



## Mini-Lesson:

# Oral Tradition and the Roots of Hambone

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### OVERVIEW

Libby Larsen's *Hambone* draws inspiration from the African American history of hambone and is directly linked to oral traditions and West African musical styles. This lesson provides information about the history of these traditions.

### LEARNING GOAL

Students will read and discuss the article to better understand the music.

### MATERIALS

Student copies of:

- [The Roots of Hambone](#) reading

Musical examples (optional):

- Bessie Jones sings the Hambone lyrics while her friend Gene Bluestein pats and slaps out the Hambone rhythm on his body: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YAKTzYADoo>
- Fisk Jubilee Singers sing *Swing Low Sweet Chariot* in 1909: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GUvBGZnL9rE>
- Spoken Word: Southern Word at TEDxNashville: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5RODIKqqH4>

### PROCESS

1. Direct students to: read the article "[The Roots of Hambone](#)" out loud in class. (Assign designated readers.)
2. Play audio/video examples as you go through the reading.
3. Organize students into small groups to respond discuss what they have learned.
4. Reconvene and have one student from each group share what they learned with the entire class.

### EXTENSION

Using the "[Become a Cultural Investigator](#)" worksheet, direct students to think of other examples of African musical influence on the world around them.

# The Roots of Hambone



## HISTORY

**Oral tradition** is one way people pass down their history, stories, values, music, language, and culture. African American culture has always been kept alive and flourishing through oral traditions such as:

- Game songs
- Storytelling
- Poetry and rhythm

**Hamboning** is a good example of an African American musical style that has developed through oral traditions.

The roots of hambone go back to West Africa. When enslaved Africans were brought to the Americas, their culture came with them. Slave owners outlawed the use of African languages, customs, instruments and songs. Forbidden to use what they knew, the slaves created alternative ways to communicate and express themselves.

These alternative ways of communication and expression developed in different ways. The daily experiences of plantation life, their memories of their African homes, and the stories and songs they learned from Christian missionaries all provided ideas and information the slaves used to create a unique way of communicating. Over time, the people refined their storytelling, singing and public conversations, and wove acting, gestures, vocal inflection, **metaphors**, and even coded messages into music and speech.

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## GAME SONGS

The games kids play while chanting or singing hambone are connected to another African tradition – using dance and song to teach children. Some of the many lessons taught through songs and games include:

- Manners
- Responsibility to community and nature
- Helping children see themselves as contributing members of the society
- Cooperation

Hambone combines dance movement, rhythm, storytelling, stylized language, teaching, and song. The rhyming words tell a story that imitates the experiences of children and adults alike.

## STORYTELLING

In Bessie Jones' *Hambone*, the lyrics tell a story. This form of lyrical storytelling is connected to the West African tradition of the **Griot**. A griot is a very important person, who is responsible for remembering and telling the history, songs and mythology of group's culture. Griots also teach and preserve cultural values through their storytelling. In the Americas, the slaves continued the tradition of the Griot, using stories to communicate, tell their history, teach their children, pass on coded information and survive.

One early form of African American expression was the spiritual. Through **spiritual**, the enslaved people not only sang their feelings, but also developed new musical forms and ways to use the voice. They even used spirituals as a way to send coded messages to one another.

Many of the stories told by the slaves were traditional West African folktales. They were popular because the people could narrate the stories using **stylized language** – making their voices do crazy things as the impersonated different characters. Telling stories in this way goes back to Esu Elgbara, an African god who was a trickster, a master of metaphor, and an amazing expressive storyteller.

When the slaves spoke using this kind of language, they could outwit slave owners and gain a little independence and individuality. At the same time, they were also passing on their history, customs and values to their children.

Storytelling and the use of stylized language can also be found in the writing of many 20<sup>th</sup> century African American authors such as W. E. B. DuBois, Zora Neal Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.



## POETRY AND RHYTHM

The rhyming language of *Hambone* is like poetry – delivered in short, rhythmic phrases that lead to a definite climax. Just like many other African American musical and spoken art forms, *Hambone* has accented rhythmic patterns and phrases that are spoken or sung with the body percussion.



African American poets have built a tradition of literature linked to the lyricism of songs and folktales. Some of the well-known African American writers and artists who have contributed to this tradition include Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou and Alice Walker.

Other examples of stylized language can be found in:

- The poetry of the spirituals
- African American folk songs
- Blues music
- The rapid fire sounds of be-bop
- The fancy rhythms of **beatnik** and **spoken-word poetry**
- The poetry of rap and hip-hop



## BECOME A CULTURAL INVESTIGATOR

Today arts all of the world have connections to West African and African American music and culture. Become a “cultural investigator” to find some of these connections. Listen to songs, instrumental music, stories, commercials, and film music and see if you can find stylized language, rhythmic use of the voice, and dramatic or humorous storytelling.

As you investigate a song, story, poem, rap or hip-hop piece, think about the following:

- What is the subject of the work?
- How would you describe it? (using sounds, moods, characters, symbols, etc.)
- If there are words, how do their rhythm patterns add to the mood of the song?
- What kinds of music make the words more interesting? How?
- Do the words make the music more interesting? How?
- What kinds of images and/or metaphors are used? How?

Tell someone else what you’ve discovered!

