

<b>Title of Unit</b>	Songwriting in the Music Theory 1 Class	<b>Grade Level</b>	9-12
<b>Curriculum Area</b>	Music Theory 1	<b>Time Frame</b>	9 weeks
<b>Developed By</b>	Ryan Ellis		

**PROJECT BASED SONGWRITING IN THE MUSIC THEORY 1 CLASS:  
A UNIT INSPIRED BY THE JOHNNY MERCER FOUNDATION**

This unit represents a condensed plan for project-based learning in music theory. It is the end result of two years of development in which the course is completely centered on songwriting. The theory curriculum is covered with the purpose of writing, recording, copyrighting and promoting original songs. Some of the discussion and analysis topics within this curriculum call for one week, but in reality were drawn out across an entire year. I recommend teaching this curriculum on a more open timeframe that really covers each topic in depth, and allows students time to reflect and build their projects carefully. The only important deadline to set is the requirement of the final projects. I would be happy to share sample projects and insight. Please contact me at [ryandellis@me.com](mailto:ryandellis@me.com) or [www.duetology.com](http://www.duetology.com)

Ryan Ellis received his Bachelor of Music degree from the University of Miami in 2000. Subsequently, he spent five years as the Director of Bands at Miami Southridge Senior High School before accepting the position of Choral Music Director at John A. Ferguson High School. His choir, The Falcon Singers, has performed throughout the United States with concerts in Kennedy Center, Washington D.C., Chicago, Atlanta, Orlando, and New York including three concerts at Carnegie Hall in 2009, 2011, and 2014 in which the group performed the world premiere of “Nou Se Limye,” by Haitian composer Sydney Guillaume. As a professional jazz pianist, Mr. Ellis has worked extensively in the Caribbean, Florida and Hawaii performing with a who's who of jazz including Kevin Mahogany, Eddie Jones, Paul Brown, Leon Foster Thomas, Bobby Ramirez, Ira Sullivan and Bobby Dukoff. Mr. Ellis served as Johnny Mercer Foundation Fellow at Florida International University where he received his Master’s Degree in 2016.

FIU Faculty Advisor: Dr. Manuel Prestamo, Ph.D.

Identify Desired Results (Stage 1)		
Enduring Understandings	Essential Questions	
Overarching Understanding	Overarching	Topical
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening is an active endeavor.</li> <li>• People communicate about their culture through music.</li> <li>• A culture’s music reflects its values.</li> <li>• Music has its own vocabulary, and that vocabulary enables one to communicate.</li> <li>• Knowledge of music provides more opportunity to connect with meanings.</li> <li>• Music promotes heightened understanding of society and culture.</li> <li>• Intended or unintended, all music has a message.</li> <li>• The meaning or message can be interpreted in different ways by listeners.</li> <li>• Music can be communicated by ear and through writing.</li> <li>• Melody and harmony work together to create music.</li> <li>• Writing music is an individual or collaborative activity and often performers are not the writers.</li> <li>• Song writing involves melody, harmony and lyrics.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent does music influence social change?</li> <li>• To what extent does society influence musicians and vis versa?</li> <li>• Do musicians break down social norms?</li> <li>• How is music written?</li> <li>• What sets of notes (keys) are commonly used in most music?</li> <li>• What will be the message in my music?</li> <li>• How do composers use melody to help convey message?</li> <li>• How do I craft lyrics to an existing melody?</li> <li>• How can I make a song of my own?</li> <li>• How essential is written music to the process of composition?</li> <li>• To what extent does society impact the composition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do we compare and contrast music?</li> <li>• What characteristics categorize music into a particular genre?</li> <li>• What are the notes of the treble and bass clef?</li> <li>• What is major and minor</li> <li>• How do I write down melodies that I hear?</li> <li>• How do I identify chords that I hear?</li> <li>• What are some ways to approach writing lyrics</li> <li>• How do I create an entertaining performance of my own composition?</li> <li>• How do I play my composition in more than one key?</li> <li>• How do I upload a video to YouTube?</li> <li>• What are the parts of a pop song?</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With some training, anyone can write music.</li> <li>• Compositions are a form of self expression.</li> <li>• The combination of tone, texture, design, timbre, rhythm and theme of compositions can be determined by the traditional parameters of a given style or can be limited only by the imagination of the composer</li> </ul>	<p>process?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Should prewritten compositions be arranged?</li> <li>• How deliberate is the process of recording original music?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do I manipulate diatonic chords to express myself?</li> <li>• How do music and lyrics relate?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Knowledge – (6 facets)</b> Students will know</p>	<p><b>Skills</b> Students will be able to...</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What song is my favorite? Why? (Self-Knowledge)</li> <li>• Critique various styles of music and the opinions of peers. (Perspective)</li> <li>• Provide personal dimension to the music of others (Interpret)</li> <li>• How to actively listen to the opinions of others and see the value in their musical taste (Empathy)</li> <li>• How to express themselves through lyrics. (Self Knowledge)</li> <li>• Appropriate ways to criticize to compositions (Empathy)</li> <li>• The social implications of their work, if any...(Perspective)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify notes in treble and bass clef.</li> <li>• Explain the construction of the major scale.</li> <li>• Interpret played melody into written notation.</li> <li>• Identify and explain harmonic progressions.</li> <li>• Write lyrics to a given syllabic structure.</li> <li>• Perform their piece.</li> <li>• Identify and explain melodic contour as it relates to lyrics.</li> <li>• Apply their knowledge of melody and harmony by creating new music. Perform composition in any key.</li> </ul>	

