

# Rock 'n' Roll High School: A Genre Comes of Age in the Curriculum

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## Purpose

The purpose of this informal case study was to observe and document a rock ensemble course at a public high school, as an example of an alternative approach to instrumental music education in K-12 schools.

## Rock Music in Society and Education

Rock music has historically been challenged "in achieving widespread acceptance in American music education" (Hebert & Campbell, 2000, p. 14). This may be attributed to several factors, including the fact that rock music is considered aesthetically inferior to other genres of music, that it encourages rebelliousness and could be unhealthy for adolescents, and that teachers do not have adequate experience or training in rock music to design effective curricula for teaching it in an authentic manner.

Some suggest that music education should employ a much more democratic learning process, such as that used by semi-professional original rock bands (Ferguson, 2002). They argue that the learning process should be more of a collaboration between musicians (teachers and students) with common goals, wherein most, if not all, members of the ensemble participate in the decision making (Allsup, 2007; Green, 2008).

As with many genres learned through oral traditions, many rock musicians do not know how to read Western classical music notation nor understand theory terminology (Lilliestam, 1996). Performing rock music has also generally been a male-dominated activity throughout its history (Clawson, 1999).

Nonetheless, K-12 students studying rock music in the schools is not a new phenomenon. It has been used as a medium to teach other subjects besides music, such as literature, history, and social studies. Support for teaching rock music began to emerge in the late 1960s, partially inspired by the culminating reports from the Tanglewood Symposium (Mark & Gary, 2007), and has continued over the years (Woody, 2009).

Although still not common, there have been examples of successful programs that include rock band classes in the regular school curriculum (Newsome, 1999).

## Rock Ensemble

This is a credit-bearing course in the State College (PA) Area High School curriculum that meets during the regular school day. It is taught by James Robinson, who also teaches orchestra and guitar classes at the school. It is not an extra-curricular program nor an extension of any of the existing music classes. Previous experience is not necessary to participate, although an audition and/or interview with the instructor is required before students can sign up. In many specialty music ensembles, the majority of the students are also members of one of the traditional ensembles. This is not the case with Rock Ensemble, however, so the class is generally serving a different sample of the overall school population.

There was one section of Rock Ensemble the first year the course was offered (2007-2008). Since then there have been 3-4 sections serving between 50-60 students each year. Each section includes an average of 15 students, although they are not organized by ability level, which Robinson hopes to eventually establish. Students who have a flex period during one of the other sections are invited to attend but are not promised the opportunity to play.

## Themes

### Rationale & Creation

There were many obstacles to overcome in order to make Rock Ensemble a reality. It took much time and effort for Robinson to lay the groundwork for the creation of the course. He had to demonstrate that there existed enough student interest in the course to make it viable and sustainable. His work with the annual State High Battle of the Bands greatly contributed to his being able to demonstrate this interest. A majority of the students who participated in this event actually did not participate in the traditional music ensemble classes. Nonetheless, all of these students had a strong interest in performing, and many had already well-developed musical abilities.

### Instruction & Procedures

Rock Ensemble began the same way each time I visited. The students gradually entered the room, and most sat in chairs at one of six tables in the center of the classroom. Robinson sits in a chair at the head of a table on the end. He begins with announcements. He has a clipboard. Half of the lights in the room are off. He takes attendance. He speaks in a well-projected but calm voice as he announces details about upcoming events on the calendar or reviews the work they did in previous classes.

After the opening procedure, Robinson outlines which tunes will be practiced that day, and announces who is playing which instruments for the first song. Students move to their various assignments. Some move to the stage and prepare their instruments or test their microphones. Some students sit down at the recording equipment and begin to check volume levels, and others go to the video equipment and check the camera and computer equipment. Rehearsal of the songs proceeds for the remainder of the class time, with students switching positions between songs. Most students are active in an assigned position at any one time during the class, and all will participate at some point eventually.

### Equipment & Location

Although the administration was supportive of the new course, they offered virtually no budget to help with related expenses. One reality of rock groups is that the electronic equipment necessary to even participate can be expensive. Robinson expended a lot of time and energy at the early stages securing enough equipment to get the class up and running. Some of the equipment being used to this day, in fact, is his personal gear. Generous parents or community members donated several pieces, and others were acquired for very little cost through instrument exchange programs or from online auction services.

The class meets in the choir classroom, which has a stage area where the equipment resides. The environment is very functional, with enough good-quality equipment to accommodate two guitarists, one bassist, one drum set player, one electric keyboard player, and multiple vocalists. It also includes a sound system and equipment for audio and video recording.

### Expectations

Although the class utilizes a different learning style than a traditional music ensemble, Robinson insists that his expectations are not lower for achievement in Rock Ensemble than in his orchestras. He has never removed a student, but he has strongly encouraged several students to drop the course when it became apparent that they were not interested in actively participating in the class.

