

Feelgood Songs 1: “Feeling Good” Teacher’s Notes A2+

Music has great power to inspire us and lift our mood. Which we could all do with a bit of at the moment. We were trying to think of work to set pupils at home that was positive and good for the soul: what better than a little soul music? So here is the first in a series of resources on feelgood songs. In this case, Nina Simone and her version of “Feeling Good”.

Axe du programme :

- Représentation de soi et rapport à autrui
- La création et le rapport aux arts

Vocabulary and structures

- music, nature and emotions
- preterite
- passive voice
- present simple and present be + ing
- causative structures
- infinitive structures

Culture

- the song ‘Feelin’good’
- the Civil Rights Movement
- Nina Simone

Method

- analysing the lyrics of a song and commenting on the musical accompaniment

Pramatic goals:

- expressing an opinion about a song
- writing about the feelings evoked when listening to a piece of music

Reading, listening, writing

- The aim of this activity is to let pupils discover some context about the song and the singer before concentrating on the song itself and the feelings it evokes.

- The first two pages are about Nina Simone herself. Pupils have linguistic tasks to complete as they read information about her.

- They then watch a slideshow video about the song and fill in a multiple choice quiz.

- Finally, they listen to the song and reflect on how it elicits emotions.

Biobox transcript

1. This song was originally composed for a musical about the class system in Britain in the 1960s (called *The Roar of the Greasepaint – The Smell of the Crowd*.)
2. The show was brought to Broadway, New York, in 1965.
3. The song was first recorded by American saxophonist and jazz musician John Coltrane on his 1965 album *The John Coltrane Quartet Plays*. It was an instrumental version.
4. Nina Simone recorded the song for her 1965 album *I Put a Spell on You*.
5. The song became one of the anthems of the Civil Rights movement.
6. Nina Simone’s recording became popular again after it was used in a British TV commercial for (Volkswagen) cars.

7. The song was used in the TV series *Six Feet Under*.
8. English rock band Muse recorded their own version of the song for their album *Origin Of Symmetry*.
9. American rappers Jay-Z and Kanye West worked together on a sampled version of the song in 2011.
10. Canadian singer Michael Bublé did a version as the theme song to the 2013 James Bond film *Casino Royale*.
The song is: 'Feeling Good'

SOLUTIONS

■ Playing Music

was, left, sang, was, took, sang, studied, turned, started

■ Naming Nina

was named, was called, was inspired, was given, be called

■ Songs She Sang

was released, came out, became, is said, made, recorded, added, sang

■ Activism

In the 1960s, After, after, in 1998

■ The Song's Story

1. British 2. A musical 3. An instrumental version 4. The civil-rights movement 5. Six Feet Under and an advert 6. Jay-Z and Kanye West, Muse 7. James Bond film 8. "Feeling Good"

■ Listen to "Feeling Good"

birds, sun, breeze
fish, river, blossom
dragonfly, butterflies, sleep
shine, pine, mine

■ The Song

Eléments de réponse :

a. 'Feelin' Good' has been considered to be the 'ultimate feelgood song', and the singer does indeed seem to 'feel' great and full of hope.

The chorus of the song refers to a new start / the fact that something new and better is about to start. The repetition of the adjective 'new' lays the stress on / insists on a change in the singer's life for the best. The list of words the adjective 'new' is associated with creates a sort of a crescendo from the beginning of the day to the singer's entire 'life', which evokes hope and optimism. As a result, the singer feels 'good', and she repeats this three times in the song. The end of the chorus is also some sort of a climax creating an impression both of joy and fulfilment.

Other elements in the song convey the ideas of a new beginning – 'Blossom on the tree' – and a better life – the sun shining in the sky ('sun in the sky'), insects having a great time ('Butterflies all having fun'), and the peacefulness of it all ('Sleep in peace'). The use of the BE+ING present 'I'm feelin' good' in the chorus in contrast with the simple present of 'I feel' in the verses contributes to stress / underline the positive effect nature has on the singer. Listening to the song we feel as though something great was also within our reach as long as we take time to enjoy the 'old world' we live in, and this is what the references to nature are all about.

b. The pronoun 'you' refers to the natural elements the singer is addressing throughout the song – the 'birds', the 'breeze', the 'river'. In fact, she seems to be deriving pleasure from her observation of nature, and the repetition of a direct address to the sun, the wind, and the animals reinforces the impression of a closer contact

with nature, that is to say real life. The sort of intimacy the singer shares with nature is expressed through the fact that both the earth and the animals are supposed to understand the singer's state of mind – 'you know how I feel'. The song thus creates an impression of symbiosis / closeness between the human and the natural. And the 'new life' the lyrics are about (precisely) lies in this new-found harmony. Everything seems possible in the 'bold world' opening up to the singer.

The feeling of harmony is underlined by the association of nature with positive values such as 'fun', 'peace' and freedom. No wonder then that the song became one of the Civil Rights Movement anthems in the 1960s.

c. The song has often been interpreted as a form of liberation from oppression. Even though the idea of former oppression is not explicit in the lyrics, the notion of freedom is clearly expressed both in the second ('River runnin' free') and the last verse ('freedom is mine'). This desire for freedom is in keeping with the fight for civil rights at the time when Nina Simone recorded her cover version of 'Feelin' Good'.

In a more subtle way, the reference to the birds 'flyin' **high**' in the sky or 'Dragonfly **out** in the sun' also points to a world in which everything seems possible, where you can fly as high as you want, and where you can live in 'peace'.

What's more, the very rhythm of the song conjures up the same feeling as a sense of exhilaration builds up from the start. At first Nina's voice is slow and controlled, she takes her time and each new phrase is a new step in the song. Her voice becomes more and more powerful as she repeats the same lines again and again, and the rhythm of the song accelerates up to the point when she lets out her cry of freedom – 'Freedom is mine'.

Besides, (as indicated previously,) the very structure of the chorus – 'it's a new dawn, it's a new day, it's a new life for me' – creates the same impression of a rising movement towards something better, towards a greater form of liberty.

Finally, Nina Simone's 'free' interpretation of the song could also be interpreted as the rendering of the Civil Rights activists' aspirations – 'a bold world' in which you can go out (like 'Dragonfly out in the sun') without any restrictions. And it is precisely this form of musical freedom which makes the song such a moving one.

d. Nina's cover version of 'Feelin' good' has left a strong mark on the music scene as she uses her voice in a stunning way both to express the song's essence and to communicate her energy to her audience. For it is not only nature she is addressing, it is also the listener's very soul she is reaching out to. The sense of communion created by her version of 'Feelin' good' goes beyond the mere scope of the lyrics, as it is also with us that she is connecting.

She starts the song *a capella*, with just her voice, before the band comes in with a strong rhythm after the first verse and builds to a crescendo.

Her use of syncopation (strong notes that do not fall on the beat as in 'sun in the sky') and improvisation made the song her very own. She lets her emotions out by slurring words together, as for example when she sings 'You know how I feeeeeel'.

At the end of the song Nina is scatting, that is to say she uses her voice to imitate an instrument. The last part of the song does not contain any words, it is all about making sounds and giving to the music a very personal and original touch. The tension that is thus built adds to the emotional power of the music piece.