

# Popular Music in School: Remixing the Issues

By Robert H. Woody

Over the last forty years, popular music in America has consistently shown great variety, originality, and evolution. These qualities are evident when we look at this period's popular musicians, such as the Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, Linda Ronstadt, Prince, Madonna, Nirvana, Sheryl Crow, and Usher. The variety is even more impressive when we broaden our consideration beyond the best-selling artists and consider all vernacular styles, including country, jazz, folk, R & B, rap, and Latin music.

While American music has clearly flourished and evolved over the last several decades, it's difficult to say the same for American music education. Although there are important reasons to preserve long-standing traditions of school music, one wonders why the content of our music curricula doesn't better reflect the musical world in which we live. Participants in the 1967 Tanglewood Symposium challenged music educators to be inclusive of music of all styles and cultures, specifically including "music of our time" and "popular teenage music" in this directive.<sup>1</sup>

MENC has supported this mandate ever since, in part by devoting issues of the *Music Educators Journal* (MEJ) to popular music and by publishing a number of

print resources, the most recent being *Bridging the Gap: Popular Music and Music Education*.<sup>2</sup> In the 1991 special focus issue of MEJ, Robert Cutietta reflected on the twenty-some years that had passed since Tanglewood and lamented some of the ways popular music had found its way into school music programs—ways not intended by the Tanglewood participants. Perhaps the most disappointing was the "bait-and-switch" technique, in which teachers use popular music merely as a motivational hook for activities that ultimately focus on classical or traditional school music.<sup>3</sup>

Have things changed in the sixteen years since 1991 or the forty years since Tanglewood in 1967? Is the current state of music education similar or different? It is unclear to what extent popular music has made inroads into school music, but certainly rehashing the same old justifications and recommendations is unlikely to effect additional change now. Accordingly, this article presents a different perspective. The familiar rationales for the acceptance of popular music have given way to new reasons why more vernacular styles deserve a greater place in school music. What's more, this position is bolstered by recent research findings in music learning suggesting that adoption of certain popular-music practices may be a key to improving formal music education altogether.<sup>4</sup>

## Uses and Misuses: The Issue of Authenticity

Perhaps the biggest reason people question the place of popular music in schools is the way integration has been attempted over the years. Marching bands playing Bruce Springsteen tributes, concert choirs singing Top 40 medleys, and orchestras giving pops performances from hit movie soundtracks do not always produce the best results. Simply arranging popular music for existing traditional school ensembles does not do the music justice. The music of Bruce Springsteen was not meant to be played by a marching band any more than a Sousa march was meant to be played by a rock band.

Although some crossover efforts work better than others—and perhaps more for entertainment purposes than aesthetic or educational value—the issue of musical authenticity should

*For it to be authentic, we must teach popular music in a way that is true to the processes of vernacular music making.*

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always be a high priority. Most teachers have come to understand the importance of using authentic recordings, performance practices, and instruments whenever possible when working with the music of another world culture, if only as a sign of respect to that culture. Popular music, which can be thought of merely as a subculture within American music, deserves the same consideration. This is especially true since popular music often represents the “native” music culture of our students. In a very real way, respecting the music is respecting our students. If we ignore musical authenticity with popular styles, our students will know it.

Teaching popular music in an authentic manner has a lot to do with *how* it is covered in the classroom. In traditional music education, teachers lead students in analyzing pieces to identify the compositional properties of the music, but this music theory model will often not be appropriate for considering popular music. In many cases, the value of popular music is not derived from its compositional or music theory–related properties. To understand and appreciate it correctly often requires greater consideration of the music’s emotional and expressive qualities and its relationship to its social and cultural context.

For example, it may be easy to question the sophistication of the music of Madonna—especially if comparing it to that of classical composers—but it is far more difficult to dismiss the influence Madonna’s music has had on its many listeners.<sup>5</sup> Again, popular music may be best thought of as music of another culture (other than Western classical). Just as it is not appropriate to judge the meaningfulness of, say, traditional Japanese music according to Western classical standards (and its premium on melodic and harmonic sophistication), it is also inappropriate to apply this musical value system to vernacular styles.

With this in mind, it might seem that we need a music appreciation model in which the teacher accompanies listening examples with information about the music’s historical and cultural context. While this can be successful, this instructional approach can also threat-

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Photo by Linda Rutledge

Inclusion of vernacular music making can better prepare our students for a lifetime of participatory musicianship.