<b>Assessment Evidence (Stage 2)</b>	
<b>Performance Task Description</b>	
<b>Unit Goals</b>	Identify notes of bass and treble in 15 seconds. Identify Major and Minor key signatures in 15 seconds. Write a review of recorded music for a hypothetical magazine. Write a song
<b>Teacher Role</b>	Facilitator
<b>Audience</b>	Hypothetical music industry and the general public, YouTube.*
<b>Product/Performance</b>	Recorded CD, Artwork, Promo sheet, Music Video
<b>Standards</b>	<p>MU.912.H.2 The arts reflect and document cultural trends and historical events, and help explain how new directions in the arts have emerged.</p> <p>MU.912.C.2.2 Evaluate performance quality in recorded and/or live performances. Evaluate one's own or other's compositions and/or improvisations and generate improvements independently.</p> <p>MU.912.O.1.1 Evaluate the organizational principles and conventions in musical works and discuss their effect on structure.</p> <p>U.912.C.1: Cognition and reflection are required to appreciate, interpret, and create with artistic intent.</p> <p>MU.912.F.1: Creating, interpreting, and responding in the arts stimulate the imagination and encourage innovation and creative risk-taking</p>

MU.912.C.2:

Assessing our own and others' artistic work, using critical-thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills, is central to artistic growth.

MU.912.S.3:

Through purposeful practice, artists learn to manage, master, and refine simple, then complex, skills and techniques.

### Other Evidence

Journaling on class presentations of favorite songs, composers, lyricists, class discussions and personal viewpoint.

**The entire unit is based on projects developed over the course of nine weeks. The outcomes are original songs, recorded, mastered on cds, complete with album art, copyrighted, and with promotional documents.**

\*Students will only be uploading their own original works to public platforms. Teachers should be aware of copyright infringement.

### Learning Plan (Stage 3)

<b>Where</b> are your students headed? Where have they been? How will you make sure the students know where they are going?	Students have a basic understanding of musical concepts like high and low, style differences, and instrument timbre. Final projects will be discussed from the beginning and referred to throughout the process.
How will you <b>hook</b> students at the beginning of the unit?	The juxtaposition of the Johnny Mercer Foundation "Accentuate the Positive" Curriculum and YouTube videos of student compositions.
What events will help students <b>experience and explore</b> the big idea and questions in the unit? How will you equip them with needed skills and knowledge?	Their rehearsals, performances, and feedback from audience. Project Group work, peer feedback, revision, listening to examples, trial and error.
How will you cause students to <b>reflect and rethink</b> ? How will you guide them in rehearsing, revising, and refining their work?	Class discussions, video record all performances, reflective journaling..
How will you help students to <b>exhibit and self-evaluate</b> their growing skills, knowledge, and understanding throughout the unit?	Video, recording, peer feedback and journaling.

