HOW TO DO AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

For this project, you will build on what you have learned in *Talk That Music Talk* to do an interview with someone who lived under the segregation laws known as Jim Crow. To do this project, you will learn how to do an in-depth interview to learn what was it like for someone to live with these rules in place. You can choose to interview someone of any background because everyone was impacted by the laws. In the interview, you can learn about how did people of different “races” did or did not connect with one another during this time, and what were the impacts of people living apart. You can ask them what role music played in their lives and whether it was a way they could connect across boundaries.

Learning to be a good interviewer means learning a lot about ourselves and how we communicate with others. We need to pay attention to what our assumptions are going into a research project so that they won’t get in the way of

1) How we work with people on their stories and 2) What we ultimately learn and are able to share with others.

**STEP 1:** Read Ray Lambert’s chapter in *Talk That Music Talk* and write down questions that an interviewer would have had to have asked for Ray to tell the stories he shared.

Imagine what it was like for the two childhood friends to pass each other on the street, but to be living separate lives. What would you like to ask each of them.

**STEP 2: Doing your own oral history**

After you have written down questions, you are ready to begin thinking about someone you would like to interview.

Choose someone to interview who grew up during segregation. The person could have been involved in Civil

Rights activism, someone who played music, or just experienced day-to-day life under the unequal system. They

can be of any “racial” background. The point of the interview will be to ask about their experiences growing up

during segregation and what their experiences with music were like. Did it help them cross any racial boundaries

in their lives?

Once you know who you’d like to interview, do a five minute “free-write” on this person and why they are important. When you are finished, you can share your reflection

with your classmates.

• As you prepare for your interview, keep an open mind. Someone is opening his/her life to you. It is a gift that can

be very transformative for both of you. Here are three reasons why:

1) Interviews provide a space to talk about experiences, relationships, and feelings that you may not talk about in

everyday life.

2) Listening to other people’s stories helps you think and remember more about your own life.

3) Reflecting on other people’s experiences helps you decide what’s important to you as you grow up.

**STEP 3: Organizing an interview schedule**

Now write down other questions you would like to ask the person you are interviewing. You should have at least

20 questions.

• After you have a list of questions, you need to organize them in ways that will make an interview flow smoothly.

For first time interviews, it is best to keep the questions in chronological order so you don’t get confused about

when events happened. Topics should not jump all over the place, either.

• Begin with questions that will make the person being interviewed feel comfortable with the interview—they

may be a little nervous and you might be too!

• Stay away from questions that will be answered in just a few words—especially “yes” and “no” questions. Instead,

use words that begin with question words like “How,” “What,” “Where” and “When” to help people tell a longer

story.

• Questions should begin with easy answers and can build up to harder questions. Do not end the interview on a

difficult question, which will make the interviewee feel like they’ve been “left hanging.” Instead, give them an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and what they want the interviewee to know about them.

**STEP 4: How to conduct an interview**

When you first begin doing interviews, you may feel shy and nervous. Even if you are doing the interview in your

own house, an interview will turn a familiar place into a formal setting! If you decide to record your interview, you

will need to do two things before the interview begins:

• Permission form. If the teacher or school intends to use the interview for anything besides the classroom project,

the interviewee will need to sign a permission form before the interview begins. This form includes the full

name of both the interviewee and the interviewer, contact information, signature, and date.

• Before the interview begins, ask students to do a “tag line” at the beginning of the recording. A standard one:

“This is NAME and today is DAY MONTH, YEAR, and I’m sitting WHERE with WHO about to do an interview

for NAME OF CLASS PROJECT. NAME, do I have your permission to begin the interview?”

Here are some tips on being a good interviewer:

• During an interview, you need to find a quiet place without distractions. All phones and TVs are off. If you

are recording, do not have background music on.

• Throughout the interview, you must work at making good eye contact, or showing respect in other ways that

are appropriate. Do not act bored! Even if you are interested, you need to work at showing the person you

interview that you care. Write out your questions ahead of time and bring extra paper to take good notes on the

answers.

• Don’t judge or correct people. Don’t tell anyone they’re wrong or show disapproval.

• Active Listening. Ask follow-up questions!!! If they talk about something that you can tell is important to them,

don’t just jump to the next question!

• Take notes on things you want to follow-up on—other questions.

• Don’t dominate the interview by talking about yourself.

• Offer comfort if your interviewee becomes upset, and ask if they would like to take a break.

• At the end of the interview, say thank-you and explain again how you are going to use the interview. Ask if you

can follow-up with them if they have any more questions.

***Note:*** Listening to these suggestions is a bit like someone explaining how to do a dance or play a song. Instructions

make much more sense when you actually start to do it, so don’t forget to come back to these tips. You will become

an even better interviewer moving forward.