

Historica Canada Education Portal

I'll Never Smile Again: The Ruth Lowe Story

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Ruth Lowe biography from [The Canadians](#) series. Following the untimely death of her husband, Ruth Lowe wrote the song, *I'll Never Smile Again*. It became one of the most popular songs during the Second World War.

Aims

These activities encourage students to consider the significance of Ruth Lowe, and to reflect on the role that music plays in society.

Background

Through powerful tones and sensational lyrics, music often expresses emotions for which people cannot find words. In 1939, Toronto-born songwriter Ruth Lowe wrote the song *I'll Never Smile Again*. A song that encapsulated the wartime sentiments of soldiers and their loved ones, it quickly became one of the most popular songs of the Second World War. It emphasized not just the love felt between two individuals but also the grief of their separation and the hope of seeing each other once again. The lyrics were the result of one of Lowe's most sorrowful periods in her

life. After just two years of marriage, Lowe's husband died as the result of an operation. Her sadness following the tragic loss stirred her to express her feelings through her music. Released in 1940, *I'll Never Smile Again* was a great success and the first great hit for Frank Sinatra.

Following the release of *I'll Never Smile Again*, Lowe's life changed dramatically. People wanted to know all about the young Canadian who had written this wonderful song and the story behind its creation. She made a number of public appearances and quickly rose to fame in the music industry. Lowe had many other successful songs, including *Put Your Dreams Away*, however none received the acclaim that *I'll Never Smile Again* did. It truly was the top hit of 1940.

Ruth Lowe enjoyed a life of celebrity until her death in 1981 at the age of 66. Today she is remembered as a musical giant of the 20th century. Lowe's greatest tragedy in life won her a triumphant career, and the respect and adoration of thousands.

Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 4 hours

Procedures:

Group/Class Activities

1. Organize your students into pairs to complete one of the following interviews. Make sure that all 3 topics are selected for presentation. Each requires about 2-3 minutes to present to the whole class.

- Recreate an interview with Ruth Lowe a few months after the release of *I'll Never Smile Again*. Questions to consider could include her ideas about the song, why she feels it became so popular and how the success of it has affected her life.
- Simulate an interview with a member of Canada's military (Army, Air Force or Navy). Questions to consider could include information about the individual and what the song *I'll Never Smile Again* means to them.
- Re-enact an interview with a woman on the home front whose husband or boyfriend has gone to fight in the war. Questions to consider could include information about the individual who has gone to war, her own position at this time, and what the song *I'll Never Smile Again* means to her.

After the presentations as a class, compare Ruth Lowe's interpretation of the song's success with the feelings of others toward the song. What makes Lowe's song so powerful to so many? Is there a song on the radio today that invokes such widespread emotion?

2. Arrange students into groups of 4 or 5 to create a [Heritage Minute](#) about the life of Ruth Lowe and the success of her song *I'll Never Smile Again*. Students must decide how and why Lowe is important to Canadian History and incorporate their view into their Minute. Ask students to compare their views on her importance with that of the other groups.

Individual/Class Projects

3. Following the death of her first husband, Ruth Lowe wrote the popular song *I'll Never Smile Again* to express her sorrow. Have students think

quietly for 2 or 3 minutes and write down a short list of things that inspire them and why these things are inspiring. These can be recorded in a table. You might have them identify things that relate to the five senses (sight, smell, taste, touch, hearing).

Have students then write a poem or song based on the things they feel inspire them.

4. Before beginning the following task, invite students to discuss what music means to them through a Think/Pair/Share exercise on the question: Is music an important aspect of our society? Why or why not? Allow students to think about their ideas on the question quietly for one minute then share their thoughts with a peer in the class for two to three minutes. When they are finished, record key points made by the students as they discuss this as a class for five to ten minutes.

Much of the success of *I'll Never Smile Again* rests with the ways in which the song's sorrowful lyrics speak to the social values of the period surrounding the Second World War. The lyrics have come to represent the generation who listened to them. How are songs we listen to today going to represent us in the future? Have students identify their favourite song, present it to the class, and discuss the following questions.

- What is the name of the song?
- Who performs it?
- What type of music is it? (i.e. rock, r&b, hip hop, country, etc.)
- What is the song about?
- Why do you like it?
- Choose three lines from the song and explain what they are about.
- Does the song comment on the social values of today?
- Does your music really reflect your ideas?

Following the presentations, ask students: Are they satisfied with how their generation is represented by their music? Discuss this as a class.

5. During the Great Depression many families lost nearly everything. Ruth Lowe's family faced tough times during this period. Despite bad circumstances, the one thing they always had was a piano. Reflect on the significance of this item. Imagine you and your family are living through the 1930's. What item might your family hang on to and why? Would all members of your family agree? How could a fair decision that was acceptable to everyone be made?

6. Discuss Ruth Lowe's importance as a female Canadian icon/hero. As a class brainstorm a list of Canadian female artists and then rank according to students' perceptions on the contributions the artists have made to Canadian identity. In what ways can they be described as role models for today's youth?

7. Ask students how many of them had heard of Ruth Lowe before this class. For those who had, where did they hear of her? For those who had not, ask why they feel this might be the case. Discuss their responses in terms of the following comment made at the end of the film: "...that's the beauty of when you can produce something that lives on... that you don't die, you never go away because you can hear the music somewhere, someplace..."

8. In 1981, Ruth Lowe was honoured with a Grammy award and inducted into the American Music Hall of Fame. A Canadian citizen, she has not yet been recognised in the Canadian Music Hall of Fame. What are your thoughts on this? Write a letter to the Canadian Music Hall of Fame expressing your position on the matter.

Resources

[Ruth Lowe Worksheet](#)

[Ruth Lowe - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[I'll Never Smile Again - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Second World War – The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Women and War - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

Citron, Paula. "Son Wants to Share Composer Mom's Legacy," *Toronto Star* Thursday, December 26, 1991.

[Facts Canada. "Sunday Newsletter: August 26, 2001"](#)