

READING AND TEACHING

Redbone: The True Story of a Native American Rock Band

WRITTEN BY CHRISTIAN STAEBLER AND SONIA PAOLONI | ILLUSTRATED BY THIBAUT BALAHY | IN COOPERATION WITH THE VEGAS FAMILY
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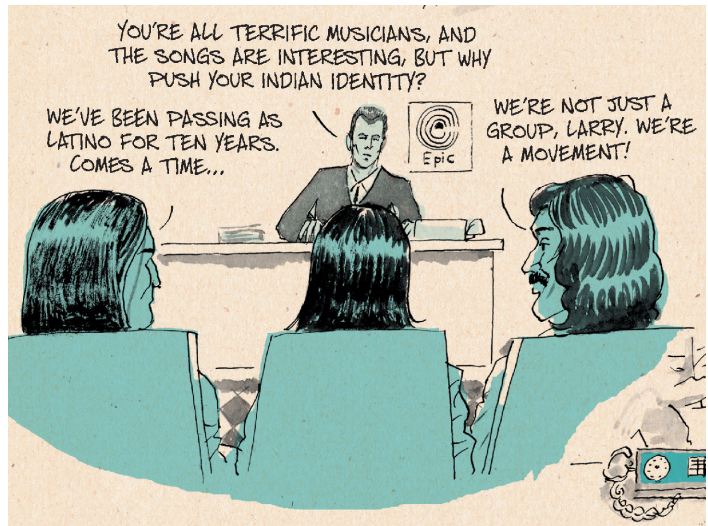
- ENHANCE CRITICAL THINKING AND MEDIA LITERACY ANALYSIS
- STIMULATE DISCUSSION WITH INQUIRY CORRELATED TO:
 - COMMON CORE ELA READING: INFORMATIONAL TEXT STANDARDS
 - AP UNITED STATES HISTORY THEMES AND HISTORICAL THINKING SKILLS
- MAKE TEXT-TO-TEXT AND TEXT-TO-WORLD CONNECTIONS
- ENGAGE MULTIMODAL LITERACIES
- EXTEND LEARNING WITH CREATIVE PROJECTS AND RESEARCH

IDW

Rationale and Pre-Reading

Activating Prior Knowledge

With an immediacy and candor that is sure to engage students, *Redbone* is a graphic memoir that depicts a turbulent time in ways that are immanently relatable. With a focus on the 1960s and early 1970s, the text artfully combines its autobiographical components with a broader chronicling of the era as well as much-needed historical background and a present-day point-of-view. The story of the rise of a classic rock band parallels that of the Native American movement so that the reader experiences a personal story illuminating a political one—and vice versa.



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Setting and Curriculum

Redbone's text complexity—it features a sophisticated structure, shifting forms of storytelling, and a rigorous knowledge demand—make it an ideal candidate for 9-12 English and U.S. History courses, or for independent reading within either discipline or in a library setting. Given its high-interest subject matter and prefiguration of issues relevant to today's students, the abundance of potential text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections make it a compelling springboard for analysis and discussion. For these reasons, the questions that appear in the following pages are correlated to the College Board's AP U.S. History Themes and Historical Thinking Skills as well as the Common Core 11-12 ELA Standards for reading informational texts. Regarding the former, the text covers Period 8:

1945-1980, particularly 8.11 (The Civil Rights Movement Expands) and 8.12 (Youth Culture of the 1960s).

Multimodal Literacies. NCTE's statement on the topic points out that the "Integration of multiple modes of communication and expression can enhance or transform the meaning of [a] work beyond illustration or decoration... It is the interplay of meaning-making systems (alphabetic, oral, visual, etc.) that teachers and students should strive to study and produce." This is an important distinction when it comes reading graphic texts such as *Redbone* wherein the narrative style relies heavily on the visuals, consistently causing readers to make inferences and then rewarding them with meanings that would not exist with the print text alone. Throughout this guide, then, we'll draw attention to multimodal elements in both reading and responding to the text.

Pre-Reading

Build Background. Consider reviewing or having students research the following: a) the origin and popularization of rock music in its first two decades; b) social and political trends of the 1960s, including the Civil Rights Movement; c) Native American cultural traditions such as potlach, sweat lodge, and the sun dance, and the history of Native Americans following the closing of the "frontier" at the end of the nineteenth century. Of particular interest might be the banning of drum patterns, chanting, and the ghost dance, all of which were viewed as threats because of their power and ability to inspire.