## Week 1

<b>Lesson Title</b>	<b>Grade</b>
Songwriting Week 1- Lyrics	9-12
<b>Long Term Goals/Big Idea</b> Students will gain the musical knowledge and understanding of how to create a chord progression, lyrics, and melody Students will be able to aurally identify roman numeral chords in a major key center Students will gain a conceptual understanding of the songwriting process	
<b>Learning Objective</b> Students will aurally recognize major and minor chords Students will identify roman numeral chords after hearing them in various voicing on the piano Students will successfully build and identify chord progressions Students will identify chord progressions in the context of pop music Students will use current events to create lyrics  <b>Standards:</b> MU.912.C.2.2 Evaluate performance quality in recorded and/or live performances.MU.912.C.2.3 Evaluate one’s own or other’s compositions and/or improvisations and generate improvements independently MU.912.H.2 The arts reflect and document cultural trends and historical events, and help explain how new directions in the arts have emerged. MU.912.O.1.1 Evaluate the organizational principles and conventions in musical works and discuss their effect on structure.	
<b>Procedures to Support Learning:</b> 1. Students will read a brief description of the life of Johnny Mercer, while also examining some of his lyrics (guided by the “Accentuate the Positive Johnny Mercer Activity Guide.” After reading up to page 13 in this text, students will discuss the life of	

Johnny Mercer and how his experience may have impacted the lyrics he wrote.

2. Students will discuss the question “What impact does music have on the world” and then “What impact does the world have on music.” They will continue the discussion by facilitation of the instructor on music and society.
3. Students will complete an activity in which they sit for three minutes in silence and write down keywords and thoughts from the discussion. They will then form lyrics based on these keywords and phrases.
4. Student volunteers will share their lyrics with the class. These will be kept in a lyrics journal for students to use in their group songwriting.

Formal Assessment Techniques		Materials/Set Up
<input type="checkbox"/> performance task <input type="checkbox"/> recording <input type="checkbox"/> self/peer assessment <input type="checkbox"/> test/quiz	<input type="checkbox"/> journal <input type="checkbox"/> portfolio <input type="checkbox"/> sing (performing) <input type="checkbox"/> essay/report	Space for small groups Pianos (at least 4) Piano charts for each individual student

**Student Accommodations/Differentiation**  
 Directions repeated as needed  
 Directions given in simple language  
 Physical cues given as often as possible  
 Largely printed sight reading materials as well as materials projected onto the front board

**Reflections on and Extensions of Lesson**  
 Students will complete the lyrics they began in class based on the Music and Society discussion, a new set of lyrics will be due each class.



## Week 2

<b>Lesson Title</b> Songwriting Week 2- What's it all mean?	<b>Grade</b> 9-12
<b>Long Term Goals/Big Idea</b> Students will gain the musical knowledge and understanding of how to create a chord progression, lyrics, and melody Students will be able to aurally identify roman numeral chords in a major key center Students will gain a conceptual understanding of the songwriting process	
<b>Learning Objective</b> Students will aurally recognize major and minor chords Students will identify roman numeral chords after hearing them in various voicing on the piano Students will successfully build and identify progressions	
<b>Standards</b> MU.912.C.2.2 Evaluate performance quality in recorded and/or live performances. Evaluate one's own or other's compositions and/or improvisations and generate improvements independently MU.912.O.1.1 Evaluate the organizational principles and conventions in musical works and discuss their effect on structure. MU.912.F.1: Creating, interpreting, and responding in the arts stimulate the imagination and encourage innovation and creative risk-taking. MU.912.C.2: Assessing our own and others' artistic work, using critical-thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills, is central to artistic growth.	

