

Teaching Private Enterprise Through Tunes: An Abecedarium of Music for Economists

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Abstract

Over the past decade, a number of non-traditional approaches have emerged for teaching introductory economics beyond chalk and talk lectures. This note highlights two music-related websites for economic educators. The first uses animations to present music in class. The second takes song lyrics and formulates a series of economic questions that can serve as useful exercises. The resulting synergies create a new medium for communicating market processes.

Teaching economics through music is an extension of the work done by William Becker (2004) and Becker and Michael Watts (1998, 2001, 2003, 2006), who examined the way that economics was taught at the college level and found that the discipline had been slow to adopt innovative approaches to teaching. Very little has been written about the relationship between economics and music. Frank Tinari and Kailash Khandke (2000) made use of popular songs dating back to the 1930s to help teach economics. More recently, G. Dirk Mateer (2004, 2006) and Joshua Hall, Robert Lawson, and Mateer (forthcoming) have expanded the set of songs related to economics by referencing newer music.

The Flash Music for Economics (www.musicforecon.com) and ABBA to Zeppelin, Led (www.divisionoflabour.com/music) websites offer a variety of songs and lyrics that instructors of economics may find useful in teaching economics. These tools complement other non-traditional approaches to economic education. Some examples include Watts' (2003) inspection of economics in literature and a burgeoning exploration of film in economics. Mateer and Herman Li (2007), Robert Sexton (2006), Mateer (2005), Avinash Dixit (2005), Becker (2004), and Don Leet and Scott Howser (2003) explore the use of films to teach introductory economics. In addition, Mike Shor (2007) has an extensive online listing of popular culture references to game theory, and Mateer (2007) has created a set of teaching resources of interest to economists that can be found on YouTube.

Hollywood, in general, has a well-documented anti-capitalist mentality; see Larry Ribstein (2004) for a more complete analysis. Of special interest is the work of Robert Formaini (2001), who examined how free markets are portrayed in film, and Michael Hammock, J. Wilson Mixon, and Michael Patrono (2000), who drew free-market environmentalist lessons from Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax*.

This note highlights two new music-related websites for economic educators. The purpose is to describe how each site works and the intended audience. Given the newness of the approach, the discussion that follows is informative in nature.

The Website:

Flash Music for Economics (www.musicforecon.com)

Mateer and Rice (2007) expisit a method by which music, lyrics, and economics can all be integrated into a classroom setting via an animation format. The musicforecon website provides instructors with access to more than forty animated musical files developed using this method. Each of the animations combines lyrics with a song and an economic interpretation. The animations create visual interest by synchronizing the lyrics to the music and utilizing pictures to create a memorable experience.

To access the materials, instructors need an ID and password. This mechanism is necessary to ensure that the materials are used only for educational purposes.¹ The website's database is sortable by

¹ The educational exemption to the copyright law makes this necessary.

field, song, artist, and year. In addition to providing the animations for instructors, the site also contains a primer for instructors to use in constructing their own materials. So far users have sent in more than a dozen animations. These submissions, along with the original content, are posted on the website for easy viewing.

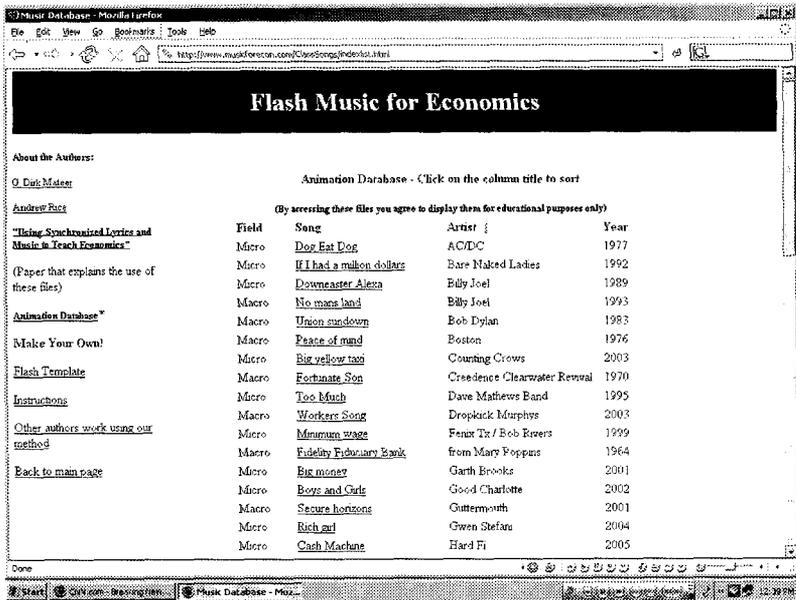


Figure 1: The main page of www.musicforecon.com.

