

'We didn't start the fire':

using 1980s popular music to explore historical significance by stealth

Scott Allsop helped his students to uncover the implicit criteria informing someone else's attribution of historical significance to past events. That 'someone else' was Billy Joel whose 1989 song became the focus for deconstructive analysis. Through a series of activities Allsop helped his students to identify the criteria that Billy Joel *seems* to have been operating with. The students then experimented with applying those criteria by creating an updated version of the same song. Allsop emphasises that the most important part of the sequence was the necessarily slow but engaging process by which students discerned, refined and discussed Billy Joel's apparent criteria. Through this, the students deepened their understanding of how individual perceptions of historical significance can manifest themselves. Meanwhile, Allsop himself deepened his own understanding of the ways in which cultural and national considerations shaped his students' reflections on historical significance in the contrasting settings of Egypt and England.

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'Summer term syndrome'

'Yay! Nasser!' hollered the class as the portrait of the former Egyptian President flashed in front of them, sandwiched between similar photographs of Malenkov and Prokofiev. Instinctively tapping along with the song, a similar cheer of recognition arose when footage of the Suez Canal appeared alongside Khrushchev, Bill Haley and the Comets and Elvis Presley. As far as my class in Cairo were concerned, I was showing them a music video in order to pad out the last few weeks of the academic year. They were just a few weeks away from finishing Key Stage 3 and breaking up for the summer holidays. Just a few lessons later, however, the quality of these students' discussions on historical significance was enough to prove that this had not been a meaningless use of time as we waited for the year to end.

For as long as history remains compulsory only until the end of Key Stage 3, classroom teachers may find it difficult to maintain the interest of some students who have chosen not to study it for GCSE. The factors leading to uptake (or not) of history after Key Stage 3 have been rigorously explored in the work of Harris and Haydn.¹ However, while we all consider the findings and engage in the dialogue encouraged by the authors, we are still faced with the same old challenge – how do we keep a class engaged in lessons when 'summer term syndrome' sets in, while ensuring that we still teach good history?

Pop star as historian

Teachers often joke about the long-discredited practice of putting on music or a film purely to round off the last few lessons of the academic year. While many blockbuster films link directly with the history curriculum and could complement the year's work, it is now widely recognised that passively sitting and watching a film is of little value. In the lesson sequence outlined below, I set about using music and video as a springboard to stimulate learning, without the students even realising it.

The song 'We Didn't Start the Fire' by Billy Joel has probably been one of the most commonly heard pieces of music in history classrooms around the world since it was first released in 1989.² Joel managed to pack 40 years of modern world history into a five-minute pop song that became a top-ten hit on both sides of the Atlantic. He also, unwittingly, managed to create a song that seems to bookend the Cold War by choosing events from within the period 1949-89. Billy Joel's single was released on 10 November 1989, the day after the Berlin Wall was torn down.

Mastin, in his work on using music as sources, helped his pupils to explore how music is a product of the period in which it is written, a reflection of attitudes at the time.³ Since discussing the merits of the song as a teaching tool, way back in

my PGCE year, I have listened to, studied and even sung the song with my classes. But as I became more and more familiar with its content, it was clear that the biggest historical puzzle about this song is not what the events were, but rather *why* Billy Joel chose to include the events that he did. Bradshaw sees such a puzzle as 'creating controversy in the classroom'.⁴ Joel explains how, having turned 40, the song was a result of his asking himself the question, 'Okay, what's happened in my life?'⁵ He took the events that stood out for him and, working within the limits imposed on a commercial pop song, presented his interpretation of historically significant images, events and personalities within his lifetime.⁶ He thus unintentionally provided a vehicle through which to study historical significance.

Having fun with historical significance

The lesson sequence that I devised (see Figure 1) was therefore built upon my view that *We Didn't Start the Fire* provides a snapshot of Billy Joel's implicit values concerning historical significance. It ought to be possible to study the

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song in order to infer his implicit criteria for judging events to be historically significant.⁷ At the same time, however, I aimed to lead the students into thinking we were doing an essentially vague and unguided summer term activity, and to use their assumption of a 'fun' unit to sneak much deeper historical thinking into the mix.

