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Sample Lesson Plan- “Big Ballin’ (In the Gilded Age)”
Hip-Hop U.S. History

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Song Summary:

Four big players in the Gilded Age (Rockefeller, Carnegie, Morgan, Pulitzer) come alive on this track as they present their take on big business, monopolies, the role of government, and livin’ large.

Pre-song discussion questions:

1. The word “gilded” means gold plated, but cheap on the inside. Why do you think this word applies to this era of our history?
2. Monopolies have been a part of capitalism Adam Smith first put a pen to paper. Can you think of any monopolies or companies that own an unfair portion of their market today? Can you think of any effects this has on our current economy?
3. What effects do monopolies within a specific business sector have on:
 - a. its consumers or clients?
 - b. its employees?
 - c. the general economy?
4. What are the advantages of unionizing the employees of a specific industry? How do these advantages differ from industry to industry?
5. During the Gilded Age, America was experiencing a massive intake of immigrants from Europe. What are the similarities and differences between the intake of immigration today compared with that of the turn of the 20th century? What are the both the hardships and benefits that immigrants face today? How does this compare to the lives of immigrants during the turn of the 20th century?

The Song: Verse 1

John D. Rockefeller:

I don't even need a beat.

I could kick it a cappella.

Doo-wop, shoo-wop.

I'm John D. Rockefeller.

I'm bigger than Big Pimpin'?

I'm bigger than Jay-Z.

He named his record company after me.

I'm the O.G. with oil than Valdez.

Standard Oil?

That's just one of my companies.

*I formed the **trust**, yes I did.*

Now I'll gobble up these Colonel

Sanders like they're chicken feed see?

Terms for Thought:

- 1. Standard Oil-** Rockefeller's oil giant which dominated the industry by buying out smaller companies. The Cleveland based company attacked competitors with unethical business strategies such as bribery, sabotage, and secret deals.
- 2. Trust-** To bypass laws governing corporations, Rockefeller and his attorney Samuel Dodd invented the trust. A trust is a large group of big businesses that are all controlled through one corporate umbrella.

Questions for Discussion:

1. When Rockefeller was only a young bookkeeper he was asked to determine if oil would be a worth-while investment. He lied and told them oil had "no future". Although this might seem unethical, the business world helps those that help themselves, and there is a fine line between being a savvy businessman and an immoral businessman.

Where do you think this line exists? Was Rockefeller wrong to lie to his boss? When does a strict code of ethics come before making a profit?

2. Rockefeller formed a trust in order to allow his business to grow even larger. In today's world, many companies that you think are independent are in fact owned and controlled under one big umbrella operated by a single corporation (Viacom, AOL-Time-Warner, Clear Channel).

Is it fair for one business player to control many separate entities, gobbling up such a huge portion of the market, and conclusively making it increasingly difficult for smaller independent companies to flourish and grow? On the other hand, are these huge conglomerates just being smart in the world of capitalism, the economic model our country has prided itself on?

The Song- Verse 2

J.P. Morgan:

*Who's next? That'd be me, J.P. Morgan,
vital organ, fire people
like they're organs.*

Yeah, you heard about me,

Age is Gilded. *Banks: I built it.*

Towns: I filled it.

*This **robber baron** is hotter than
most of these wack cats,
I'm a real hustler putting
trains on rail tracks.*

*Kicking those real facts,
little homey pay attention:
the only one to use the law
to bring me my position.*

Terms for Thought:

- 1. Gilded Age-** era of big business where a handful of tycoons became extremely wealthy but the booming economy hid corruption and the underpaid, overworked laborers that lay below the surface of society.
- 2. Robber Barons-** The name given to such exploitive tycoons.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Although without question robber barons treated their workers in a way that by today's standards would be considered inhumane, they still provided a vast amount of jobs that helped stimulate our economy; in some instances they even erected company towns.

Compare and contrast the pros and cons of what big business did for our country at the turn of the 20th century. What are the conclusive results? What is big business going for jobs now?

2. In the days of the robber barons it was much easier for them to get away with blatant corruption because the government lacked the technology that we now use to monitor business activity; technology that can be used to trace our ill-intentions.

How has technology changed the way we do business? Has it been for better, or for worse? Explain.

The Song: Verse 3

Andrew Carnegie:

*Pass the mic, I'm Andrew Carnegie,
the one all these U.S. senators
want to be.*

The opposite of poverty,

Carnegie Steel.

*yeah we have a whole **monopoly.***

*Like **Horatio Alger**, I'm rags to riches.*

I used to have no dough,

now my paper's vicious.

Social Darwinism, yeah,

I can't be stopped,

like that metal after it pop, I'm h-h-hot.

Terms for thought:

Carnegie Steel: Steel giant that dominated the industry. Run by rags to riches legend Andrew Carnegie who later teamed up with J.P. Morgan to form U.S. Steel, the first billion dollar corporation in 1900.

Monopoly: When one corporation owns their entire business sector, therefore eliminating competition and competitive pricing.

Horatio Alger- author who wrote fictional tales of American boys going from “rags to riches”. These popular books helped spawn the idea of the Gospel of Success: anyone can become rich and famous in America, with enough ambition and perseverance.

Social Darwinism- Darwin's theory that evolution depended on the survival of the fittest adapted to socio-economics; a free market economy will allow the best, smartest, and most hard-working people rise to the top of society.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Do you believe the Gospel of Success to be true? Can anyone overcome adversity to become successful in America? If so, how has that path changed from the time of Horatio Alger to today's fast-paced, high-tech society? What is the relation between the Gospel of Success and Social Darwinism?

2. In 1889, Carnegie wrote an essay titled The Gospel of Wealth which argued for Social Darwinism. Although he and others used it to justify the gap between the rich and the poor, do you feel Social Darwinism is merely that, or is it a natural way for society to conduct itself that echoes our very nature as humans?