**Procedures to Support Learning**

1. Students will have a discussion about how the lyrics and musical elements make a song “meaningful” or “meaningless.”
2. Students will begin a group project in which they decide collectively upon a song that they find meaningful and using musical elements discussed, and then perform the song in way that changes the intent of the song by changing musical elements. Students will use the remaining class time to discuss and practice, with the instructor visiting each group as a facilitator.
3. At the end of class, groups will perform their “meaningful” song for the class. Students will discuss elements each group used that changed the meaning of the original version of the song.
4. An extension of the lesson could be an out of class assignment for each individual student in which they must take a song they find meaningful and make it meaningless, while writing an analysis as to what specific musical and lyrical elements make this song “meaningless.”

**Formal Assessment Techniques**

- performance task
- recording
- self/peer assessment
- test/quiz

- journal
- portfolio
- sing (performing)
- essay/report

**Materials/Set Up**

Space for small groups  
Pianos (at least 4)  
Piano charts for each individual student

**Student Accommodations/Differentiation**

Directions repeated as needed

Directions given in simple language

Physical cues given as often as possible

Largely printed sight reading materials as well as materials projected onto the front board

**Reflections on and Extensions of Lesson-** How will your final product have meaning and how will you support your lyrics with musical elements.

### Week 3

<b>Lesson Title</b>	<b>Grade</b>
Songwriting Lesson- Harmony	9-12
<b>Long Term Goals/Big Idea</b> Students will gain the musical knowledge and understanding of how to create a chord progression, lyrics, and melody Students will be able to aurally identify roman numeral chords in a major key center Students will gain a conceptual understanding of the songwriting process	
<b>Learning Objective</b> Students will aurally recognize major and minor chords Students will identify roman numeral chords after hearing them in various voicing on the piano Students will successfully build and identify progressions  <b>Standards:</b> MU. MU.912.C.2.2 Evaluate performance quality in recorded and/or live performances.912.C.2.3 Evaluate one's own or other's compositions and/or improvisations and generate improvements independently <b>U.912.C.1:</b> Cognition and reflection are required to appreciate, interpret, and create with artistic intent.	
<b>Procedures to Support Learning</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Students will be led in a review of Roman numeral chords <i>I</i> through <i>vi</i> using the piano and students identifying given chords by showing the number with their hands. An informal assessment will be given in the form of visually assessing student mastery of chord recognition based on their hand signs.</li><li>2. Students will complete a listening exercise in recognizing a common pop progression: <i>I, V, vi, IV</i> in G major. After many iterations on the piano, with students showing the chord changes with the correctly corresponding number of fingers.</li></ol>	

3. Students will then listen to three songs with this progression. They will be asked to raise their hand when the familiar progression is played. Students will continue showing the chord changes with their hands. Students will listen to “Don’t Stop Believing” by Journey, “Where is the Love” by the Black Eyed Peas and “She Will Be Loved” by Maroon 5.
4. Students will have a class discussion on the use of these four chords in pop music. Students will delve into the meaning of lyrics, and how the harmony supports the lyrics. Identify the themes that this progression support. They will compare contrast the lyrics and music of three different songs. To what extent are the lyrics and music supportive of each other.
5. Students will discuss any cultural and societal connections to the lyrics and music. (4 chord combination)
6. In their assigned small songwriting groups (4-6 students), students will create an original verse and chorus using this progression at some point within their composition. Students will perform their songs at the end of class, discussing how the elements of music and lyrics enhanced or contributed to the meaning of the song.

**Formal Assessment Techniques**

- performance task
- recording
- self/peer assessment
- test/quiz

- journal
- portfolio
- sing (performing)
- essay/report

**Materials/Set Up**

Space for small groups  
Pianos (at least 4)  
Staff paper  
Guitars (at least 4)

**Student Accommodations/Differentiation**

- Directions repeated as needed
- Directions given in simple language
- Physical cues given as often as possible

Largely printed sight reading materials as well as materials projected onto the front board

**Reflections on and Extensions of Lesson**

Students will complete a rough draft of an original song.

