knew her / And found her dead on the ground?"

Young and his bandmates in CSNY recorded the song and released a single, which shot up the charts. Soon, young people all over America knew the lyrics. "Ohio" became an anthem of the counterculture.

So, what does this have to do with Core Knowledge? Well, more than you might think.

You see, in 1970 it didn't take much to understand "Ohio." As long as you weren't living in a cave, you knew what the members of CSNY were talking about. You knew they were angry and were challenging the youth of America to do something to resist the Vietnam War and the government. Today the situation is different. "Ohio" is still played on hundreds of radio stations, but modern listeners need to bring some cultural literacy to the table if they wish to understand the song.

The lyrics of "Ohio" are clipped, fragmentary, and angry. The musicians sing of "four dead in Ohio." They mention some guy named "Nixon" and complain, "soldiers are gunning us down!" And of course they ask the provocative question: "What if you knew her / And found her dead on the ground?" What they never do is identify Kent State or tell you exactly what they are singing about. In order to understand what the lyrics mean and why there is such anger and urgency in the voices of the singers, the modern listener needs to know what happened at Kent State, what the Vietnam War was, and

who Richard Nixon was--three things that are taught in the Core Knowledge curriculum for eighth grade.

For those of you who are not familiar with Core Knowledge, it is a particular approach to educational improvement based on the premise that a grade-by-grade core of common learning is necessary to ensure a sound and fair elementary education. The movement was started by Dr. E.D. Hirsch, Jr., author of *Cultural Literacy* and *The Schools We Need*, and is based on a large body of research in cognitive psychology, as well as a careful examination of several of the world's fairest and most effective school systems. Dr. Hirsch has argued that, for the sake of academic excellence, greater fairness, and higher literacy, early schooling should provide a solid, specific, shared core curriculum in order to help children establish strong foundations of knowledge. After wide consultation, the content of this core curriculum has been outlined in two books--*Core Knowledge Preschool Sequence* and *Core Knowledge Sequence, K-8*--that state explicitly what students should learn at each grade level. Currently, hundreds of schools and thousands of dedicated educators are participating in this school reform movement throughout the United States. (To learn more about Core Knowledge, go to [www.coreknowledge.org](http://www.coreknowledge.org).)

Core Knowledge is sometimes attacked as a reactionary or conservative idea, but it turns out you need a little core knowledge to understand a radical song like "Ohio." And I think this is only one instance of a larger, paradoxical phenomenon: In many cases, you need cultural literacy, even if what you want to understand is the counterculture.

Another example of this paradox is Joni Mitchell's sixties anthem "Woodstock." Mitchell sings of the famous rock concert, held in upstate New York in 1969:

*By the time we got to Woodstock  
We were half a million strong  
And everywhere there was song and celebration  
And I dreamed I saw the bombers  
Riding shotgun in the sky  
And they were turning into butterflies  
Above our nation.*

These lyrics will make more sense to a student who has been taught what Woodstock is and what happened in the sixties, as Core Knowledge students are taught in the eighth grade. Such students will understand why, in the context of the Vietnam War, Mitchell dreams of seeing bombers "turning into butterflies." Based on their studies of Judaism and Christianity in first and sixth grade, students may also recognize the biblical reference in the refrain:

*We are stardust  
We are golden  
And we've got to get ourselves  
Back to the garden*

When Mitchell says we have to "get ourselves / Back to the garden," she doesn't mean just any garden. She means the Garden of Eden, where, according to the Old Testament, Adam and Eve lived at peace with each other, in harmony with nature, and entirely unashamed of their naked bodies. For those with a bit of cultural literacy, those last two lines open a vast world of associations, giving the lyrics the sort of connotations and depth we associate with poetry. They also help explain some sixties phenomena that might otherwise seem baffling. All those naked people at Woodstock and all the communes that sprang up in the sixties--these things make more sense when seen in the light of this felt need to get "Back to the garden."

Another rock song that makes a lot more sense if you've got some cultural literacy is "Sympathy for the Devil," by the Rolling Stones. This song, frequently voted one of the

greatest rock songs of all time, is structured a bit like a riddle. Mick Jagger takes on the voice of the Devil. (Some might say that this was not a big stretch for the salacious lead singer.) In the opening verses of the song, the Devil introduces himself but does not actually give his name. Instead, he mentions a number of historical episodes he has been involved in, pausing now and again to taunt and challenge his listener: "Hope you guess my name!"

*Please allow me to introduce myself.  
I'm a man of wealth and taste.  
I've been around for a long, long year.  
Stole many a man's soul and faith.  
I was around when Jesus Christ  
Had his moment of doubt and pain  
Made damn sure that Pilate  
Washed his hands and sealed his fate.  
I stuck around St. Petersburg  
When I saw it was a time for a change,  
Killed the czar and his ministers:  
Anastasia screamed in vain  
I rode a tank,  
Held a general's rank,  
When the Blitzkrieg raged  
And the bodies stank.*

Obviously, the Devil gets around! In fact, it takes a good deal of cultural literacy just to recognize the various events in which he claims to have played a role.

In order to understand the second stanza, you need to know a little about the Christian religion, the life of Jesus, and the Devil's role as a stealer of "souls" and "faith." The Devil also says he was present when Jesus had his moment of "doubt and pain." This might refer to the time when the Devil tempted Jesus in the desert, to the moment when Jesus is said to have cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34), or perhaps to some other episode during Jesus's last days. Certainly the last lines of the stanza refer to the last days. There the Devil says he "Made ... sure" the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate "Washed his hands" and disclaimed responsibility for Jesus's death. This is an explicit biblical reference: "When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person" (Matthew 27:24). While few students will recognize the specific biblical references, Core Knowledge students who have studied Christianity in first and sixth grade should know who Jesus and Pilate are and should recognize the story that involved them both--and this knowledge may enable them to guess the identity of the speaker. If not, the next verses provide additional clues.