Critical Thinking Question. To frame the reading of the text as a historian might, ask students to what extent it serves as a primary or secondary source. As a largely first-person account by Pat Vegas, it would seem to be the former while the fact that his words/memories are filtered through the work of creators Staebler, Paolini, and Balahy would render it the latter.

Discussion Questions

Correlations Key:

**AP U.S. HISTORY
HISTORICAL THINKING
SKILL**

**AP U.S. HISTORY
THEME**

**COMMON CORE
ELA STANDARD**

1. The main narrative begins in 1962. What were the historical, social, and cultural contexts for the U.S. during that period? How do you think they might influence the events that will be chronicled over roughly the next decade? (p. 13, 68)

CONTEXTUALIZATION • SOCIAL STRUCTURES • POLITICS AND POWER • RI.11-12.2

2. When the two brothers make “Vegas” their stage name, it marks the beginning of their trying to pass as Mexican and conceal their Indian identity. What are the social and economic forces that could cause people to do this, and what are the effects of doing so? Additionally, what are some other examples of “passing” in different time periods or involving different races or ethnicities? (pp. 15, 26)

MAKING CONNECTIONS • AMERICAN AND NATIONAL IDENTITY • RI.11-12.2 • RI.11-12.3

3. When Hendrix comments that it’s “not easy bein’ Black or Indian in this country,” the text makes an explicit parallel between the African-American and Indian communities in the 1960s. Can similar parallels be drawn during other periods (including today)? What factors affect the success of alliances between marginalized groups? (pp. 25-26)



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ARGUMENTATION • MAKING CONNECTIONS • AMERICAN AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

4. Why did the Vegas brothers wait three years before forming Redbone? What are the risks of being a pioneering first member of a specific group to break/cross a social or legal line? Use examples from politics, sports, the arts, and other cultural spheres to support your opinion. (p. 30)

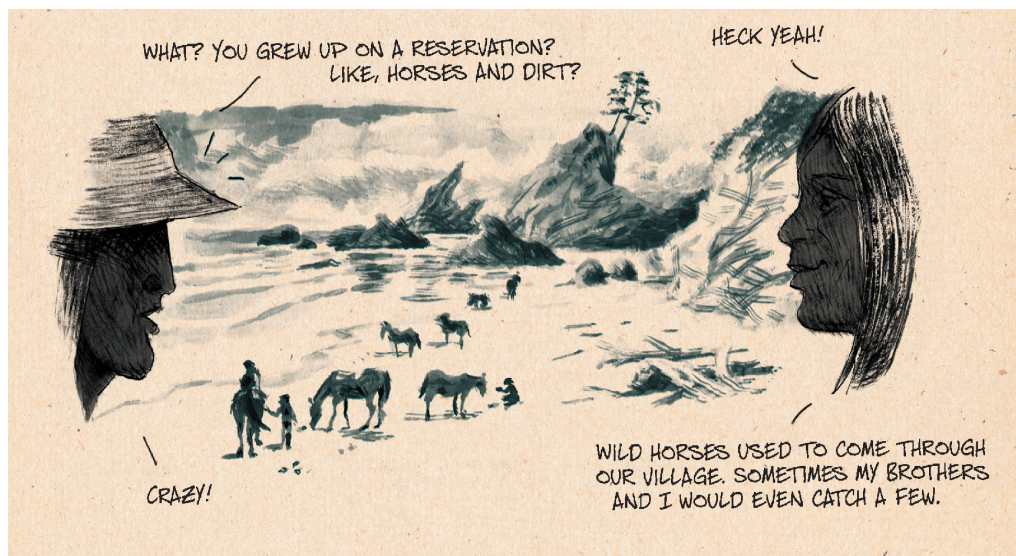
DEVELOPMENTS AND PROCESSES • ARGUMENTATION • RI.11-12.1

5. How does Tony Bellamy’s early life reflect the American Dream via an archetypal “showbiz” escape from socio-economic conditions? Compare and contrast that path to success in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—for example, is it harder or easier to reach an audience today? Critical thinking follow-up: using the distinction of equality vs equity, does the “rags to riches” narrative tend to hinder or enhance social activism and progress? (pp. 32-33)

ARGUMENTATION • AMERICAN AND NATIONAL IDENTITY • RI.11-12.1

6. Growing up, Pete DePoe experienced a very different type of Indian life than the other members of the band. With this in mind, what are the limits of historical thinking that treats groups of people as monolithic without accounting for variance in conditions and experiences? (p. 44)

