

STUDY GUIDE: Dr. Scot Brown

This study guide is to support virtual and in-person classes for students and teachers inspired by the movie *Respect* about the life of Aretha Franklin.

Overview

Dr. Scot Brown is a Professor of African-American Studies at UCLA who also teaches courses on music and history. Music scholars like Dr. Brown play a very important role in the music industry. They spend years conducting in-depth research into important topics that many people may not even have considered. Then they share their knowledge with the world and help us gain a greater understanding of those topics and how they relate to other topics and ideas.

Dr. Brown shares his expertise through a wide array of avenues, including writing articles and books, giving lectures, and providing commentary for television, radio, and social media programs and in documentaries. Dr. Brown is also a musician who plays bass and keyboards and programs drums under the name “Scotronixx.” His active musicianship equips him to “push back against music as a literary text” and to value its social dimensions just as highly as its narrative dimensions. His scholarship reflects the view that music is “a kind of social currency” [2 min. clip starts at 1:16:47] that “interlocks family, neighborhoods and community.”

In his master class, Dr. Scot Brown gives a rich “bottom up” description of funk that demonstrates how the formation of this genre was the result of everyday people bringing together their musical skills within the cultural context of shared community values and within the larger context of social and economic realities.

Learning Objectives

Students will learn how music scholars develop and share their expertise.

Essential Questions for Reflection Critical Thinking

- What is funk?
- What tools, resources and experiences contributed to Dr. Brown’s expertise in funk music?
- How successful is Dr. Brown at giving a “bottom up” description of funk? Explain.

Suggested Student Activities

Imagine that you, like Dr. Scot Brown, have been called upon to share your expertise on funk. What kind of preparation is necessary? The following activities will help you prepare and shed light on relevant Africentric cultural values.

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Lesson 1: Create a Glossary of Funk

Activity 1. Prior to watching the master class, explain to students that Dr. Brown may use terminology that is familiar to some and unfamiliar to others. Some terms may be new to all. Students should listen for terms, concepts and artists that are key to both understanding funk and explaining it to others. They should write down at least five of these key terms as they hear them, along with a brief definition or description. You may change the number of key terms required based on your students.

Activity 2. In small groups, have students discuss their key terms and definitions/descriptions. Students may conduct research online to build out their understanding of the terms. Then students will combine their individual lists into a single alphabetized glossary with robust paragraph-long definitions that reflect what they learned in their discussion and research. Students should include hyper-linked musical examples and/or images in their glossary.

Activity 3. Have each small group develop a narrative multimedia presentation of their group-glossary that targets fifth-graders. Assist them in identifying and presenting to an actual fifth-grade class. Compile the group-created glossaries into a single poster-sized Glossary and mount in the classroom. Assist the students in securing other community venues for their presentation. As a fundraiser, create smaller versions of the Glossary on cardstock that students can sell at community presentations.

Lesson 2: The Big Payback – Simplexity

Activity 1. Define the Africentric value of *Musicality and Rhythm*. Definition: Musicality & rhythm demonstrate the connectedness of movement, music, dance, percussiveness, and rhythm, personified through the musical beat. In Black culture, music and rhythm suffuse every form of communication. Understanding the complex and multi-layered nature of communication is an important basis for competence in Black musical culture.

Have students complete a KWL exercise about how this Africentric value operates in relation to funk music by asking students these questions and writing the answers in three columns: What do students know (K)? What do they want to know (W)? Then, after Activity 3 is completed: What did they learn (L)?

Activity 2. Play [The Big Payback](#) by James Brown. Dr. Scot Brown states:

“So if you think about the song The Big Payback, that comes a little later, but it's a great song for studying funk because you can hear the different parts. Very simple, but when you put them together, you can't help but dance or feel something because of the interconnection between these different patterns. The song that's given a lot of credit for being a real intervention in funk is Cold Sweat by James Brown, where you hear, you know, the horns respond to other instruments, and they keep repeating this groove. When I say groove, I mean a repeated rhythm [where] repetition is not a problem, [but rather] the repetition is part of what makes that groove irresistible. James Mtume (Jazz saxophonist Jimmy Heath's son) calls that simplexity. That's a lot of what's going on with funk, and there are variations on it and there's some very complex things, but at its root, that was what James Brown brought.”

As students listen, have them identify the individual rhythmic patterns that comprise the groove. After

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first hearing, they should be able to identify the number and type of instruments and/or voices that comprise the groove and that each contribute distinct rhythmic patterns. Give individual students the opportunity to contribute at least one of their ideas about the components of the groove until all of the components have been identified.

Activity 3. Play [The Big Payback](#) by James Brown. Have students listen to the song a second time. This time, ask them to notate the rhythm of one or more components of the groove. They can do this with standard notation or with [TUBS charts](#). Be sure to agree on meter first. You may change the number of rhythms assigned to be notated based on students' skill level. Allow individual students to perform the parts of the groove they transcribed. Depending on their skill, some students may perform multiple rhythms concurrently using body percussion or found sounds.

Activity 4.

After completing the "What did you learn?" section of KWL (see Activity 1), discuss simplicity, which is [defined](#) as the complementary relationship between complexity and simplicity, as it relates to funk grooves generally and in *The Big Payback* in particular. Ask students to share how the groove made them feel, how helpful they felt Dr. Brown's explanation was and how it was "bottom up" or not, and how students might improve upon Dr. Brown's explanation.

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