I first created this sequence of lessons when I taught at a comprehensive school in Guildford and have continued to refine it over the past four years. Moving to teach in Egypt, I wanted to try the same sequence there to see how well it helped them to grapple with the concept of historical significance. Many of the students I teach in Cairo place enormous value on knowing content. An active and conceptually-driven approach to history is therefore challenging for them. Moreover, learning in a second language adds additional barriers to processing some of the more complex historical concepts. It is therefore important that my students feel in control of their learning, as they simultaneously learn to apply higher-order skills. With this in mind, the sequence is designed to secure a balance of knowledge-building and active, focused historical thinking. It also seeks a balance of breadth and depth.

But I began by just showing them a music video of the song. The video I created is available to download from my website at www.mrallsophistory.com, but there are many other versions on sites such as *YouTube*.

'We Didn't Start the Fire' identifies 118 events, people and inventions. The first thing that struck me when I showed the video to my classes this year was that they were already instinctively assessing the song as an historical source. They were asking the questions that I wanted them to answer

even though I had not presented it as anything other than a music video which I thought they would like to see. Brown and Woodcock suggested that their own use of local history as a focus for a study of significance ensured their classes' immediate engagement in the lesson due to the locality and proximity.⁸ This may explain the positive response of my class in Cairo as they cheered when Nasser and the Suez Canal, both icons of Egyptian pride, flashed before them. Indeed, the level of engagement from the class was – without any guidance from me – similar to that which I had elicited through other examples of 'Initial Stimulus Material' (ISM) throughout the year.⁹ Much as Butler found with his use of Billie Holiday's 'Strange Fruit', the classroom discussion generated by the music allowed the students to create the basis for the enquiry through the questions that they themselves wanted to answer about the song.¹⁰ What are these events? Why does the songwriter include them?

There has been an increasing focus on the teaching of historical significance in recent years, with a shared view that no particular mnemonic or definition can be seen as the 'right' one to ask students to apply to the past. Counsell, having

proposed the 5Rs, recognises the limitations of dictating criteria to students.¹¹ She and others share the view that we, as history teachers, should create opportunities which encourage our students to identify, test and refine their own criteria for judging historical significance. They should also move on to discern implicit significance criteria at work within *others'* interpretations or representations of the past. Bradshaw, for example, drawing on his own practice, created the 'Historical Significance Sandwich' as a progression framework for enabling students reaching this highest-order skill. Yet in beginning that process, he, like Counsell, suggests that students are likely to need to be *given* clear criteria – initially at least – in order to scaffold their thinking.¹²

It is here that the lesson sequence I developed required a different approach, in that it leapfrogged over that early stage. If I was to succeed in presenting our work as a fun 'end of term'-style activity, while also encouraging the development of higher-order thinking, it would be letting my guard down to provide criteria. The game would be up and they would immediately realise that I was trying to (... I can barely bring myself to say it ...) get them to *think* in the last few weeks of the year. Instead of presenting them with a neat package of criteria, I therefore wished to have the students look for and identify Billy Joel's criteria for historical significance rather than having the criteria presented to them. Recent thinkers on historical significance have all experimented with similar activities in their own classrooms. Brown and Woodcock asked students to identify implicit criteria for historical significance in E. H. Gombrich's *A Little History of the World*, whereas Bradshaw did so using OMD's 'Enola Gay'.¹³

The activity that students tackled immediately after showing the music video was designed to cement the assumption

that we were just having a bit of fun while waiting for the summer holidays. Students were invited to choose one of the 118 events in the song and then to conduct research using a range of departmental resources and the Internet in order to create a PowerPoint presentation answering those five key questions which all students of history have had drilled into their minds: what? who? when? where? and why? The 'why?' was very deliberately worded as: 'Why do you think Billy Joel might have included this in his song?' (see Figure 1 for the full scheme of work).

