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## Who was Che Guevara?

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## Who was Che Guevara?

Kaleb Harkins

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### Explanation of Format

- To answer this question, I have chosen several musical selections that I feel represent different stages/aspects of Che's life. For this presentation, I have provided links to these selections along with lyrics, and then a description of my reasoning for each piece.

### Music

- **First Selection:** "I Got a Name" by Jim Croce
- <https://youtu.be/YcqauC49Xmc>
- **Lyrics:**

Like the pine trees lining the winding road  
I got a name, I got a name  
Like the singing bird and the croaking toad  
I got a name, I got a name  
And I carry it with me like my daddy did  
But I'm living the dream that he kept hid

Movin' me down the highway, rollin' me down the highway  
Movin' ahead so life won't pass me by

Like the north wind whistlin' down the sky  
I've got a song, I've got a song  
Like the whippoorwill and the baby's cry  
I've got a song, I've got a song  
And I carry it with me and I sing it loud  
If it gets me nowhere, I'll go there proud

Movin' me down the highway, rollin' me down the highway  
Movin' ahead so life won't pass me by

And I'm gonna go there free

Like the fool I am and I'll always be  
I've got a dream, I've got a dream  
They can change their minds but they can't change me  
I've got a dream, I've got a dream  
Oh, I know I could share it if you'd want me to  
If you're goin' my way, I'll go with you

Movin' me down the highway, rollin' me down the highway  
 Movin' ahead so life won't pass me by  
 Movin' me down the highway, rollin' me down the highway  
 Movin' ahead so life won't pass me by

### Explanation

- Ernesto “Che” Guevara was born in Argentina during the year 1928. Many descriptions of Che’s early childhood highlight his asthma, the fact that he was born into a middle class family, and his enrollment in medical school.
- While this stage in his life may seem bare, I feel it is noteworthy, considering it was during this time that Che received the very first influences for the political views that would later define his life.
- As for the music, I feel childhood is a crucial time in beginning to discover who you are (your name) and what you want to give the world (your song). These two things together make up a person’s dream for his or her life. For Che’s childhood, I was immediately drawn to this piece, and I could picture him already forming what his dream would be.

### Music

- **Second Selection:** “Take a Letter Miss Jones” from Willy Russell’s *Blood Brothers*
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0TJAXRUnf7Y>
- **Lyrics:**

Take a letter, miss Jones, quote,  
 I regret to inform you,  
 that owing to circumstances  
 quite beyond our control  
 it's a premature retirement  
 for those surplus to requirement  
 I'm afraid it's a sign of the times, miss jones,  
 an unfortunate sign of the times

take a letter, miss Jones,  
 due to the world situation  
 the shrinking pound, the global slump  
 and the price of oil  
 I'm afraid we must fire you  
 we no longer require you  
 it's just another sign of the times, miss jones,  
 a most miserable sign of the times

take a letter, miss Jones,  
 my dear miss Jones, we'd like to thank you  
 many years of splendid service  
 etcetera, blah blah blah  
 you've been a perfect poppet  
 yes that's right, miss Jones, you've got it  
 it's just another sign of the times,  
 miss Jones, it's just another sign of the times

dry your eyes, miss Jones  
 it's not as bad as it seems you  
 get used to being idle  
 in a year or two  
 unemployment's such a pleasure  
 these days, we call it leisure  
 it's just another sign of the times,  
 miss jones, it's just another sign of the times

there's a young man on the street, miss jones  
 he's walking round in circles,  
 he's old before his time, but still too young to know  
 don't look at him, don't cry though  
 this living on the giro  
 is only a sign of the times,  
 miss Jones, it's just another sign of the  
 miss Jones, it's just another sign of the times...

