

DISCOVER BLUEGRASS: Exploring American Roots Music

Unit 6: Bluegrass Instruments - Build a Bluegrass Band

As the film describes, a bluegrass band is composed of a combination of five or sometimes six instruments. In this lesson, learners will form a hypothetical bluegrass group and use web or catalogue resources to “buy” the instruments to equip their band.

Typical standards addressed:

Basic mathematical calculation
Planning
Economics
Collaborative learning
Information skills

Things you will need:

Access to the Internet (the teacher may wish to bookmark the list of sites to limit exploration)
Catalogues of acoustic instruments

Procedure:

To the learners: Here is the scenario. Our local community arts council has become enthusiastic about the rising popularity of bluegrass music and wishes to encourage the development of local bands. To do this, they have established the Bluegrass Instrument Fund from which they will award grants of \$10,000 to deserving bands who submit proposals. Your assignment is to submit a Bluegrass Instrument Fund proposal. So, working in groups of five (about the size of a typical band), establish a bluegrass band.

1. Use your imagination and what you know about bluegrass from the film to come up with:

- A name for your band
- The stage names or nicknames that band members will use when they perform
- A brief history of your band
- The names of your greatest hit songs
- Anything else you think will persuade the judges to give you the \$10,000.

2. Next, using one or more of the following web sites or catalogues, carefully research the features and costs of the various bluegrass instruments. Choose the specific brands and models you wish to purchase. Give some explanation of why you chose the ones you do, and stay within budget. Put all of this together in the form of a proposal that outlines the two sections above. Make it look official and businesslike—something that an arts council would take seriously.

To start, you might want to check out:

www.janetdavismusic.com

www.fqms.com

www.elderly.com

Note: All sites are safe and learner appropriate. Report your findings to the class and turn into your proposal to your teacher, who will see that it gets to the arts council. Good luck!

Additional Lesson Ideas:

What were the prices of some instruments? What is the most expensive fiddle, guitar, banjo, mandolin, bass or resonator guitar you saw? What do you think makes an instrument so expensive? Which instrument was most difficult to find? What features did you see that particularly appealed to you? Could you imagine playing one of these instruments?

Go back and look at the DVD again, this time concentrating on their instruments. What brands do the musicians play? How much do you think one of the bands paid for their instruments, combined?

Discuss what roles behind the scenes are needed in a bluegrass band, in addition to playing the instruments and singing. You may come up with a list like this on the blackboard: band manager, booking agent, publicist, record label president, website manager, social networking manager, videographer, fan club president or street team manager, accountant, songwriter, publishing company owner, instrument repair person/builder, road manager, recording engineer, recording producer and stage costume designer. What does each of these people do? Who will cover each job in the band you've created?

As a writing assignment, come up with a promotional press package for your band. Create the following elements:

- A folder with the name and logo of your band drawn on the outside
- A one-sheet bio on your group that tells a little about each band member and what instrument they play
- A group photo (or drawing) of your band
- A collection of quotes from the press—what writers in well-known magazines, newspapers or blogs are saying and writing about your music
- A CD cover, website or poster design.

A local bluegrass band or national band touring through your area could visit your class and talk about the instruments they have chosen to play, how old they were when they starting playing them, and how they decided what instrument was right for them. They could also demonstrate the different roles in a bluegrass band that each instrument plays.

Lesson Plans written by Tom Kopp, Ph.D., Miami University, for the Foundation for Bluegrass Music. For more info: www.bluegrassfoundation.org