Rather than being an open-ended 'Death By PowerPoint', the research task was absolutely vital in providing a springboard to accessing the historical thinking that my lesson sequence

As the presentations went on and as the whiteboard became covered in a bank of explanations for Joel's choices, the students began to realise that in many cases their own explanation of 'why' was similar to somebody else's. What they found most fascinating was that this was still the case even when comparing two seemingly unrelated topics. One student may have studied an event, another a person, a third an invention. Yet they may all share similarities in the reasons why Joel may have included them in his song. Having amassed all the different suggestions as to why Joel included their topic, it was therefore possible to conduct a large 'sorting activity' where students located and joined with others who had come up with similar explanations. As the students themselves had created the explanations, they

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would require. It is only through gaining background knowledge of events – Bradshaw's 'bread and butter' of historical significance – that students can begin to progress in their understanding and consideration of historical significance.¹⁴

Creating criteria

By maintaining vagueness about the activity, my students reverted to their natural inclination towards amassing factual knowledge and consequently presented extensive and thorough overviews of their chosen topic. This was important as it was only with a secure knowledge that they could then properly explore the issue of 'why?'. Some perceptive students had already begun murmuring about the prevalence of baseball and other USA-centric events, which allowed us to begin discussing the impact of culture and locality on an individual's choice of what might be historically important. Before long, the students were, in effect, using their understanding of these events and people in the song to identify Joel's personal criteria for historical significance.

Having the students present their findings to the class was an important part of the process of identifying criteria. After each presentation I wrote each student's explanation of why Joel included their event in the song on the whiteboard. When doing the activity in previous years, I had noticed a tendency for students to focus on explanations that centred on modern-day effects but, as Counsell warns, this 'does not necessarily take pupils closer to thinking about historical significance.'¹⁵ From that experience, I learned that active teacher input during the research stage is vital. I had to encourage students to think about other reasons why Joel may have included the event in his song and thus to challenge their preconceptions.¹⁶ To say that Disneyland was chosen because it was still going after 30 years was not an adequate explanation! Consequently, through extended questioning with individual groups, it was possible to help the students to get beyond their own preconceptions of what constituted historical significance and to elicit more considered responses that recognised how some events have many different *qualities* that can make them appear historically significant.

had complete ownership over the process of grouping and categorising similar explanations. The activity ended with our sharing the titles that the students had come up with for their category. They had worked together to identify and classify Billy Joel's criteria for historical significance.

Reflecting on the categories identified by the students, it was interesting to look back at the work of Phillips and Counsell.¹⁷ Both put forward criteria for historical significance, neither meaning to be a catch-all, but the categories proposed by my class were interesting in their similarity to these earlier suggestions. The students had spotted similar explanations such as those that were 'the first', 'shocking', 'affected the whole world', 'front-page news' – along with various others – all of which could be associated in some way with elements of Phillips' 'GREAT' and Counsell's '5Rs'.

The historical significance of the present

It was all very well being able to identify criteria for historical significance in the lyrics of a 1980s pop song, but what was more important was for students to apply and test their findings by examining how well these criteria for judging historical significance fitted other situations. This could involve comparing one person's significance criteria to those of another. Brown and Woodcock do this by comparing the students' findings from Gombrich with other historians' work on the First World War.¹⁸ Perhaps one could take 'We Didn't Start the Fire' and compare it to Bradshaw's work on OMD's 'Enola Gay' in order to see if two 1980s top-ten hits used the same criteria for ascribing historical significance. In my case, however, I wanted the students to apply their criteria to things they knew well: events from their own lifetimes.

It could be argued that encouraging students to ascribe historical significance to modern or current events undermines the very act of assessing *historical* significance due to our proximity and partiality to the events in question. Almost every week the media champions 'the greatest film since this', or 'the most groundbreaking political decision since that', and

