



The Historical Thinking Framework for Analyzing Songs (Easy Formula)

LEARNING WITH PRIMARY SOURCES:

You can remember song analysis with:

S.A.M.P.L.E.

Letter Meaning

- S** Source (creator & context)
- A** Audience
- M** Message (lyrics & symbolism)
- P** Purpose
- L** Larger historical meaning
- E** Evidence comparison



Analyzing a **song as a primary source** means treating it the same way historians analyze speeches, letters, sermons, or newspapers — as **evidence produced within a historical moment that reveals beliefs, experiences, power structures, and cultural meaning.**

How to Analyze a Song as a Primary Source

Step 1: Establish Historical Context (Sourcing)

Start with the basic historian questions:

Who created the song?

- Artist, songwriter, performer, or community tradition
- Social identity (race, class, religion, region)

When was it created?

- Historical moment matters more than release date sometimes.

Where did it emerge?

- Church, protest movement, labor movement, popular culture, migration communities.

Why was it created?

- Worship? Protest? Entertainment? Political messaging? Survival expression?

Example scholarly Word Usage

The song functions as a cultural artifact reflecting African American communal responses to segregation-era social conditions.

Step 2: Identify Audience and Purpose

Ask:

- Who was supposed to hear this song?
- Was it internal (community-building) or external (persuasion)?
- Was it coded communication?

Songs often served purposes such as:

Purpose	Historical Example
Resistance	Spirituals, Civil Rights songs

Purpose	Historical Example
Education	Church hymns teaching theology/literacy
Protest	Labor or freedom songs
Identity formation	National or cultural music

Step 3: Close Reading of Lyrics (Textual Analysis)

Treat lyrics like a written document.

Analyze:

Key words and repetition

- What ideas are emphasized?

Metaphors and symbolism

- Rivers, journeys, freedom, light, chains, promised land.

Tone

- Hopeful? Defiant? Mourning? Celebratory?

Biblical or cultural references

- Especially important for Black church traditions.

Example analytical question:

Does the language express literal conditions or symbolic resistance?

Step 4: Musical Elements as Historical Evidence

Historians often forget this step — but music itself carries meaning.

Consider:

- Rhythm (march-like, mournful, joyful)
- Call-and-response structure
- Improvisation
- Collective participation

These may reveal:

- African retentions
 - Church worship practices
 - Community solidarity
 - Oral tradition transmission
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Step 5: Social and Political Meaning

Ask what the song reveals about:

- Power relationships
- Social injustice
- Cultural survival
- Religious worldview
- Political mobilization

For example:

- Spirituals → coded resistance under slavery
- Gospel → theology + social uplift
- Civil Rights songs → collective action tools

Step 6: Reception & Use (Historical Impact)

A key scholarly move:

- How was the song used?
- Who sang it?
- In what spaces?

Examples:

- Churches
- Marches
- Schools
- Labor strikes
- Freedom meetings

A song's **performance context** is often as important as the lyrics.

Step 7: Corroboration (Historical Method)

Compare the song with other primary sources:

- Sermons
- Letters
- Newspapers
- Oral histories
- Church records

Think like a Historian and ask: Does this song confirm, challenge, or complicate other evidence?