The History and Songs of the Mardi Gras Indians

Joseph Dixon

Performance
Grades K-8

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:
This interactive musical performance introduces students to the history of the Mardi Gras Indian tribes of New Orleans. Students are engaged in sing-alongs and chants of traditional call and response patterns, as well as phrases that are still significant in contemporary music. They learn the duties of the Big Chief, Flag Boy and Spy Boy, and the roles they play during their walk on Mardi Gras Day and Saint Joseph’s Night. Students also experience opportunities to accompany the artist with music making while singing traditional songs, such as “Indian Red” and “Iko Iko.”

TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills):

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<th>Gr</th>
<th>MUSIC</th>
<th>LANG. ARTS</th>
<th>SOCIAL ST.</th>
<th>MATH</th>
<th>SCIENCE</th>
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The Students Will:
* Sing songs from diverse cultures, recognizing several elements of music, such as melody, harmony, rhythm and pitch and participate in several vocal parts.
* Practice appropriate audience behavior during live performances.
* Participate in discussions, listening to others, speaking when recognized and making appropriate contributions.
* Use the writing process to create imaginative stories to express their thoughts and feelings.
* Work productively with others in teams.
* Research information using a variety of resources and create a written, oral, or visual presentation.
* Understand the contributions of people of various racial and ethnic groups to society.
* Explain the significance of various ethnic and cultural celebrations in communities.
* Relate ways in which contemporary expressions of culture have been influenced by the past.
* Collect, organize, and record data in graphs.
* Solve word problems.
* Compare mixtures and solutions.

STAAR (State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness):

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<th>Writing</th>
<th>Grades 4 &amp; 7 Reporting Category 1</th>
<th>The Student Will:</th>
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| Social Studies | Grade 8 Reporting Category 2 | Compose a variety of written texts with a clear central idea, coherent organization, sufficient development, and effective use of language and conventions. * Demonstrate an understanding of geographic and cultural influences on historical issues and events.
Performance Vocabulary:

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<tr>
<th>The Spy Boy</th>
<th>The Spy Boy marches first, often several blocks ahead of the rest, keeping an eye out for other tribes. When he sees one, it is his job to send a signal to First Flag, using shouts and hand signals. Today, when different groups meet—and part of the purpose of parading is to meet other marchers—they dance at each other in a ritualized series of challenges, calls and responses. Fifty years ago the meetings often provoked violence; hence, the need for an advance scout to relay warnings.</th>
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<td>The Flag Boy</td>
<td>The Flag Boy comes after the Spy Boy. He carries the group’s colors (a huge staff decorated with feathers and the gang’s symbol) and relays the Spy Boy’s information to the Big Chief, who marches at the back. He then returns the Big Chief’s commands back to the Spy Boy.</td>
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<td>The Wild Man</td>
<td>The Wild Man can roam where he likes. His role is to clear away crowds as the Chief approaches; he must be loud and demonstrative as he dances. The marchers generally attract a following of neighborhood people in ordinary dress, playing tambourines and chanting.</td>
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<td>Big Chief</td>
<td>Big Chief, often the oldest member, has the greatest sewing skill (to make handcrafted costumes) and the best singing talent (to chant the Mardi Gras Indian songs). The Big Chief has a stick that controls the Indians. When he hits the ground with the stick, the Indians get down and bow to the Big Chief.</td>
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<td>Masking</td>
<td>Masking as an Indian means designing and creating a new elaborate costume (suit) every year, (hand-beaded and feathered, weighing between 100 and 150 pounds) and parading with other members of the tribe throughout the city on Mardi Gras Day. This tradition originated with African descendant peoples who wanted to pay homage to Native Americans for their support and acceptance. To this day, masking remains a way for African Americans in New Orleans to honor their historical and cultural relationship with Native Americans.</td>
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<td>Call and Response Chants</td>
<td>Call and response is a way of communicating, most often appearing in music. It requires at least two people, with the first person introducing an idea and the second individual finishing or repeating it. It is a technique where one musician offers a phrase and a second player answers with a direct commentary or response to the offered phrase. Call and response is a singing technique in which a person leads by singing a phrase, which is then answered by a group of singers.</td>
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<td>Mardi Gras</td>
<td>Mardi Gras is music, parades, picnics, floats, excitement...and one big holiday in New Orleans! Everyone is wearing purple, green, and gold or costumes, and they are adored with long beads caught from the beautiful floats.</td>
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Academic Vocabulary:

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<th>Culture</th>
<th>The customs, civilization, and achievements of a particular time or people.</th>
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<td>Custom</td>
<td>A particular established way of behaving.</td>
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<td>Tradition</td>
<td>A custom, opinion, or belief handed down to posterity; an established habit or custom.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>A body of people having something in common.</td>
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CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS:

Before the performance:

- Ask students what they know about Mardi Gras celebrations, and draw them into a discussion of the sights, sounds, and atmosphere that transpires in one American city known for its Mardi Gras festivities: New Orleans.

After the performance:

- Have children express what they liked best about the experience by talking, writing, drawing, or singing about their favorite part.

- View pictures of the Mardi Gras Indian suits that tell a story.
**Language Arts:**

* Use construction paper, feathers, pieces of fabric, and stones to design a miniature of a Big Chief Costume and Mask. Include a symbol in the design that has meaning for you (eagle, buffalo, rattlesnake, lion, elephant, or some other animal). Pretend that you are the Big Chief. **Write a story** that tells about and describes all of the sights and sounds that you see on the parade route as you march through the streets of New Orleans. Display the Big Chief costume and your story side by side.