The Song: Verse 4

J.P. Morgan:

*Yeah, you know who it be...J.P.
Morgan that is...
Here's the situation"
the U.S. government needed money,
asking for help,
now something here sounds funny.
My momma said good deeds
don't ever come back,
so they hit me with the
Sherman Antitrust Act.
It's got to be a gimmick,
you saying if I'm too rich,
they make a law to tell me
how I've got to spend it?
The **laissez-faire economy** saved me.
The rest can't touch 'cause I'm higher
than Marley.*

Terms for Thought:

Sherman Antitrust Act- passed in 1890, this act outlawed trusts, but was rarely enforced. Actually, big business lawyers turned the law around to prosecute striking unions. This reflected the pro-business attitude of the courts, and the meek intentions of Congress to regulate trade.

Laissez-faire economy- literally French for "let be". The theory that a free economy will regulate itself and that competition will create fair wages and prices.

Questions for Discussion:

- 1. The Sherman Antitrust Act was clearly ineffective. Give some suggestions for solving the big bad business problem that regulates the robber barons but preserves the essence of laissez-faire economy. Is a true laissez-faire economy even plausible? Why or why not?**
- 2. Big business and the government very often intermingle. In 1895, J.P. Morgan famously bailed out the U.S. government with 62 million dollars. Today, large companies pay enormous sums of money to have lobbyists petition law-makers to pass bills that are in the companies' best interest. The government has the power to award huge contracts for defense and reconstruction purposes. Relationships like these have ended in scandal, but there are ways of maintaining legality.**

Do you think the mixture of big business and government is even ethical in the first place? If so, where is the line? If not, are there any exceptions? Is it ethical for the government to award lucrative contracts to corporations to whom high ranking officials have personal ties? Is it ethical for law-makers to be whined and dined by lobbyists?

The Song: Verse 5

Jo Pulitzer:

I'm Jo Pulitzer. I'm ten on the Richter

I'm how they set the standard

for all prize winners.

U.S. goes to war, I use the news to divide us.

*In Cuba, **Teddy Roosevelt**, screaming **Rough Riders!***

So tell me who's in control of your worldview.

The man with paper in hand, Pulitzer's the truth.

*I don't need no facts, this is **yellow journalism**.*

*Exaggerate the truth, **Sensationalism**.*

Terms for Thought:

Teddy Roosevelt: Multi-faceted 26th president of America, Roosevelt was both the leader of the Republican Party and the Progressive Era. He was a naturalist, historian, explorer, international diplomat and war hero, among other things, Roosevelt led a Technicolor life that includes such landmark accomplishments as negotiating peace in the Russo-Japanese War, 'trust-busting' 40 corrupt mega-businesses, exploring the Amazon River basin, leading the first volunteer cavalry during the Spanish-American war, gaining control over the construction of the Panama Canal, and authoring 35 books.

Rough Riders: They made their debut as the first volunteer cavalry under the leadership of Teddy Roosevelt during the Spanish-American War and gained fame at the Battle of San Juan Hill.

Yellow Journalism: A fraudulent method of news reporting that includes inflating and exaggerating stories to make them more appealing to consumers. Yellow Journalism played a significant role in the country's decision to go to war with Spain.

Sensationalism: Overly hyping a story to fantastic proportions to get more attention; a big part of Yellow Journalism.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Many people claim today's media is politically biased to some degree. When you watch the news, do find this to be true? Give some examples as to why or why not?

Do you think, since the press is privately operated, the networks have a right to reflect personal politics in broadcasting? Where does the line exist between a news network's right to opinion vs. its obligation to report "facts"?

2. Think back to the last time you watched a prime-time, network news program. What did the graphic art look like? What did the music sound like? What kind of vernacular and buzz-words did the reporter or anchor use? How did these elements make you feel, and what purpose did they serve? Were they necessary? Were they sensational?

The Song: Verse 6

John D. Rockefeller:

*Rockefeller eats shrimp dipped in caviar,
I don't need a car, I ride on real jaguars.
I keep the prices high, the wages low
so the **Knights of Columbus** know
who's in control
I own 90 percent of oil, keep it greasy.
These **machine politics** are getting
kind of sleazy.
Me and **Boss Tweed**,
yeah we own the vote,
Tammany Hall, playa. That ain't no joke.*

Machine Politics: Corrupt politicking through methods of doling out jobs, city contracts, and other benefits in exchange for votes.

Boss Tweed: New York City's kingpin party boss of the mid-1800s. Tweed embodied machine politics and was widely known for his far-reaching corrupt empire that essentially controlled New York. Although he fathered some virtuous acts, such as building hospitals and orphanages, the State of New York convicted him in 1873 for his corruption. Later he escaped authorities, and fled to Cuba where he was then caught by their government and arranged to be extradited. Narrowly escaping he bribed his way onto a ship to Spain, but authorities caught up to him again and he was shipped back to New York where he subsequently died two years later, in a jail two blocks from his birthplace. Ironic.

Tammany Hall: The building and stage for the Democratic Party's political machine that became a major influence over New York's politics for nearly 200 years.

Knights of Columbus: One of the first labor union's to stand up to big-business, the Knights pushed for women's rights and a stop to abusive child labor. In 1885, they led a successful strike against Jay Gould's railroad company, but a year later its involvement in the deadly Haymarket Riot caused the union to sink.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What has changed in the political world since the time of Tammany Hall and Boss Tweed? How much influence do you think machine politics generate today?

Can you think of a time when you did something gracious for someone, but had a self-serving result you were hoping for?

2. What are some upsides and downsides to unions? Why do we or don't we need them?