In the next stanza, His Satanic Majesty boasts of having played a role in the Bolshevik Revolution. But again the references are oblique, and it takes some cultural literacy to unpack the lyrics. Core Knowledge students who have studied Russian history in fifth and seventh grade, will know that St. Petersburg is in Russia and that the czars were the rulers of Russia until 1917, when Lenin and the Communists took power and, not long after, executed the royal family. The czar's most famous daughter, Anastasia Romanov, is said to have "screamed in vain."

In the last stanza quoted above, the Devil claims to have ridden a German tank during World War II. But once again he doesn't explicitly identify the war or his national affiliation. The word that unlocks the specific meaning of this stanza is "Blitzkrieg"--a word that is listed in the *Core Knowledge Sequence* for seventh grade.

After each of these verses, the speaker turns to the listener and issues the same

challenge: "Hope you guess my name!" The listener who has some cultural literacy will definitely be up for the challenge.

As a final example, consider another popular Neil Young song, "Cortez the Killer." Students who have studied Meso-American civilizations (taught in Core Knowledge schools in first and fifth grade) will know that Cortez was a Spanish conquistador. He was indeed a "killer," for his bloody conquest of the Aztec Empire in the early 1500s left many thousands dead. This basic cultural literacy enables one to follow the opening verses of the song:

*He came dancing across the water  
With his galleons and guns,  
Looking for the new world  
And a palace in the sun  
On the shore lay Montezuma.  
With his coca leaves and pearls.  
In his halls he often wandered  
With the secrets of the worlds.  
And his subjects gathered 'round him  
Like the leaves around a tree.  
In their clothes of many colors  
For the angry gods to see.*

Without cultural literacy, none of this makes much sense. But graduates of Core Knowledge schools will recognize that the "he" in the first line is Cortez, and that the waters he came "dancing across" are the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico. They will know that guns played a major role in the Spanish conquest of both the Aztecs and the Incas. They may also know, or be able to guess, that a galleon is a Spanish ship.

Once the name Cortez has been introduced, a Core Knowledge student will expect to hear about Montezuma, too, since Montezuma was the leader of the Aztec Empire when Cortez appeared. A Core Knowledge student will know that the Aztecs worshiped many gods. The description of the "halls of Montezuma" is likely to echo in at least a few ears, too, since the fourth-grade music guidelines in the *Sequence* include the Marine's hymn, with its famous opening line: "From the halls of Montezuma / To the shores of Tripoli." Consciously or unconsciously, the Canadian Young seems to be echoing this American classic.

Alert Core Knowledge graduates should also be able to tell when Young begins to romanticize the Aztecs in the next few stanzas:

*And the women all were beautiful  
And the men stood straight and strong.  
They offered life in sacrifice  
So that others could go on.  
Hate was just a legend  
And war was never known  
People worked together  
And they lifted many stones.  
They carried them to the flatlands.  
But they died along the way.  
And they built up with their bare hands  
What we still can't do today.*

The romanticizing of the Aztecs begins in the opening lines, when Young claims that all of these native peoples were beautiful and healthy, a condition which has probably never prevailed in any civilization at any time.

Young also glides over the subject of human sacrifice. It is true that the Aztecs "offered life in sacrifice / So that others could go on." They believed that such sacrifices would appease the gods. But the lives they sacrificed were human lives: sacrificial victims were tied to an altar, whereupon their chests were sliced open and their still-beating hearts offered to "the angry gods." By avoiding the fact that the Aztecs killed human beings and emphasizing the unselfish motives behind these sacrifices, Young puts a cheerful face on a terrible practice and presents a one-sided view of the Aztecs.

"Hate was just a legend, / And war was never known," is more of the same kind of romanticizing, all too common today. The residents of pre-Columbian Mexico were well acquainted with hate and war. In fact, the Aztecs stand out in the annals of history as an exceptionally belligerent civilization: In order to keep their altars supplied with a steady diet of sacrificial victims, the Aztec emperors kept up a perpetual war with neighboring peoples. It would be more accurate to say that "peace was never known."

Young again claims too much for the Aztecs when he declares that modern engineers could never build things as grand as the Aztecs built. But it certainly is true that "they lifted many stones." And here is another unexpected benefit for the culturally literate: Young doesn't tell us what the Aztecs "built up" when they "lifted many stones," and a culturally illiterate listener might be left envisioning a nondescript pile of rocks. A Core Knowledge fifth-grader, on the other hand, should have visions of an Aztec pyramid dancing in her head. To my way of thinking, that's the best possible argument for Core Knowledge--it makes things happen in your head that wouldn't happen otherwise.

Now I don't want to claim too much here. It's true that there are many rock songs that require no cultural literacy whatsoever. ("De-doo-doo-doo, de-dah-dah-dah.") It's also true that there are many other songs that are so oblique, or disjointed, or drug-addled, that no amount of cultural literacy will allow you to make sense of them. Finally, and most importantly, it's true that there are many things that are more important to understand in life than rock lyrics--including textbooks, newspapers, beautiful literature, poetry, job applications, contracts, warranties, manuals, and ballots. The point isn't that rock music is especially important (it's not); the point is that cultural literacy has the power to make texts meaningful, even in situations far removed from the classroom.

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Matthew Davis is director of the Core Knowledge Reading Program and a Rolling Stones fan. This article first appeared in *Common Knowledge*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2003, and is reprinted with permission.

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