- Do a Google search of images of “Mardi Gras Indians.” **Write a story** in which you describe what you see in the pictures you found. As you write, think about the following ideas: Who do you think the people in the pictures are and what might they be doing? What is the purpose of the elaborate costumes the people are wearing? Where might the costumes have come from? How expensive would they be to make? What generalizations can you make about the people wearing the costumes? Print out one image you find most intriguing and describe it in complete detail.

- In a small group, create a collage of images of the Mardi Gras Indians from the pictures you found during your image search of Mardi Gras Indians. Present your collage to the class, explaining your favorite parts.

- Write a magazine article about the Mardi Gras Indians. Include two imaginary interviews with the Big Chief and Spy Boy of a Mardi Gras Indian tribe. Read your article aloud to the class.

**Social Studies:**

- Discuss in small groups: Who are the “Mardi Gras Indians” and what is their importance to New Orleans’ cultural traditions?

- With a partner, research the following: What are the historical origins of the “Mardi Gras Indians”? Are they actually “Indians”? Why did they originally decide to dress like “Indians”? Describe several ways in which the Mardi Gras Indians merge African and Indian traditions. What is the importance of Native American and African American collaborations during the slave history in the south? Display your research on a poster and present it to the class.

- Create a Venn Diagram to compare and contrast the elements of the African-American culture and Native-American culture.

- Create a “Mardi Gras Indians Museum” by displaying images, facts and historical relevance of the Mardi Gras Indians on a classroom bulletin board.

- Create a Mardi Gras Indians Timeline. Research the historical background of the Mardi Gras Indians and put major events in their cultural development on the timeline.
Math:

- Create Mardi Gras Bead Patterns. Place beads on a pre-designed template to match a pattern or use Mardi Gras beads to complete simple patterns.

- Play Mardi Gras music and have a mock parade in your classroom where you throw beads to students. At the conclusion of the parade, examine the beads each student has caught and graph each one’s catch. After the graph is complete, compare the results on the graph. Use actual beads as visual supports to compare more, less, and same as.

- Use Mardi Gras Indian facts to create word problems. Exchange problems with other students. Solve the problems and explain your answers to the class.

Science:

- Create Mardi Gras Bottles! Fill a plastic bottle with 1/3 karo syrup, 1/3 water with green, yellow or purple food coloring and 1/3 cooking oil. After filling with the liquid, drop in a string of beads. Shake the bottle and watch the beads float in the middle layer! Explain. Fill another bottle with clear water and green glitter with cut beads and trinkets. Shake. Explain what you find.

Resources:

Related Websites:

http://www.mardigrasneworleans.com/mardigrasindians.html
http://www.vrml.k12.la.us/holidays/mardigras/mardigras.htm

Interactive Sites:

http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/Printing_Press/
http://bioinfogp.cnb.csic.es/tools/venny/index.html

Related Smartboard Sites


ABOUT THE ARTIST:

Joseph Dixon works to promote self-empowerment and creative expression through the arts. He designs and teaches art activities that utilize TEKS for the Woodlands Center for the Performing Arts. Award-winning and multi-talented, Mr. Dixon has presented lectures, workshops, classes, exhibitions, and performances both locally and nationally and has had several of his writings and illustrations published.
BACKGROUND INFORMATION on The Mardi Gras Indians:

The Mardi Gras Indians named themselves after Native Americans to pay them respect for their assistance in escaping the tyranny of slavery. It was often local Indians who accepted slaves into their society when they made a break for freedom. They have never forgotten this support.

African Americans, who were not invited to Mardi Gras celebrations, created their own Carnival rituals. Mardi Gras Indians began appearing in the late 19th century; the first group was the Creole Wild West from the Seventh Ward. A connection between African Americans and Native Americans was forged when New Orleans escaped slaves found asylum with Louisiana Indian tribes. The Mardi Gras “Indians” honored Native Americans—who helped hide runaway slaves from bounty hunters and slave masters—by creating costumes and dressing up as American Indians. They were paying homage by “masking Indian” or “playing Indian,” and the tradition was a manifestation of the bond between Native American and African Americans. Their folk art tradition included music, dance and hand-sewn costumes and masks. They were self-taught and dedicated to their craft. The neighborhood-based tribes followed a hierarchy, and the tradition was handed down to younger generations with extensive attention to detail.

While Mardi Gras Indians certainly pay homage to American Indians, the rituals and garb are noticeably West African and Afro-Caribbean. From the beadwork, to the colors, the masks and call and response nature of the chants, the Mardi Gras Indians call forth traditions that pre-date African Americans’ arrival in the United States. Mardi Gras Indian culture is a culture that has sustained thousands of working-class black men and women in New Orleans for more than a century. It revolves around parades, traditionally on Mardi Gras and on the Sunday closest to St. Joseph’s Day, in which Black New Orleanians don elaborate suits of feathers, beads, sequins and costume jewels to sing, dance and chant. It is a beautiful spectacle and an intricate New Orleans art form. The culture, however, goes beyond public performance. Its roots reach back to Africa and pre-European America. It commemorates the aid given by one oppressed minority to another. At the same time, it celebrates the defiance and self-determination of generations of Black New Orleanians, excluded by segregation from the Mardi Gras celebrations of their white neighbors, who put on their outfits and marched despite the contempt of white New Orleans and the threat of jail and violence.