

LESSON PLAN

MUSIC AND SOCIAL STUDIES

Every culture in world history has had its own music for ritual, work and entertainment. Music can help illustrate and dramatize the meeting of cultures:

Case Study: Solomon Linda's Mbub

The story of Solomon Linda's song Mbub is a cautionary tale about how Western culture can borrow and transform the work of an indigenous artist:

- Solomon Linda was born in the Zulu territory of South Africa in 1909.
- He founded a singing group called Original Evening Bird.
- In 1939, a talent scout invited the Evening Bird to a recording studio. In the studio, Linda made up the song Mbub on the spot.
- The 78 r.p.m. recording of Mbub was the first African record to sell 100,000 copies.
- The American folk singer Pete Seeger recorded an arrangement of the song with his group The Weavers. Mispronouncing the lyrics, Seeger changed the title to Wimoweh. It became a worldwide hit.
- Eventually, over 150 groups recorded their own version.
- In 1961, the American songwriter George Weiss took the last section of Linda's improvisation and turned it into the melody, setting it to the words "The lion sleeps tonight."
- In 1994, Disney's film version of The Lion King included Weiss' version on the soundtrack.
- In 2004, Solomon Linda's descendants filed a lawsuit against Disney and Weiss' publishers. Linda's full story was revealed: He signed away the rights to Mbub in 1952 for the modern equivalent of 87 cents. He lived in poverty, working as a cleaning man. He died in 1962 with \$22 in his bank account. His wife, who was illiterate, again signed away the rights in 1982. While the Lindas lived in poverty, The Lion Sleeps Tonight was earning millions of dollars in royalties.
- Thanks in part to the investigative reporting of Rian Malan of Rolling Stone magazine, there was a groundswell of support for the Linda family. In February 2006, the family was awarded royalties from 1987 to the present, ending the dispute.



Solomon Linda (furthest left) and the Original Evening Bird

(Source: "In the Jungle, the Unjust Jungle, a Small Victory," front page article in The New York Times, March 22, 2006)

Class Lesson:

- Play Solomon Linda's original recorded version, available on "Mbube Roots (Zulu Choral Music from South Africa)," Rounder Select #5025. Compare it with Pete Seeger's version, available on "Pete Seeger's Greatest Hits" (Sony 65711) and Disney's version in The Lion King (Disney B0000CABJ2).

How does the song change—in the way it is performed, in its emotional effect—when it is transferred to Western culture becomes "commercial"?

Describe the circumstances of how Linda gave up to the rights to his song, which became a worldwide hit. How would have been fair to compensate him?

Further Study:

Hungarian composers Bela Bartok and Zoltan Kodaly explored the countryside of their native land, recording and transcribing folk music. Brazilian composer Heitor Villa-Lobos journeyed into the heart of the Amazon jungle in search of indigenous song. Americans Ruth Crawford Seeger and Alan Lomax visited remote regions of Appalachia and other areas to document and help preserve songs passed down through many generations of frontier people.