Figure 1: Overall structure of the lesson sequence

Lesson	Activities
1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Show a music video of Billy Joel's 'We Didn't Start the Fire' that includes images for each of the events mentioned in the song (suggested video available at www.mrallsophistory.com) 2) Students choose one of the events in the song and research a presentation answering 5 key questions: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. What was the event? What happened? b. Who was involved? c. When did it take place? d. Where did it happen? e. Why do you think Billy Joel included this in his song?
2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Students present their research. Teacher writes their responses to 'Why did Billy Joel include this?' on the board. 2) Whole-class sorting activity wherein students form groups with people who suggested similar possible reasons for inclusion in the song. Students to agree a broad title or name for their group, which then becomes a significance criterion.
3	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Class discussion to think of events, people, inventions, etc. in the years since 'We Didn't Start the Fire' was released in 1989. Students then work in smaller groups to brainstorm as many ideas as possible. 2) Using the significance criteria produced in the previous lesson, students discuss the events that they have brainstormed and cross out ones that do not fit. 3) Introduce the syllable and beat grid to show how Billy Joel wrote his lyrics. Students then take blank grids and write their own verses using the events they came up with that fit the criteria.
4	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Use Audacity (http://audacity.sourceforge.net/) to record the students singing their lyrics over a karaoke version of the original song. 2) Save the Audacity file as an MP3 to give to the students. They then import the audio into Windows Movie Maker and find images from Google Image Search to match their lyrics. 3) Reflect on how choice of images requires further consideration of the criteria informing historical significance judgements.

so our students are comfortable with the idea that things in their lifetime are often judged as holding some significance within a wider time-scale. However, at what point do recent events become *historical* events whose wider *historical* significance we can judge? I would argue that just because we do not yet have the distance and hindsight to fully reflect on events such as 9/11, the invention of the iPod or the election of Barack Obama, we are still able to use contemporary knowledge of these issues – and knowledge of how history works – to put forward arguments pertaining to their *likely* historical significance. Moreover, part of the excitement and fascination with discussing historical significance is the way in which students gradually learn that historical significance is not fixed or permanently intrinsic to an event. Judgements about significance will shift across people, place and time. In order to grasp this temporal, spatial and personal contingency

of historical significance, I would argue that we should encourage our students to engage not only with the past, but also to reflect on the importance of local, national and international trends in the present, speculating as to their possible, changing significance to future beholders.

Updating Billy Joel

Having already researched events from *We Didn't Start the Fire* and having produced significance criteria, the third lesson in the sequence began with a lengthy whole-class brainstorming of events since 1989. The activity needed a good purpose, however, and so I set the scene that Billy Joel's song is like a time capsule of the world up to November 1989 but that it needed updating. What events might Billy Joel choose to include if he were to bring it right up to the

present day? Tackling the activity in 2009 created added fun as we were able couch the following activity as creating a twentieth-anniversary version of the song.

My different classes thought about the events that they would include in different ways but they all benefited from a reminder, by re-watching the video, of the types of things Billy Joel mentioned in his song. Many initial student suggestions focused on technology: MP3s, DVDs and games consoles often dominated early discussions. However, by reminding students of the range and type of Billy Joel's choices it was surprisingly easy to draw out suggestions that included such things as the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and central London, the spread of bird and swine flu, the death of Princess Diana, the fall of the USSR, the Good Friday Agreement and the end of apartheid in

had a class discussion over the significance of each suggestion. We were going (I reminded the students) to update Joel's song and so we needed to include *only* those events that fitted the criteria which they had identified in the original song. The students were therefore applying the implicit criteria that they had identified in his choice of events in order to judge the relative historical significance – *from Joel's likely point of view* – of the suggestions that they had come up with. Within this, fascinating discussions began to bounce around the classroom. For example, the students argued that some events would be deemed significant because they perfectly exemplified a single category. Others they judged worthy of inclusion because they demonstrated a strong combination of elements of a range of criteria, even though the 'weight' of each individual element may have initially seemed negligible. In this way, students were able to show how much they

It is important to remember that the creation of the music video in this sequence is not the 'point' of the lesson sequence.

South Africa. These were interspersed with other suggestions such as Harry Potter, Britney Spears, the Titanic movie, the opening of the City Stars mall in Cairo, the grounding of Concorde and the Internet.