ARGUMENTATION • AMERICAN AND REGIONAL CULTURE • SOCIAL STRUCTURES



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7. In the section about ethnocide and assimilationism, why does the layout shift to a conventional panel grid and the artwork become colorless? Also, how would you evaluate the credibility of the sources (p. 157) used for the facts presented about the American Indian boarding schools? (pp. 45-50)

SOURCING AND SITUATION • CLAIMS AND EVIDENCE IN SOURCES • AMERICAN AND NATIONAL IDENTITY • RI.11-12.7

8. When Larry Cohen asks, “But why push your Indian identity?” and Pat responds that “We’re a movement!” how does this exchange represent a turning point? What are the benefits and dangers of associating pop culture works and creators with specific social causes and movements? (p. 57)

CONTEXTUALIZATION • WORK, EXCHANGE, AND TECHNOLOGY • SOCIAL STRUCTURES • RI.11-12.2 • RI.11-12.3



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9. In comics and graphic novels, a splash page occurs when an image takes up an entire page. Why is this technique used when the band finishes recording and prepares to perform as Redbone for the first time? How does it celebrate that moment in time? (p. 61) **RI.11-12.7**

10. When Standing Rock is discussed, Pat states that “the current fight is a continuation of struggles from the ‘60s.” What evidence supports this assertion, and how might cultural products such as this book contribute to “continuing” social justice efforts? (p. 67 ff.)

DEVELOPMENTS AND PROCESSES • SOURCING AND SITUATION
• ARGUMENTATION • GEOGRAPHY AND THE ENVIRONMENT •
POLITICS AND POWER • RI.11-12.1



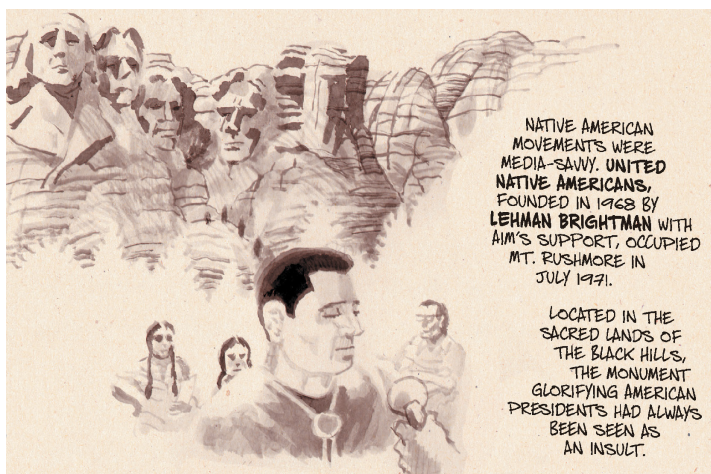
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11. Disproportionate incarceration and exploitative prison labor occurred in Minnesota in the 1960s. Recall/review: In what other time periods and with what other marginalized groups have these phenomena existed in U.S. history? Analysis: What are the forces, both social and economic, that allow them to persist? (p. 69)

MAKING CONNECTIONS • WORK, EXCHANGE, AND TECHNOLOGY • SOCIAL STRUCTURES

12. As the text recounts, AIM took its name from a desire to reclaim “the word ‘Indian.’” How does the naming of political and activist groups affect how the public sees them as well as their own sense of identity? Support your opinion by referencing groups from the American Revolution (AP Period 3) through today (AP Period 9) as needed. (p. 70)

MAKING CONNECTIONS • ARGUMENTATION • AMERICAN AND NATIONAL IDENTITY • SOCIAL STRUCTURES



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13. The theme of occupying certain locales—Alcatraz, Mt. Rushmore, the Department of Interior building, Wounded Knee—is a recurring one, and one that has been repeated more recently by others (e.g., 2011’s Occupy Wall Street). Do such events represent an effective strategy for concrete social or political change, or does their value lie more in symbolic or emotional victories, as Pat seems to suggest in regard to Wounded Knee (p. 98)? (pp. 71-72, 74, 94-98)