## Week 4

<b>Lesson Title</b> Songwriting Week 4: minor chord options and borrowed chords	<b>Grade</b> 9-12
<b>Long Term Goals/Big Idea</b> Students will gain the musical knowledge and understanding of how to create a chord progression, lyrics, and melody Students will be able to aurally identify roman numeral chords in a major key center Students will gain a conceptual understanding of the songwriting process	
<b>Learning Objective</b> Students will aurally recognize major and minor chords Students will identify roman numeral chords after hearing them in various voicing on the piano Students will successfully build and identify chord progressions Students will identify chord progressions in the context of pop music	
<b>Standards:</b>  MU.912.C.2.2 Evaluate performance quality in recorded and/or live performances.912.C.2.3 Evaluate one's own or other's compositions and/or improvisations and generate improvements independently  MU.912.S.3: Through purposeful practice, artists learn to manage, master, and refine simple, then complex, skills and techniques.	
<b>Procedures to Support Learning:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Students will review minor chord options in a major key (<i>vi</i>, <i>ii</i>, and <i>iii</i>). They will review the music theory leading up to identifying these chords. They will also review previously introduced <i>I</i>, <i>IV</i> and <i>V</i>. The instructor will redefine "progression" with the help of the class.</li><li>2. The reviewed previous material will be spiraled into aural identification of chord progressions. Students will then have a</li></ol>	

discussion and hear many aural examples of changed chords. The aural identification will be mostly focused on a major II also known as *V/V* chord. After students have recognized *V/V* in context multiple times, we will move to examples in pop music.

3. Students will listen to “Forget You” by C-Lo Greene and raise their hands when the *V/V* chord occurs.
4. Students will then get into their assigned songwriting groups and incorporate a major II chord into their original song. The instructor will facilitate the application of this chord within the small groups.

Formal Assessment Techniques		Materials/Set Up
<input type="checkbox"/> performance task <input type="checkbox"/> recording <input type="checkbox"/> self/peer assessment <input type="checkbox"/> test/quiz	<input type="checkbox"/> journal <input type="checkbox"/> portfolio <input type="checkbox"/> sing (performing) <input type="checkbox"/> essay/report	Space for small groups Pianos (at least 4) Piano charts for each individual student Guitars (4)

**Student Accommodations/Differentiation**

Directions repeated as needed  
 Directions given in simple language  
 Physical cues given as often as possible  
 Largely printed sight reading materials as well as materials projected onto the front board

**Reflections on and Extensions of Lesson:**

Write a “bridge” section to a song that incorporates borrowed chords. Journal: How can borrowed chords change a song’s energy or tone? What other songs can you find that use borrowed chords?

## Week 5

<b>Lesson Title</b> Songwriting Week 5: Writing Melodies	<b>Grade</b> 9-12
<b>Long Term Goals/Big Idea</b> Students will gain the musical knowledge and understanding of how to create a chord progression, lyrics, and melody Students will be able to aurally identify roman numeral chords in a major key center Students will gain a conceptual understanding of the songwriting process	
<b>Learning Objective</b> Students will aurally recognize major and minor chords Students will identify roman numeral chords after hearing them in various voicing on the piano Students will successfully build and identify chord progressions Students will identify chord progressions in the context of pop music Students will identify strong and weak beats Students will be able to create a melody over a given chord progressions  <b>Standards:</b> MU.912.C.2.2 Evaluate performance quality in recorded and/or live performances.MU.912.C.2.3 Evaluate one's own or other's compositions and/or improvisations and generate improvements independently MU.912.H.2 The arts reflect and document cultural trends and historical events, and help explain how new directions in the arts have emerged.	
<b>Procedures to Support Learning:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Students will review aural identification of roman numeral chords, using an informal assessment of showing the roman numeral number with number of fingers held up. Students will review all roman numeral chords in a major key. Students will then create a 4 chord progression by deciding as a class.</li></ol>	

2. On the board, the chords will be written with a blank staff underneath. Students will review which solfege syllables serve as chord tones in each roman numeral chord chosen. The students will then choose solfege syllables from the chord tones established and fill in the blanks of the exercise on the board.
3. After the melody is created, the instructor will play the chords and melody on the piano for the students to hear. Students will make any changes they would like, still using the chord tone solfege syllables.
4. The instructor will then erase beats two and four on the board. Students will learn about strong and weak beats through kinesthetic movements. Students will identify strong and weak beats while counting out loud. They will then discuss options for solfege syllables on beats two and four. Through scaffolding, students will identify that the weak beat can have non-chord tones to create a melody. Using the now two chord progression and four solfege syllables that serve as the melody, the instructor will now play the measure. Students will make any changes needed or desired.
5. Students will complete three more examples of this exercise, stringing the measures together to create a four bar melody and progression.
6. Students will then move to their songwriting groups and use this technique to write the melody to any sections of their original songs in progress.

