



The Songs and Poems of Banana workers

Bananas are grown both on small family farms and much larger commercial plantations. The banana industry provides employment for thousands of people in Latin America, the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, and West Africa.

Workers in the banana industry often work for low wages, with no security, and they handle unhealthy and environmentally hazardous chemicals without adequate protection. Smallholder farmers dependent on growing bananas for a living, face many difficulties such as, the rising costs of production and the severe impacts of changing climate which make production unpredictable and unsustainable. Fairtrade ensures that farmers and workers have rights to safe working conditions and improved incomes.

These learning activities for learners aged 11+ develop their understanding of the lives of banana workers in a traditional context, and build learners' understanding of where their food comes from and the work that goes in to producing it.

Aim

- To analyse the song lyrics and poem to gain an understanding of the lives of banana workers

Subject links:	Topics:
Music	Fairtrade
History	Working conditions
English	Civil rights and Black History

Activity 1: Music and meaning

Music and verse can offer us an insight into the lives of other people and listening to music can be an engaging way for students to learn more about the working lives and cultures of people in other parts of the world. Ask the class:

1. Why do we listen to music?
2. How does music make us feel?
3. Does music serve a different role in your life depending on your mood, who you are with or what you are doing?
4. Does music ever cause you to think differently, to feel a part of something larger or to want to rise up and take action?

Display the quotations about music by Nelson Mandela and Pete Seeger from the *Appendix* and see how the students respond. See if the students agree or not, and ask them to explain why:



Activity 2: Understanding *The Banana Boat Song*

As a class listen to *Day-O (The Banana Boat song)* by Harry Belafonte. You can find these online on many music websites including here on [Vimeo](#), Daily Motion or a version on [Youtube](#) from the Muppets show which is especially good for younger children. The lyrics below can be sang as a class or assembly. Distribute print outs of the lyrics. Students can listen, annotate and make notes on the verses, reacting or responding to anything in the lyrics, or in the music itself.

Respond to the music

In pairs or small groups give the students some paper to answer these questions.

1. Have you ever heard this song? If so, where?
2. Where did you hear it?
3. What emotion(s) do you feel when you hear the song?
4. Write any words you think of in connection to this song.

Then, once students have written their answers, ask them to share with the class what they have put.

Discuss as a group

Use the further information provided in the *Appendix* to help promote an in depth discussion. Consider the questions below.

- Can the song give us any insight into the conditions and lives of those involved in the banana trade?
- Why might songs like this have become so popular?
- Do you think the song is effective in what it is trying to do? Why?

Day-O (The Banana Boat Song)

All: Day-o, day-ay-ay-o
All: Daylight come and he wanna go home
All: Day, he say day, he say day, he say day,
All: He say day, he say day-ay-ay-o
All: Daylight come and he wanna go home

Group 1: Work all night on a drink a'rums
Group 2: Daylight come and he wanna go home
Group 1: Stack banana till thee morning come
Group 2: Daylight come and he wanna go home

Group 1: Come, Mr. Tally Mon, tally me banana
Group 2: Daylight come and he wanna go home
Group 1: Come, Mr. Tally Mon, tally me banana
Group 2: Daylight come and he wanna go home



Activity 3: Song of the Banana Man

Evan Jones (1927-2012) was a poet, playwright and screenwriter based in Britain. He was educated in Jamaica and later attended Oxford University in England. Here we have provided a few verses of his poem, *Song of the Banana Man*, but the full version can be found online. There are also videos available online where the poem is introduced and read, such as here on [Youtube](#).

Poetry activity

Distribute print outs of this poem by Jamaican poet written in 1952. Students can highlight words and phrases to discuss and take notes on the verses, reacting or responding to anything in the poem of interest. You can give them the opportunity to read or perform verses of the poem.

Responding to the poem

In pairs or small groups give the students some paper to answer these questions.

1. What can we assume about the tourist and his attitude towards locals?
2. Why may this poem be called a song and in what ways does it use rhythm and rhyme?
3. What historical aspects may have shaped the response of the banana man?
4. What else is he other than a banana man?

Come back together as a class and give students the opportunity to present and discuss their ideas. Use the further information provided in the [Appendix](#) to promote a wide discussion.

