



## 3 Mini-Lessons: *Hambone* Inspirations

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### OVERVIEW

Students will read, discuss, and write about three inspirations for Libby Larsen's *Hambone*: Hambone, Cakewalk, and Rock 'n' Roll.

### LEARNING GOAL

Students will understand the background of Larsen's *Hambone* in order to support their performance.

### RESOURCES & MATERIALS

Student copies of:

- [Hambone reading](#)
- [Cakewalk reading](#)
- [Rock 'n' Roll reading](#)

Musical Examples:

Hambone:

- Bessie Jones' Hambone: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YAKTzYADoo>
- Red Saunders' Hambone: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgabSNWG6q4>

Cakewalk:

- Cake Walk dance from the Library of Congress: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QifiyNm6jG4>
- Debussy plays his *Golliwog's Cakewalk*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMrdhgWR9Zk>

Rock 'n' Roll:

- *Rock Around the Clock*, Bill Haley & His Comets: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-qjc17KEsc>
- Bo Diddley, *Bo Diddley*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMZjAOoX6nw>

### PROCESS

1. Divide students into small groups and direct them to read one of the readings. You may choose to have each group read the same reading and cover all three on subsequent days or, you may choose to have the three readings divided among the groups on a single day. They can read silently or out loud, sharing the reader's role within their group. Consider sharing audio/visual examples of each inspiration with students.

2. Direct them to discuss what they've read and write down their own definitions for hambone, cakewalk, and rock 'n' roll, as well as a few facts about each.
3. Reconvene as a large group. Ask the students to define each topic and share what they learned with one another. If they have already started working on *Hambone*, ask them to find the inspirations in the piece.

# Hambone

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**Hambone** is a musical style made by rhythmically clapping, patting, and slapping various parts of the body. The term comes from the bones that African slaves used to make music when their masters banned them from using traditional instruments. Over time, hambone came to describe the intricate game played by African American children as they clapped, patted thighs and slapped various parts of their bodies while they sang.

Bessie Jones and Charles Gaskins are two musicians who keep these musical traditions alive. While Bessie sings, Charles slaps out a syncopated rhythm on his thigh and chest.

The African habit of using any and everything for a drum frustrated the attempt of the southern white slave owners to stamp out drumming among the blacks. The drums themselves virtually disappeared from black folk music for almost 200 years, but drumming - on banjo heads, tabletops, church floors, with hands or with sticks survived.

Hambone even shows up on playgrounds when children perform chants and songs with **hand jive** accompaniments.



# Cakewalk

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The **cakewalk** is an African American social dance and competition. It started in the 18<sup>th</sup> century on southern plantations. The winners were the dancers who could strut and prance with the most style.



Dancing on a plantation was usually done for recreation or religious reasons. At plantation or town gatherings, a special platform would be built and the slaves would entertain white plantation owners with amazing and agile dance steps. In a cakewalk, the dancers hold their upper bodies still with little or no movement.

Though the white owners didn't know it, the slaves were imitating the highbrow manners and rigid bodies that "white folks" used when they danced like this. It was an amazing contrast to African dance traditions, which use loose leg movements and fancy dance steps in the lower body.

The steps in the dance were **improvised**, allowing each dancer to display his or her individual talents and best moves on-the-spot. The best dancers would receive a prize, usually a cake. Like other plantation dances, the cakewalk was one of the historical dances that led to American **jazz** dance.

Composers around the world loved the **ragtime-syncopated** rhythm of cakewalk music. French composer Claude Debussy used those rhythms in his piece for piano, *Golliwog's Cakewalk* from "Children's Corner".





# Rock 'n' Roll

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Growing up in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Larsen loved listening to the rockin' rhythms of Bo Diddley. In *Hambone*, parts of the piece are influenced by Diddley's distinct style.

"Rock and roll" did not just suddenly appear in the 1950s. The roots of the 1950's "rock and roll" include ragtime, blues, plantation songs, the music of Stephen Foster, Sister Rosetta Tharp and Ruth Brown, the bands playing New Orleans, Chicago, and swing styles of jazz, rhythm and blues, artists like Fats Domino, and Chuck Berry and country and western music. They combined forces of these many kinds of music led to the tune most people associate with the beginning of "rock and roll," *Rock Around the Clock*, recorded by Bill Haley and His Comets.

Bo Diddley was a "rock and roll" performer from Chicago. Like all musicians, he used music to express his feelings and ideas, and to talk about what he felt was important. Here's what he said about being born to music:

I was born one night about twelve o'clock,  
I came in this world playing a good guitar;  
My papa walkin' 'round, stickin' out his chest,  
Holler: 'Mama, this boy, he gonna be a mess!

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Bo Diddley was born Ellas Bates McDaniel in McComb, Mississippi in 1928. He began to study the violin and guitar when his family moved to Chicago. When he was ten years old, Bo and two of his friends played their first public performance, on a Chicago street corner. He continued to perform with friends as a teenager, providing music for private parties and dances. Though he worked during the day, he would hang around Chicago blues clubs at night. Finally, in 1951, Bo got his first big break when the 708 Club hired him for his first real gig. He took off from there, playing in Chicago with several rhythm and blues groups and touring the Midwest.

There are many stories about how Ellas Bates McDaniel ended up with the name "Bo Diddley." One story says people started calling him Bo Diddley when he launched a boxing career as a young man. Another story claims that his classmates in elementary school give him the name. And a third says that Leonard Chess, founder of Chess and Checker Records, had the idea. Chess supposedly changed his name to Bo Diddley right after the contract was signed because it meant "funny storyteller." Yet another story says that the name comes from a stringed

instrument called the “diddley bow.” The diddley bow is made from a piece of wire attached to a house or a fence picket, which acts as a resonator. The wire is stretched taut and a nail or the neck of a glass bottle is used to play the string.

Bo Diddley signed on with the Checker record label in 1955, just as “rock and roll” was rising on the pop music scene. His first single was called “Bo Diddley,” and was an immediate hit. On the flip side of the record was another hit, “I’m a Man.” The music was loud and explosive – a new sound for record buyers. With shouted lyrics, pulsating guitar, and wild thumping drums holding things together, the music was louder and more exciting than most recordings of that era. With these two songs, Bo Diddley became a “rock and roll” star. Considered an innovator, his music influenced many musicians in the United States and Great Britain.

Bo Diddley was inducted into the Rock ‘n’ Roll Hall of Fame in 1987, and died on June 2, 2008.

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Imagine that you could choose a new name for yourself as a performer. What would it be? How would a song based on your new name sound?