Everything Robinson does in his class procedures is deliberate. He discovered that if he made the students sit and listen quietly for a short period of time at the beginning of class it helped them to be more focused when they got up onto the stage and had the instruments in their hands. Although music teachers might assume that it is better to start a class with action or music making rather than with verbal explanation, Robinson said it was usually a disaster when he had the students set up immediately because he had trouble getting them to stop noodling as he was giving instructions or leading the rehearsal.

He reported that when the classes first started he used a more directive and heavy-handed approach to classroom management, more like what he would use in his orchestra classes. He discovered, however, that he had to be more flexible when working with the students in this setting, many of whom have not been as successful in academic classes.

## Discussion & Implications

Rock music has had a long history, and the genre encompasses a variety of sub-genres of musical style. It has transformed over time and has interacted with, and been influenced by, other contemporary styles along the way. How popular rock music will remain, how it will evolve as a style, and how prevalent it will become in K-12 school curricula cannot be predicted (Fornas, 1995). Past experience has shown us, however, that it will most likely continue to influence our society and our music education programs. In this case study, it has been exciting to witness a teacher reaching out to students, most of whom had never participated in school music classes, and providing the opportunity to be musical in a setting that was previously unavailable to them. It demonstrates that a curricular rock band course can be successfully implemented while complimenting, and not undermining, existing traditional music ensemble classes.



### Rock Camps for Students

Blue Bear School of Music

[www.bluebearmusic.org/index.php](http://www.bluebearmusic.org/index.php)

Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls

[www.girlsrockcamp.org/main/](http://www.girlsrockcamp.org/main/)

Paul Green School of Rock Music

[www.schoolofrock.com/index.php](http://www.schoolofrock.com/index.php)

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## Abstract

Rock music has historically been challenged “in achieving widespread acceptance in American music education” (Hebert & Campbell, 2000, 14), which may be attributed to several factors. These include the fact that rock music is sometimes considered aesthetically inferior to other genres of music, that it encourages rebelliousness and could be unhealthy for adolescents, and that teachers do not have adequate experience or training in rock music to design effective curricula for teaching it in an authentic manner. Nonetheless, there has recently been a proliferation of using rock music in traditional and other ensembles in schools, and some have argued that the ‘garage band’ format can provide more collaborative and meaningful experiences for students (Allsup 2007; Green 2008). The purpose of this informal case study was to observe and document a rock ensemble course at a public high school, as an example of an alternative approach to instrumental music education in K-12 schools

Rock Ensemble a credit-bearing course in the State College (PA) Area High School curriculum that meets during the regular school day. It is taught by James Robinson, who also teaches orchestra and guitar classes at the school. It is not an extra-curricular program or an extension of any of the existing music classes. Previous experience is not necessary to participate, although an audition and/or interview with the instructor is required before students can sign up. In many specialty music ensembles, the majority of the students are also members of one of the traditional ensembles. This is not the case with Rock Ensemble, however, so the class is generally serving a different sample of the overall school population. There was one section of Rock Ensemble the first year the course was offered (2007–2008). Since then there have been 3-4 sections serving between 50-60 students each year.

There were several themes and implications discovered through the observations and interviews with the teacher. *Rationale & Creation*: It took much time and effort for Robinson to lay the groundwork for the creation of the course. He had to demonstrate that

there existed enough student interest in the course to make it viable and sustainable, and he had to work out how the course could be scheduled without negatively impacting other aspects of the music program. *Equipment & Location:* Robinson expended a lot of time and energy at the early stages securing enough equipment to get the class up and running. Some of the equipment being used to this day, in fact, is his personal gear. Generous parents or community members donated several pieces, and others were acquired for very little cost through instrument exchange programs or from online auction services. The room is very functional, with enough good-quality equipment to accommodate two guitarists, one bassist, one drum set player, one electric keyboard player, and multiple vocalists. It also includes a sound system and equipment for audio and video recording.

*Instruction and Procedures:* After the opening procedure, Robinson outlines which tunes will be practiced that day, and announces who is playing which instruments for the first song. Rehearsal of the songs proceeds for the remainder of the class time, with students switching positions between songs. Most students are active in an assigned position at any one time during the class, and all will participate at some point eventually.

*Expectations:* Although the class utilizes a different learning style than a traditional music ensemble, Robinson insists that his expectations are not lower for achievement in Rock Ensemble than in his orchestras. Everything Robinson does in his class procedures is deliberate. He discovered that if he made the students sit and listen quietly for a short period of time at the beginning of class it helped them to be more focused when they got up onto the stage and had the instruments in their hands.

Rock music has greatly influenced our society, and it will likely continue to influence our music education programs. In this case study, it has been exciting to witness a teacher reaching out to students, most of whom had never participated in school music classes, and providing the opportunity to be musical in a setting that was previously unavailable to them. It demonstrates that a curricular rock band course can be successfully implemented while complimenting, and not undermining, existing traditional music ensemble classes.

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