

Emo: A Short History

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did Emo music emerge from Punk to become its own unique genre, and how has Emo influenced a newer generation of artists and audiences?

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will examine the origins and development of the Emo genre by comparing songs, watching interviews with contemporary Emo bands and promoters, and writing their own Emo lyrics.



Photo: Daniel Rosendale

When one hears the word “Emo,” a plethora of things perhaps come to mind: the skinny jeans, the sad lyrics, the Vans or Converse sneakers, the straight hair, the black eyeliner. Or perhaps Emo provokes a recollection of the 2000s, when bands like Fall Out Boy, My Chemical Romance, Taking Back Sunday, and Dashboard Confessional dominated the airwaves on both MTV, Fuse, and the Vans Warped Tour.

But the roots of Emo precede the new millennium by decades. In the 1980s, a contingent of musicians began moving away from the aggressive socio-political tinged Punk ethos and towards a more introspective “emotional” approach. One of these groups was the Washington, D.C. band Rites of Spring, which is considered the first to be given the description “Emo” – much to the dismay of founding member Guy Picciotto, who rejected the label. To him, labeling Rites of Spring as “Emo” (short for “emotional”) was ironic, because he felt all music has emotions. Nonetheless, the name stuck, and Emo came to signify a mixture of the elements of Hardcore Punk with an introspective brand of songwriting.

A decade later, Emo expanded to the Midwest with bands including The Get Up Kids,, American Football, and Cap’n Jazz. These groups took an even more nostalgic and introspective approach to songwriting.

While the popularity of Emo grew throughout the 1990s, the majority of Emo bands were still “underground” and not featured on mainstream media. This changed during the third wave of Emo in the 2000s. At this point, a new generation of bands such as Fall Out Boy, Panic! at the Disco, My Chemical Romance, Paramore, and the Used hit the mainstream, being in constant rotation on channels like MTV, FUSE, and VH1. With a lyrical prowess that focused on not only relationships, breakups, and love, but also the topic of mental health, these bands were mainstays during the height of the Vans Warped Tour, Skate and Surf, and Bamboozle festivals.

But three “waves” out, Emo as a genre had to confront some major problems. Parents felt the messages in certain songs promoted self harm or even suicide, but perhaps a more glaring and more insidious issue was the incorporation of sexism and misogyny in the lyrics, coupled with a significant lack of diversity among the bands. With the notable exception of bands like the woman-led Paramore, Versaemerge, and Hey Monday, Emo overwhelmingly featured straight, white, cis-gendered men, whose lyrics and stage presentation did little to confront the seeming homogeneity of the genre.

By the time the 2010s came around, Emo lost some of its mainstream momentum. The MTV/FUSE/Major label boom for Emo was losing steam, and the fourth wave of bands – including The Hotelier, and Mom Jeans – were taking things back to the Midwest Emo route of being more underground.

Today, bands have developed a more Pop-punk sound while retaining the DIY (do it yourself) ethos of the genre’s Punk roots. Subgenres and genre-crossovers, such as Emo-Rap have also developed. Importantly, with the diversity of sounds has come a diversity of artists, as people of all different backgrounds continue to be inspired by the Emo genre.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The origins of Emo in Punk Rock
- The differences between Emo and Punk
- The position and culture of Emo today

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE

- Students will be able to summarize Emo’s evolution from its Punk roots and identify its defining characteristics by analyzing lyrics and watching interviews with contemporary musicians and producers in the Emo genre.

ACTIVITIES

PREPARATION

1. Create four stations around the room, each with a device capable of streaming video. Set each station to the following video:
 - Station 1: **Clip 2, Musical Journeys**
 - Station 2: **Clip 3, Emo as a Genre**
 - Station 3: **Clip 4, Asserting a Place for Emo**
 - Station 4: **Clip 5, Advice**

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Write “Emo” on the board, followed by three columns entitled “Feelings,” “Fashion,” and “Music.” Ask the class to brainstorm together what sorts of styles, sentiments, and music come to mind when they hear the term “Emo.”
2. **Optional:** Separate students into groups, and using presentation software and the internet, ask them to create an Emo collage of what comes to mind when they hear the term. Have student groups share the collage with the class.

PROCEDURE:

1. Inform students that they will be exploring the history of Emo, and will be viewing videos of young people who are involved in the Emo scene today.
2. Distribute one page from **Document Set: The Waves of Emo** to students, so that each student is investigating a single wave of Emo. Instruct students to read their page individually. (*Optional: have students use devices to listen to the music from the “essential bands” list at the end of each page. Teacher discretion advised, as some of the songs may have coarse or vulgar language.*)
3. Direct students to form groups based on which wave of Emo they read. (For example: all students who read the “1990s - The Second Wave” page form a group). Distribute **Handout - Waves of Emo Graphic Organizer** to each group and have student groups collectively complete the handout. After completing the handout, ask student groups to read their paragraph out loud.
4. Explain to students that they will be using what they discovered about Emo to play the quiz game, “Is it Emo?”. Display **Slideshow - Is It Emo?**. Review the directions with students, and then play the quiz game. After the quiz game, ask students:
 - How did you score on the quiz? Who scored the highest?
 - How were you able to differentiate Emo lyrics from Punk lyrics?
 - Did you find it easier or more difficult to differentiate Emo lyrics from Punk lyrics?
 - What might that say about the similarities or differences of these two genres?
5. Inform students that for the remainder of the class they will be hearing from Desmond Zantua and Aaliyah Cantrell, two artists currently operating in the Emo scene. Play **Clip 1, Introduction**. Then ask students:
 - Did anything about Desmond and Aaliyah stand out to you?
6. Distribute **Handout - Interview Questions** to every student. Then ask individual students to divide into groups to visit each station and answer the questions on the handout:
 - Station 1: **Clip 2, Musical Journeys**
 - Station 2: **Clip 3, Emo as a Genre**
 - Station 3: **Clip 4, Asserting a Place for Emo**
 - Station 4: **Clip 5, Advice**



7. Ask students:

- Based on the interviews you saw, how would you summarize the current state of Emo?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Instruct students to write their own Emo lyrics by utilizing the knowledge they acquired in the lesson. (If necessary, provide **Handout - Songwriting Template** as a guide.)
2. Students can then share their lyrics with the class if they so choose.
3. Ask students:
 - As you learned, Guy Picciotto of Rites of Spring disliked the name “Emo” because he felt all music was emotional. What do you make of the genre Emo? Do you feel the term categorizes a unique genre of music? Why or why not?

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Reading Information Text Standards for Grades 9-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.2 Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

College and Career Readiness Standards for Writing for Grade 9-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.5 Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.5 Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

College and Career Readiness Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 9-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.3 Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.3 Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity



RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- Introduction
- Musical Journeys
- Emo as a Genre
- Asserting a Place in Emo
- Advice

HANDOUTS

- Document Set: The Waves of Emo
- Handout - Waves of Emo Graphic Organizer
- Slideshow - Is it Emo?
- Handout - Interview Questions
- Handout - Songwriting Template