### Explanation

- This song and the next will represent the second stage”of Che’s life, which I considere to be the events outlined in *The Motorcycle Diaries*.
- One of the most notable aspects of the book is hearing the account of the plight of so many people. Che’s description of the sick and the poor is striking, and at times, very moving. Soon after comes the criticism that much of the rich and powerful rarely seem to notice the former.
- My mind went to this song from a musical entitled *Blood Brothers*. It too emphasizes the struggles, and often unfairness, between different classes. Though the musical takes place during 80s in England, I feel this song sympathizes with the suffering of lower class individuals (much like Che claimed to do) that is just written off as a “sign of the times.”

## Music

- **Third Selection:** “Waiting On the World to Change” by John Mayer
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pquX7Ya4-wE>
- **Lyrics:**

One, two, one, two, three

Me and all my friends  
 We're all misunderstood  
 They say we stand for nothing and  
 There's no way we ever could  
 Now we see everything that's going wrong  
 With the world and those who lead it  
 We just feel like we don't have the means  
 To rise above and beat it

So we keep waiting (waiting)  
 Waiting on the world to change  
 We keep on waiting (waiting)  
 Waiting on the world to change

It's hard to beat the system  
 When we're standing at a distance  
 So we keep waiting (waiting)  
 Waiting on the world to change

Now if we had the power  
 To bring our neighbors home from war  
 They woulda never missed a Christmas  
 No more ribbons on the door

And when you trust your television  
 What you get is what you got  
 'Cause when they own the information  
 Oh, they can bend it all they want

That's why we're waiting (waiting)  
 Waiting on the world to change  
 We keep on waiting (waiting)  
 Waiting on the world to change

It's not that we don't care  
 We just know that the fight ain't fair  
 So we keep on waiting (waiting)  
 Waiting on the world to change

And we're still waiting (waiting)  
 Waiting on the world to change  
 We keep on waiting (waiting)  
 Waiting on the world to change

One day our generation  
 Is gonna rule the population  
 So we keep on waiting (waiting)  
 Waiting on the world to change  
 No we keep on waiting (waiting)  
 Waiting on the world to change  
 We keep on waiting (waiting)  
 Waiting on the world to change  
 Waiting on the world to change  
 Waiting on the world to change  
 Waiting on the world to change

### Explanation

- If the second song described the setting/events depicted in *The Motorcycle Diaries*, then I feel this song describes Che's reaction to them.
- Many times throughout the book, Che expresses his displeasure at seeing the mistreatment of the sick and poor. He often brutally and honestly voices his disdain for the people who he believes allow these conditions to continue, such as North Americans (along with their governments), the rich, the powerful, and the privileged.
- Despite this clear opinion, Che has not yet moved to become the revolutionary many knew him to be. Instead, he is much like John Mayer in this song: a young man who sees something he does not like in the world and, at least for the time being, must wait on it to change.

### Music

- **Fourth Selection:** "A Change Is Gonna Come" by Sam Cooke
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Up\\_e3GRV484](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Up_e3GRV484)
- **Lyrics:**

I was born by the river in a little tent  
 Oh, and just like the river I've been running ev'r since  
 It's been a long, a long time coming  
 But I know a change gonna come, oh yes it will

It's been too hard living, but I'm afraid to die  
 'Cause I don't know what's up there, beyond the sky  
 It's been a long, a long time coming  
 But I know a change gonna come, oh yes it will

I go to the movie and I go downtown  
 Somebody keep tellin' me, don't hang around  
 It's been a long, a long time coming  
 But I know a change gonna come, oh yes it will

Then I go to my brother  
 And I say, brother help me please  
 But he winds up knockin' me  
 Back down on my knees, oh

There have been times that I thought I couldn't last for long  
 But now I think I'm able to carry on  
 It's been a long, a long time coming  
 But I know a change is gonna come, oh yes it will