Website usage statistics indicate that during a typical week approximately 70 unique visitors enter the site to access the animations. Moreover, more than 200 users have signed up for access to the animation database; the list ranges from a handful of high school teachers to instructors from around the world. Figure 1 shows what users see when they access the database.

Each of the animations launches in a separate window when the song title is clicked. Figures 2-4 present three screen captures of the animations.

The animations serve a number of pedagogical purposes. First, many students are audiovisual learners. We surveyed students who were exposed to the animations in a principles-level course. The responses indicate that students overwhelmingly feel that the animations add to the learning environment (see Question 1 in Table 1). How much economics students take from the media is less clear.

**Let me tell you
How it will be
There's one for you
Nineteen for me**



**"one for you and nineteen for me" is a
marginal tax rate of 95%**

Done

Start | Music Database: Media | The News: us:forec... | From AOL to Zephe...

Figure 2: The Beatles, "Taxman."

**Standing in line marking time, waiting for the welfare dime
'Cause they can't buy a job
The man in the silk suit hurries by as he catches the poor old ladies' eyes
Just for fun he says "get a job"**



There are three types of unemployment:

- Frictional (occurs because of poor information about job opportunities)
- Structural (occurs when new technologies are introduced and existing workers are displaced),
- Cyclical (occurs when the economy is in recession)

Transferring data from media-ef.musforecon.com...

Start | From AOL to Zephe... | Music Database: Media | http://media-ef.musf...

Figure 3: Bruce Hornsby, "The Way It Is."

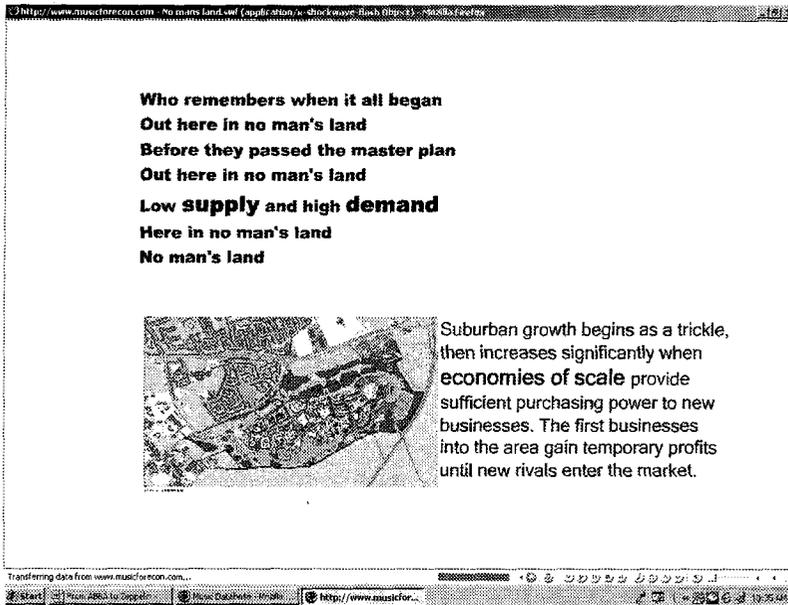


Figure 4: Billy Joel, "No Man's Land."

A sizeable majority (76 percent) of the surveyed students responded that they pay attention to the economic explanations in the animations. Our belief is that this translates into a stronger grasp of economic concepts throughout the course, but we do not yet have assessment data to support that argument. One student comment nicely summarizes how most students view the animations" "I definitely think the music adds to the educational environment. It helps to think about economic principles in scenarios other than a graph on a slide that we can't really relate to. It helps to bring the learning full circle."

Second, the method reinforces the notion that economics is personally relevant. For instance, portable music players such as iPods are ubiquitous among students, but finding a way to connect with students on their level can be difficult. Learning through music bridges this gap.

Third, instructors can show the animations during class to break up a lecture or before class to introduce a topic (Mateer and Rice, 2007). It is important to note that music has the potential to make learning more efficient for many students as well as the instructor. For instance, when introducing a topic, instructors often try to relate

the material to something that students can easily grasp. However, that approach only works when the students are familiar with the example used. Showing an animation to every student in attendance familiarizes them with the context of the example and allows everyone in the course to understand the concept from the same vantage point.

Question	Yes	Luke -warm	No	Percentage responding "yes"
Do you feel that playing music-animations before class starts adds to the educational environment?	285	4	2	99%
Do you always pay attention to the economic explanations in the animations?	224	50	19	76%

From an anonymous survey of economics students at Penn State.