Additional activity: Students can write their own verse about their lives, identities and struggles. Use the articles and interviews on the Fairtrade Foundation website to research more about what banana workers say about their work: www.fairtrade.org.uk/Farmers-and-Workers/Bananas

Song of the Banana Man (Evan Jones)

*Touris, white man, wipin his face,
Met me in Golden Grove market place.
He looked at m'ol' clothes brown wid stain.
An soaked right through wid de Portlan rain,
He cas his eye, turn up his nose,
He says, 'You're a beggar man, I suppose?'
He says, '
Boy, get some occupation, Be of some
value to your nation.' I said,
'By God and dis big right han
You mus recognise a banana man.*

*'Banana day is my special day,
I cut my stems an I'm on m'way,
Load up de donkey, leave de lan
Head down de hill to banana stan,
When de truck comes roun I take a ride
All de way down to de harbour side-
Dat is de night, when you, touris man,
Would change your place wid a banana
man.
Yes, by God, an m'big right han
I will live an die a banana man.*

*So when you see dese ol clothes brown wid
stain,
An soaked right through wid de Portlan rain,
Don't cas your eye nor turn your nose,
Don't judge a man by his patchy clothes,
I'm a strong man, a proud man, an I'm free,
Free as dese mountains, free as dis sea,
I know myself, an I know my ways,
An will sing wid pride to de end o my days
(Sung)Praise God an m'big right han
I will live an die a banana man.'*

Quotations for Activity 1: Introduction

“One of the purposes of music is to help you forget your troubles; another, help you learn from your troubles (some do), and, some will help you do something about your troubles.”

Pete Seeger

“Music is a great blessing. It has the power to elevate and liberate us. It sets people free to dream. It can unite us to sing with one voice. Such is the value of music.”

Nelson Mandela

Further information for Activity 2: Day-O (Banana Boat Song)

Day-O (Banana Boat Song) may sound like just pop song but it originated as a Jamaican folk song with its roots in a form of music known as *mento* which greatly influenced both ska and reggae. In the 1950s the song became famous worldwide when musicians such as Harry Belafonte, pictured here with his good friend Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., released versions of it on record. Sung in unison by dock workers loading bananas all night long and looking forward to going home at sunrise, Belafonte describes it as a “cry from the heart of poor workers, a cry mingled with hope”¹.



If you consider the ‘call and response’ in the song you can see how it emulates an assembly line at a dock where workers are passing on shipments and messages. Furthermore lyrics such as “Six foot, seven foot, eight foot, BUNCH,” evokes the monotony of labour they had to perform, with a collection of repetitive lyrics that call forth the idea of oppressive, never ending work². It has been argued that the song “dramatizes the drudgery of alienated labour in the colonial produce trade”³. For more on the social criticism in the song lyrics see this article on the *Alternative Rhetoric* at the University of North Carolina.

Further information for Activity 3: Song of the Banana Man

It is always important to consider poetry from different cultures alongside that of Standard English. This Jamaican poem by Evan Jones is a great example where a Jamaican dialect or Creole is used and features range of vocabulary, such as “*tek it to dem*”, that demands fairness and justice.

The Jamaican vernacular is used to “fully express pride in his occupation, its contribution to the national economy, and to underscore his personal independence” whilst names of friends such as ‘Duppy Son’ and ‘Breda’ capture a “decidedly Jamaican cultural element”⁴. The ability to earn a livelihood without being subject to the arbitrary demands of others is considered a widely held value across Caribbean society⁵. At the time of writing the banana workers in Jamaica were undergoing a major struggle against a multinational corporation with colonial roots to form a self-reliant co-operative of farmers⁶.

¹ Belafonte, H. (2012) ‘*My Song: A Memoir of Art, Race & Defiance*’.

² *Alternative Rhetoric*, University of North Carolina

³ Eldridge, M. & Belafonte, H., (2002) ‘*Remains of the Day-O*’ *Transition*, no. 92: 110-37

⁴ Southwood-Smith, D. *Language as a vehicle for national themes*. Digital Research Archive.

⁵ Moberg, M. (2013) *Slipping Away: Banana Politics and Fair Trade in the Eastern Caribbean*,

⁶ *Jamaican Observer* (2014) *The Song of the Banana Man*.