## Explanation

- Shortly after the events of *The Motorcycle Diaries*, Che, inspired from his trip, returns home and finishes his medical degree, intent on “saving the world” with medicine.
- Again, much like his childhood, this stage of Che’s life seems rather thin. However, I feel it is important to note that Che is now a “man on a mission.” He is now striving to make the change discussed in the previous selection. I feel that we can start to see Che’s passion in this part of his life, a passion that will eventually turn him into a controversial revolutionary instead of a helpful doctor.
- To contrast with “waiting” for a change, I liked having a song that stated a change “is” coming to highlight Che’s change in attitude. Also, knowing that Che’s life takes a somewhat darker turn later in life (going from medicine to murder), I found the background music to be more subdued and serious than the upbeat song before it. Lastly, this piece was written in response to racial segregation and mistreatment, even though that was not exactly the main goal or fight for Che, he claimed that equality was an important issue to him.

## Music

- **Fifth Selection:** “War Is Starting Again” by Lightnin’ Hopkins
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6kVj79BFbOI>
- **Lyrics:**

Woe, you know this world done get tangled now, baby  
 Woe, I believe they fixin' to start a war again  
 Woe, you know this world done get tangled now  
 Yeah, I believe they gonna start a war again

Yeah, there gonna be a mothers start to worry  
 Yes, there gonna be many a girls will lose a friend

Well, I got news this morning  
 Right now they need a million men  
 Woe, I got news this mornin'  
 Right now they need a million men

Woe, you know, I been overseas once  
 Oh, Lightnin' don't want to go there again  
 Lord have mercy!  
 All right!

Yeah, you know my girlfriend got a boyfriend in the Army  
 That fool better go overseas  
 You know I don't hate it so bad because you know  
 That's a better break for me  
 Woe, this world's a-tangled  
 Yeah, they finally had a war again

## Explanation

- In less than a year, Che eventually abandoned his pursuits in medicine and decided the best way to help change the world would be through revolutionary practices. These radical ideals would anger a lot of people and eventually cause war, hence the title of the song.
- In addition to a title that fits appropriately with Che's more aggressive outlook on the world, I feel the music helps convey this idea further with a much grittier and harsher sound than the previous two selections. I would also like to point out the lyrics of the last two verses. Hopkins, like most people, states that he has no desire to return to war, yet he also admits it is a better break for him in terms of his love life. This could relate to Che, who was someone who may have said he did not want to fight but may have started a fight anyway for a "better break."

## Music



- **Sixth Selection:** “Red Detachment of Women” performed by the Chinese Revolutionary Opera
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vWoE6Wu\\_AJI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vWoE6Wu_AJI)

### Explanation

- This song, like the last one, highlights Che’s turn to war activities. However, this selection also represents Che’s, along with Fidel Castro’s, efforts to overthrow the democratic government of Cuba.
- Che and Castro’s political beliefs were very communist/socialist-oriented, which caused controversy in that era of history and still today. Che believed this political stance would be the answer to the difference he wanted to see in the world and, as a result, many guerilla missions took place--the most notable being the Cuban revolution.
- For this selection, I wanted to focus on the reason for the music rather than what it sounds like. Chinese Revolutionary Opera is highly political in nature and was most prominent during the Cultural Revolution in China. During this time, this genre of music was used to entertain, but mainly to “educate” the masses on a variety of political stances and government ideas. These messages often included plots that presented the anti-government revolutionaries as “bad guys” (and even American soldiers in one production) and were always sure to promote the ruling communist regime. Though it may not have been presented in the same way, I felt this style of music, a piece of history, was fitting to describe Che’s life during, and perhaps even more so after, the Cuban revolution.

### Music

- **Seventh Selection:** “This Is the Moment” from *Jekyll and Hyde* by Wildhorn, Cuden, and Bricusse
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XB8ILnnR95s>
- **Lyrics:**

This is the moment!

This is the day,  
When I send all my doubts and demons  
On their way!  
Every endeavor,

I have made, ever  
Is coming into play,  
Is here and now, today!