Clearly there was a problem with some of the suggestions put forward by the students. Some suggestions did not strictly fit within the post-1989 time period. I found that this problem could be overcome by teaching this lesson with reference resources available for students to check the dates, thereby enabling them to be self-critical rather than relying on me to judge what was or was not permissible. A trickier problem was that even where dates of their events were appropriate, their suggestions just did not seem significant by *any* criteria, let alone likely to be judged *historically* significant in future. I learned, however, to use this as a teaching opportunity. Irrespective of my own judgement of the students' suggestions it was important for them to go through the process of jointly suggesting notable things from the past 20 years and then frantically coming up with more and more of them. Suggesting something that we may initially judge to be trivial could trigger somebody else to make a connection with a different avenue, to explore it further and so to bring out some much more worthwhile and appropriate ideas. Therefore quality of the suggestions did not matter at this stage; I wanted a big tangle of suggestions, a messy scrawl on pieces of paper. The students loved it, and turned it into a competition to outnumber the other groups. As far as they were concerned, they were having fun helping Billy Joel but, unbeknown to them, they were also preparing the ground for some much deeper historical judgement.

Only when the students were sitting with dozens upon dozens of suggestions could we really start to push our way to the higher levels of thinking. We referred back to the criteria for historical significance that they had produced in the previous lesson and began to work through the event suggestions that the class had made. Without a mountain of material, the aggressive sorting and crossing out that followed would not have worked. Beginning with a few examples on the board, we

understood about how the notion of historical significance actually worked.¹⁹

The process of refining the events took a surprisingly large amount of time, as the students tussled with the application of the significance criteria to their knowledge of each one. I was pleased, however, that every group in the class – irrespective of ability – had been able to debate and apply criteria to their lists and to end with a powerful and plausible selection of events. Interesting opportunities for challenging some of the very able students also emerged. Some of the identified criteria were judged 'more important' than others, and through this I was able to engage with the more able students in the class concerning whether making such a judgement was appropriate or helpful to this particular exercise.

History, music or both?

For the end of the summer term, I had a couple more fun exercises for them. The students went on to use their lists of historically significant events in order to write lyrics for a verse using Joel's rhythm and rhyming pattern. I was surprised by how much some students struggled with the division of syllables and beats, and I therefore devised a simple grid with which to help them structure their verses so that they would fit the original song pattern (see Figure 2). The original lyrics follow a particular song structure and so, by having a visual reference that demonstrated how the lyrics were made to fit the verse, the students found it easier to make their own versions tie seamlessly with the original. Without this grid for guidance, students had a tendency to write lines that were too long or too short, or else to create rhymes that did not fit the strict structure of the verses and so were not a true updating of the original song.

As well as highlighting the cross-curricular possibilities of this exercise – particularly in terms of the relationship with English and music – writing lyrics to fit a predefined structure raised some new challenges for students. Many students could not find another event on their list of

Figure 2: Example of 'syllable and beat grid' for the first verse of Billy Joel's original song.

Each line represents a musical bar (four beats). Each line is made up of 8 boxes, each of which represents a half beat as used by Billy Joel. Empty boxes represent either a rest or a place where Billy Joel has made one syllable stretch over multiple beats.

Ha	rry	Tru	man	Do	ris	Day	
Red		Chi	na	Jo	hunny	Ray	
South	Pa	ci	fic	Wal	ter	Win	chell
Joe	Di	Ma	ggi	o			
Joe	Mc	Car	thy	Ri	chard	Nix	on
Stu	de	ba	ker	tel	e	vis	ion
North	Ko	re	a	South	Ko	re	a
Ma	ri	lyn	Mon		roe		

historically significant events to rhyme with one they wanted to include. They were therefore forced to think about other ways in which to describe their events in order to achieve a rhyme, much the same as Joel does on occasion, or had to go back to the drawing board and reconsider events they had originally cast aside and return to their discussions of historical significance.