The Website:

ABBA to Zeppelin, Led (www.divisionoflabour.com/music/)

This platform highlights the relationship between economics and music by posing questions related to song lyrics. An assignment is provided for each song, and the student is asked to comment on the lyrics and relate the music to economics. For example, students might be asked to reflect on the concept of diminishing marginal utility and why Mick Jagger "can't get no satisfaction," or on Neil Young's complaint that everything he wants to buy is a "Piece of Crap."

The site allows instructors to search the site by JEL codes, musical genre, and economic keywords to better choose a song for a particular assignment. While this site emphasizes introductory concepts, it digs deeper than Flash Music for Economics. The assignments are appropriate for principles, intermediate, and senior-level undergraduates.

Each selection has a link to the full lyrics and, when available, another link to the music or a video of the song. This gives both instructor and student a chance to listen to the selection. ABBA to Zeppelin, Led is ideal for collaborative learning exercises in class and also for out-of-class homework/extra credit (Hall and Lawson, 2007). As a result, music is no longer incidental to learning in the course, but an integral part of the learning process.

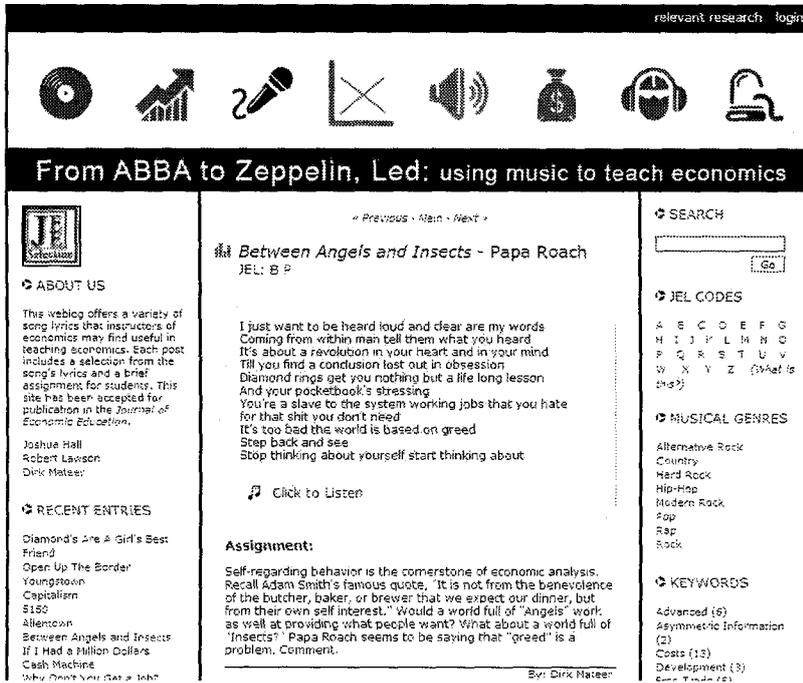


Figure 5: The main page of From ABBA to Zepplin, Led.

We suggest that the process of analyzing the lyrics promotes higher-order learning, better writing, and stronger thinking skills. In one recent classroom example, a student, commenting on the Linkin Park song “In the End,” notes that time may not be as inelastic in its supply as commonly thought. She wrote, “In the short run, a single person/organization can each increase their time spent at work by a small amount. However, in the long run more people can join the organization and add their time to the others.” It is hard to see how such a subtle observation would have been derived from a standard textbook discussion about time and elasticity.

After the website was released, the creators received dozens of e-mails with suggestions for additional songs to be added to the site. Judging by the response from faculty, many think this idea has merit. We have not formally evaluated the effectiveness of the music assignments with students, but end-of-semester survey responses have been overwhelmingly positive.²

Conclusion

With any new approach comes tradeoffs. These two websites make learning economics through music a high benefit and low cost activity. Instructors do not need to think of a song, buy the music, find the lyrics, or construct questions to use the materials. All they need is an Internet connection and the desire to change how they teach a little. Students appear to be more attentive and motivated to learn. Both of these websites are ongoing endeavors, so suggestions for the future are most welcome.

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² Here is a sampling of recent student testimonials. Student 1: "I know I personally love the music assignments. I'm a huge music addict and try to relate music to my life as much as I can. I think it is awesome how music can even [be] related to economics and also how many songs there are." Student 2: "I think they have been fun assignments, which have made it easier to reinforce basic economic concepts and principles for those students with short attention spans. Also, I never thought I would be studying, in detail, the hard core rap lyrics of 'professional crack slangers,' where we learned that the [Los Angeles] Police Department is 'looking at [African-Americans] through a microscope.' With such assignments, the registrar's office should also count this course for my diversity class requirement." Student 3: "I like it because a lot of the songs are songs that I know and that I've been singing along to for years. So it helps me learn because I can now put the lyrics into perspective and have a real life example of economics."

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