Formal Assessment Techniques		Materials/Set Up
<input type="checkbox"/> performance task <input type="checkbox"/> recording <input type="checkbox"/> self/peer assessment <input type="checkbox"/> test/quiz	<input type="checkbox"/> journal <input type="checkbox"/> portfolio <input type="checkbox"/> sing (performing) <input type="checkbox"/> essay/report	Space for small groups Pianos (at least 4) Piano charts for each individual student Separate space for each songwriting group



**Student Accommodations/Differentiation**

Directions repeated as needed, directions given in simple language

Physical cues given as often as possible

Largely printed sight reading materials as well as materials projected onto the front board

**Reflections on and Extensions of Lesson**

Each student will write a melody using the melody writing technique introduced. Look back through your journal and adjust any previously written melodies. Give a melody to any lyrics that are without music.

## Weeks 6-9

<b>Lesson Title</b> Production	<b>Grade</b> 9-12
<b>Long Term Goals/Big Idea</b> Students will gain the musical knowledge and understanding of how to create a chord progression, lyrics, and melody Students will be able to aurally identify roman numeral chords in a major key center Students will gain a conceptual understanding of the songwriting process	
<b>Learning Objective</b> Students will aurally recognize major and minor chords Students will identify roman numeral chords after hearing them in various voicing on the piano Students will successfully build and identify chord progressions Students will identify chord progressions in the context of pop music  <b>Standards:</b> MU.912.C.2.2 Evaluate performance quality in recorded and/or live performances.912.C.2.3 Evaluate one's own or other's compositions and/or improvisations and generate improvements independently <b>MU.912.F.1:</b> Creating, interpreting, and responding in the arts stimulate the imagination and encourage innovation and creative risk-taking <b>MU.912.C.2:</b> Assessing our own and others' artistic work, using critical-thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills, is central to artistic growth.	
<b>Procedures to Support Learning:</b> 1. Students will work in groups to produce their final products. The groups will mirror the industry with producer, musicians, artists, marketing, etc.....	

2. The projects must include: Original music, recorded on school provided software (pro-tools), mastered onto cd, cd artwork, promotional write-up, and proof of copyright.

3. Teacher is a facilitator helping each group.

Formal Assessment Techniques		Materials/Set Up
<input type="checkbox"/> performance task <input type="checkbox"/> recording <input type="checkbox"/> self/peer assessment <input type="checkbox"/> test/quiz	<input type="checkbox"/> journal <input type="checkbox"/> portfolio <input type="checkbox"/> sing (performing) <input type="checkbox"/> essay/report	Space for small groups Pianos (at least 4) Piano charts for each individual student Guitars (4)

**Student Accommodations/Differentiation**

Directions repeated as needed, directions given in simple language

Peer mentoring

Physical cues given as often as possible

Largely printed sight reading materials as well as materials projected onto the front board

**Reflections on and Extensions of Lesson:**

Reflect daily in your journal. What are the strengths and weakness of your group? How can you positively contribute to the final product? What problems arose with lyrics, harmony, melody, performance, recording, mastering, promoting and copyrighting the project? How did you solve these problems?

**For more information on  
Johnny Mercer, Lesson Plans, and Activity Guides:**  
[www.johnnymercerfoundation.org](http://www.johnnymercerfoundation.org)

**For additional resources on Johnny Mercer and Popular Music:**  
Special Collections & Archives  
Georgia State University Library  
Phone: (404) 413-2880  
E-Mail: [archives@gsu.edu](mailto:archives@gsu.edu)  
<https://library.gsu.edu/special-collections/>

**For additional resources on Latin American Popular Music:**  
Diaz-Ayala Cuba and Latin American Popular Music Collection  
Florida International University  
Phone: (305) 348-2412  
<https://latinpop.fiu.edu/>