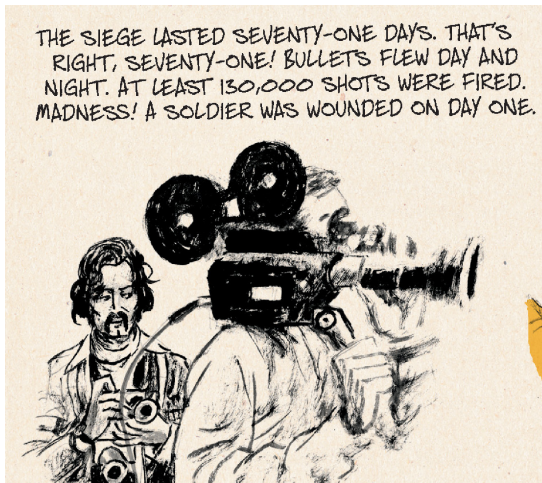
ARGUMENTATION • AMERICAN AND NATIONAL IDENTITY • RI.11-12.3

14. Given the ethnocide covered earlier in the text, why do you think Leonard Crow Dog felt it was necessary to follow a “spiritual path” to preserve Native Americans’ “cultural roots”? (p. 73)

CONTEXTUALIZATION • SOCIAL STRUCTURES • RI.11-12.3

15. The death of Wesley Bad Heart Bull and the subsequent lack of justice acted as a catalyst to a riot and escalating tension that eventually led to the siege of Wounded Knee. How do these events echo others in U.S. history from the Boston Massacre to the killing of Emmett Till or George Floyd? (p. 93)

DEVELOPMENTS AND PROCESSES • MAKING CONNECTIONS • POLITICS AND POWER



THE SIEGE LASTED SEVENTY-ONE DAYS. THAT'S RIGHT, SEVENTY-ONE! BULLETS FLEW DAY AND NIGHT. AT LEAST 130,000 SHOTS WERE FIRED. MADNESS! A SOLDIER WAS WOUNDED ON DAY ONE.

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16. How does the 1973 siege at Wounded Knee show the importance of a free press with access to newsworthy events as they happen? In what ways does the presence of the news media represent an extension of AIM's policy of filming police abuses (p. 70)? (p. 95)

MAKING CONNECTIONS • SOCIAL STRUCTURES • RI.11-12.3

17. The record label justifies its refusal to release “We Were All Wounded at Wounded Knee” by claiming that it was an “incitement to domestic rebellion”; soon afterwards the song is banned from U.S. performances,

leading Pat to say that it “cost us our career.” Is this an example of how the entertainment industry should operate, with businesses understandably making decisions based on their self-interest, or is it a sign of corporate censorship that is not in the public interest... and which can be seen as persisting to this day? (pp. 101, 104, 109)

ARGUMENTATION • WORK, EXCHANGE, AND TECHNOLOGY • RI.11-12.1

18. How does the introduction Redbone receives on French TV in 1973 trivialize and dismiss both the band and the Native American movement as a whole? On the other hand, should entertainers and celebrities be prepared for not being taken seriously? Why? (p. 111)

ARGUMENTATION • WORK, EXCHANGE, AND TECHNOLOGY



THEY'RE REAL INDIANS, AND THEY'RE ON THE WARPATH. BUT INSTEAD OF BEING ANGRY LIKE THEIR BROTHERS BACK IN AMERICA...

...THEY SING SONGS. THEY ARE... REDBONE!

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19. Draw attention to the storytelling on page 124, highlighting the way it leverages the multimodal possibilities of the medium. After pointing out that instead of images that complement or illustrate the print text about the careers of Pat’s former bandmates, these passages present art that tells a parallel narrative about the trip to Lolly’s gravesite. Ask: Why do you think the creators chose this approach? How does the juxtaposition of divergent print and art modes enrich the reader’s experience of both? [RI.11-12.7](#)

20. What is the emotional effect of the text’s disrupting its structure by reversing its chronological order and returning to Pat’s early life in the final section? (pp. 132-144) [RI.11-12.5](#)



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21. Evaluate the effectiveness of the “framing story” that has appeared throughout the book. Would the narrative have been as compelling if it had been presented in the third-person or more directly in the first-person, with Pat simply addressing the reader rather than interacting with other characters? In what respects have the creators concealed—and possibly enhanced—what is essentially a journalistic interview with a family drama? (pp. 145-147) [RI.11-12.3](#) • [RI.11-12.5](#)

Learning Applications

Conducting Oral Histories

Guide students to see that in essence *Redbone* presents an oral history from Pat Vegas in graphic form. Then have students identify the verbal prompts his children and Acela Cortese provide to elicit information, and use these as models to help prepare for gathering oral histories (either individually or in small groups) on topics of their choosing. Remind them to:

- Craft open-ended questions that will have subjects telling stories.
- Select interview spaces with a minimum of background noise and potential interruptions. Check all recording tech in advance to make sure it works.
- Keep interview etiquette in mind—making sure they are on time, do not correct or contradict the subject, and so on.
- Plan the interview with the final product in mind. How long will it be? Should one subject be interviewed in depth or multiple subjects more briefly, compiling a “360-degree view” of a specific topic or moment in history?

