

Teacher/Viewing Guide

Rahim ALHaj – Episode 109
Musician, Composer

Grade Level: 9-12

Episode Overview:

Rahim ALHaj started playing the oud when he was a boy in grammar school in Baghdad, Iraq. He immediately fell in love with the sound of the instrument and became dedicated to mastering it. His father was less supportive of this pursuit than his mother—he wanted him to find a “practical” profession and she encouraged him to become the “best oud player in the world.” As an adult, his music became political and he found much inspiration during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88.) His songs, critical of the Iraqi government of Saddam Hussein and the war, became popular. Labeled a political dissident, life became unsafe for him in Iraq, and Mr. ALHaj was forced to flee to Syria as a political refugee. Eventually, he received political asylum from the United States and ended up in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He did not speak English and credits his music with helping him to connect with American society and find success here. His music combines eastern and western traditions and is enjoyed by domestic and international audiences, Arab and non-Arab alike. Mr. ALHaj has enjoyed commercial success, including the first Grammy nomination for an Arab-American musician. However, the most important thing to him is forming a personal connection to his audience. He says that everyone in America has a different background and culture, but that together we can make a beautiful symphony of peace and harmony. Mr. ALHaj’s music is more than a way to keep his culture alive—it is a way to bring people together despite cultural, political and social differences.

Previewing Questions:

1. What would cause someone to flee their country of origin? What is a political refugee?
2. Why would someone want to come to the United States, even if their own culture would be viewed as very different than that of mainstream America?
3. How can music affect political change?

Vocabulary:

1. Oud: A form of lute or mandolin played principally in Arab countries.
2. Political dissident: A person disagreeing with an established political system or organization.
3. Symphony: Anything characterized by a harmonious combination of elements.
4. Homing pigeon: A pigeon trained to return to its roost.

Lesson Overview/Review:

After viewing the segment on Rahim ALHaj, students should be prepared to brainstorm the role music plays in culture and heritage. This can be done as a group activity, having students or the teacher record ideas on a board, or in their own journals.

Journal Option: Have students take a moment to consider their favorite type of music and what messages or feelings it conveys, as well as the role this music plays in their personal culture.

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Post Viewing Class Discussion: Conduct a short discussion to synthesize the information they gained from viewing the video segment. Some possible topics:

1. Why do you think Mr. AlHaj's father did not support his music as much as his mother did?
2. What is the significance of the homing pigeon to Mr. AlHaj?
3. How is Mr. AlHaj a great ambassador for Arab Americans?

Activity: The teacher will play four-six recordings of music from different countries around the world. The first should be an example where the teacher provides commentary and the correct country match. It is up to the teacher if a list of country choices is provided to students. Upon listening to each one, students will record in their notebooks what country or region they believe the music is from, and how they came up with their answer. Students should be encouraged to write about the instruments they hear, the emotions they feel and the musical style for each selection. After all recordings have been played, the whole class will again listen to the pieces and discuss the pieces until they agree upon their answers. Only then will the teacher reveal the answers. Diverse opinions should be encouraged and evidence should be presented.

Students will turn in their selection notes alongside a short response paragraph to the following:

Reflect on your "success" in matching music and culture. How did you do? Now that you know the answers, choose two of the selections and explain in detail how the culture is reflected in the music.

Assessment Ideas: Students will be graded on:

1. Participation in class discussion.
2. Participation in listening project and discussion.
3. Listening project notes and reflection paragraph.

Explore Online: Use the following resources to allow your students to further explore the topic and the Arab American community:

1. Arab Cultural Center: <http://arabculturalcenter.org/>
2. Arab American Museum: <http://arabamericanmuseum.org/>
3. Arab American Antidiscrimination Committee: <http://adc.org/>
4. Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage: <http://www.folklife.si.edu/>

Interdisciplinary Options: Music Education; Sociology, International Politics and Human Rights

In this episode, students will see how an immigrant to America uses his gift of music to bring diverse cultures together. Students will also have the opportunity to explore the concept of political asylum and how some forms of musical expression can be personally dangerous in a country that does not have free speech.

Common Core Alignment:

- RI7: Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.
- W1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning, and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- W3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.



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- SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- SL2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
- SL3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.
- SL4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.