Having finalised writing their verses, we used the free audio software Audacity to record the students singing their verses over a karaoke backing track of the song. The finished audio tracks were then imported into Windows Movie Maker and the students created music videos by using images found on the Internet to accompany their lyrics. Burnham provides a strong warning from her own experiences of using Windows Movie Maker that, 'we must ensure that the novelty of making a film does not distract from the history.'²⁰ It is important to remember that the creation of the music video in this sequence is not the 'point' of the lesson sequence. Similarly getting students to think about historical significance should not be seen as *delaying* the students in getting on to the computers and creating their masterpieces. It is vital that the initial work is completed in as much detail as possible; otherwise, the sequence risks becoming the type of time-filling exercise I purposely set out to avoid.

In order to sustain the emphasis on thinking about historical significance, the video creation exercise can draw out further discussions on historical significance such as the choices over which image, displayed on screen for less than a second, would best portray the significance of a person, invention or event to the viewer. What was it about Britney Spears that made one group decide she was worthy of inclusion? Should they choose a snapshot from her *Baby One More Time* music video, or a tabloid newspaper photograph of her emerging from a salon

with a freshly shaved head? The students needed to consider the criteria on which they had judged her inclusion necessary, and then to find the picture that best represented this.

The geography of history

This was the fourth year in which I had based the end-of-year's work on 'We Didn't Start the Fire'. It has been a fascinating window on both my and my students' perceptions of historical significance. Having previously taught in a comprehensive school in Guildford, I found it particularly interesting to identify some striking similarities and differences between the outcomes of my students in the UK and those in Egypt. Although the exercise was about second-guessing *Joel's* likely choices, using *his* implicit criteria that they had uncovered, the students were nonetheless inevitably tackling this through their own lenses and so the events they suggested must be said to reveal something of their own assumptions also. Some events – the attacks on the World Trade Center, or the collapse of the USSR – share international significance, and so it was not surprising that students in both countries included them. Others, however, were clearly affected by local or cultural factors. Whereas almost all my students in the UK included England's past triumphs in the Ashes or the Rugby World Cup, my students in Cairo included Egypt's winning of the African Cup of Nations in 2008.

More surprisingly, however, my students in Cairo were quick to mention the death of Princess Diana, something I had naively assumed would be very specific to the UK. The inclusion – or not – of recording artists was also revealing, as almost every group in Cairo included the Egyptian megastar Tamer Hosny whereas I doubt that any of my students in Guildford would have had a clue who he was. Such similarities and differences highlight the interplay between

Figure 3: Selected lyrics produced by students at different schools

Kings College
(11-18 comprehensive)
Guildford
June 2006

*Global warming, Sky Plus
Foot and mouth, World
Cup
Palestine, Israel
Michael Jackson out on
bail*

*Gulf War, PS1
Tony Blair, Pokemon
AIDS and HIV
Killed Freddie Mercury*

*New Labour, Gordon
Brown
Tories step down
England win the ashes
Diana crashes*

*Queen Mother passed
away
Queen's major birthday
X-Box 360
DVD and MP3*

Modern English School
(3-18 independent international),
Cairo
June 2009

*Global warming, bird flu
Oil crisis, swine flu
Soviet Union falling,
Bush and global warming.*

*New high definition
Obama's recognition
Germany hosts World Cup
Concorde says, 'We will
stop.'*

*Michael Phelps, GM foods
Communism ending
DVD and MP3
Scientific cloning.*

*Angus Young Back in Black
US war against Iraq
Ahly keeper runs away,
Bomb blast in Na'ama Bay*

studying how interpretations of history are constructed and discerning or applying criteria for significance. They reveal how judgements of historical significance are built within a cultural and national framework just as Joel's original song contains geographical and cultural bias. Brown and Woodcock began their recent article by recognising that local history is a powerful vehicle for studying historical significance.²¹ It would be fair to say that historical significance is also a powerful vehicle for approaching local history.

Four years on from the first set of videos produced by my class it is fascinating to see which events still make the final cut and which ones do not even feature on the initial brainstorm. It is clear that hindsight, distance and culture influence individual and societal interpretations of events, something which Llewellyn and Snelson recently helped their students to realise in their fascinating work on memory and forgetting.²² Through teaching this lesson sequence, it has become clear to me that one cohort's vitally important event soon becomes another's forgotten news.

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