Creating Minicomics

Have students draft personal narratives (or repurpose oral histories—see above) on a topic of social or historical interest, and then have them transform them into comics by first writing scripts. Allow them to team up with other students who may be more comfortable producing artwork, and then coach them to:

- Plan out their stories visually by using thumbnail sketches of how each panel and page should be composed.
- Use *Redbone* as a mentor text notable for its pacing and clarity of information as well as how different types of print text (e.g., the singing of song lyrics) are conveyed by expressive lettering.
- Consider using comics creation apps that can facilitate both the creative process and the publishing of the finished work.

Making Audiovisual Presentations

To flesh out the brief passages about influential musicians and composers of the era (e.g., Jimmy/Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Quincy Jones) that appear throughout *Redbone*, assign students to locate relevant archival video to present to the class. Students should consider:

- Composing a biographical sketch that outlines key achievements and the figure's lasting cultural effect.
- Using a slideshow format that can directly import video assets and complement them with graphics and bulleted print text.
- Selecting the most representative and/or popular songs, and including audio-only clips when video is not available.

Researching Historic Media

As a band, Redbone defied the pop culture expectations of the time because rock music was not typically associated with Native Americans; indeed, you may want to explain that media representations of Indians over generations were generally insulting if not dehumanizing. Given this historical context, support media literacy and critical thinking skills by asking students to conduct research into pre-1970 pop culture artifacts depicting Native Americans and their culture. They can share their results with the class, offering an analysis of the media assets they find.

- Encourage students to explore a range of media that encompasses movies, TV, comic books and strips, political cartoons, novels in the Western genre, and logos and brand names.
- Have them reflect on how *Redbone*—as well as Native Americans who rose to prominence in areas such as film, science, and politics—combated negative stereotypes and paved the way for others rather than being immediately silence.
- Suggest that students provide a counterpoint to these stereotypical depictions by also researching positive representations of Native Americans in the post-1970 era.

Learning Extensions

Additional Resources

For those who want to learn more about Redbone, the backmatter is a good place to start. An afterward by writer Christian Staebler recounts his journey from fan to the founder of the redbone.fr website to co-creating *Redbone: The True Story of a Native American Rock Band*. Of particular note is his observation—which is a potential springboard for discussion—that “Europeans had discovered an innovative group where Americans saw only a one-hit wonder, or even deliberately overlooked artistic expression from a cultural minority.” An interview with Pat Vegas is also of interest insofar as it both provides additional biographical information and updates parts of his story.



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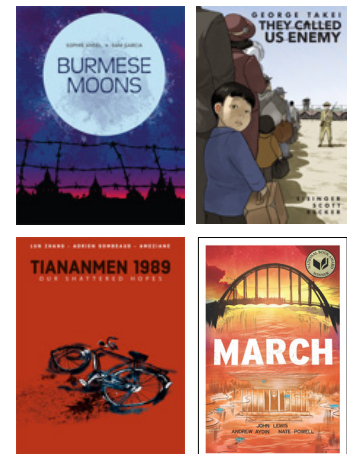
Further Reading

The bibliography on page 157 lists eleven titles that would allow students to follow up on the themes and topics of *Redbone*, from the history of AIM to American Indian boarding schools. As students read any of these books, they can record their thoughts and responses which then can be compiled into an annotated bibliography. (A writing product that in turn finds a model in the annotated discography appearing on page 158.)

While *Redbone* can be paired with any number of works of fiction or poetry, M. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* may be especially rewarding for advanced readers. Published in 1968 and winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1969—the same year Redbone was founded—this novel shows how Native Americans often struggled in institutions such as boarding schools and the military in the years following World War II.

For an additional graphic text that focuses on the Native American experience, you may want to preview *Ghost River: The Fall and Rise of the Conestoga*, which tells the bracing story of a brutal massacre that occurred in 1763. It can be downloaded for free here: <https://read.ghostriver.org>

Finally, other nonfiction IDW titles on the themes of civil rights and racial/political oppression include *Burmese Moons*, *They Called Us Enemy*, *Tiananmen 1989: Our Shattered Hopes*, and *March*.



A Note on Language. Those using *Redbone* in a classroom setting should know that on rare occasions it includes coarse language. As with all reading material, we suggest you preview it with an eye to your institution and readership.