This is the moment  
This is the time,  
When the momentum and the moment  
Are in rhyme!  
Give me this moment  
This precious chance

I'll gather up my past  
And make some sense at last!  
This is the moment,  
When all I've done  
All of the dreaming,  
Scheming and screaming,

Become one!  
This is the day  
See it sparkle and shine  
When all I've lived for  
Becomes mine!  
For all these years,

I've faced the world alone  
And now the time has come  
To prove to them  
I've made it on my own!  
This is the moment  
My final test

Destiny beckoned,  
I never reckoned,  
Second best!  
I won't look down  
I must not fall!  
This is the moment,

The sweetest moment of them all!  
This is the moment!  
Damn all the odds!  
This day, or never,  
I'll sit forever  
With the gods!

When I look back,  
 I will always recall,  
 Moment for moment,  
 This was the moment,  
 The greatest moment  
 Of them all!

## Explanation

- For the remaining selections, I feel they represent different perspectives of Che's final days and ultimately the culmination of his life. This song and the next will represent one view, and the last two will describe another.
- After the successful guerilla mission in Cuba, Fidel Castro became the leader and appointed Che as the head of La Cabaña prison. Eventually, Che would also become president of the national bank and minister of industry. While spending time in these roles, Che played a large part in turning Cuba into a communist country. He also gave many speeches and planned more revolutions in an effort to continue this communist growth around the world before his eventual capture and execution.
- I think this song fits well with the first perspective of Che being a respected success. I believe that if Che were personally asked which era of his life would define his greatest achievement, this stage/song would be his answer. This musical is based on the well-known story of Jekyll and Hyde. Dr. Jekyll is the character singing, and he is on the brink of what he thinks will be a revolutionary breakthrough in the scientific field, though many are yet to be convinced. I find the two personalities (Che's and Dr. Jekyll's) to be quite similar.

## Music

- **Eighth Selection:** "Hasta Siempre, Comandante" by Carlos Puebla

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMH22oaAoUc>

- **Lyrics:**

Aprendimos a quererte  
 Desde la histórica altura  
 Donde el sol de tu bravura  
 Le puso cerco a la muerte.

We learned to love you  
 since the historical height  
 where the sun of your bravery  
 laid siege to death.

[Estribillo]:

[Chorus]

Aquí se queda la clara,  
La entrañable transparencia  
De tu querida presencia,  
Comandante Che Guevara.

Here remains the white,  
the beloved clearness,  
of your dear presence,  
Commander Che Guevara.

Tu mano gloriosa y fuerte  
Sobre la historia dispara

Your hand, glorious and strong,  
shoots over history

Cuando todo Santa Clara  
Se despierta para verte.  
Vienes quemando la brisa  
Con soles de primavera  
Para plantar la bandera  
Con la luz de tu sonrisa.

when all of Santa Clara  
wakes up to see you.  
You come burning the breeze  
with suns of the spring  
to plant the flag  
with the light of your smile.

Tu amor revolucionario  
Te conduce a nueva empresa  
Donde esperan la firmeza  
De tu brazo libertario.

Your revolutionary love  
drives you to a new enterprise  
where they wait for the firmness  
of your liberating arm.

Seguiremos adelante  
Como junto a tí seguimos  
Y con Fidel te decimos  
Hasta siempre Comandante.

We will continue forward,  
as we continue together with you,  
and with Fidel we tell you:  
“Farewell, Commander!”

## Explanation

- Again, this song represents the response that Che was a success and a figure to be admired (in this case, almost excessively). However, instead of the song coming from Che’s perspective, this song comes from other people.
- Of all the songs listed, this is the only one that is genuinely about Che Guevara. The original version, which is listed here, was written by Carlos Puebla; since then, many covers have been performed by a variety of artists. I felt this selection must be included, as it is a real response to Che’s life from actual people. The song clearly praises him as a leader and person while striving to keep his memory alive.

## Music

- **Ninth Selection:** “Piano Suite Op. 25 Musette” by Arnold Schoenberg
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39x0Ypi4gTc>

## Explanation

- As I stated earlier, I wanted to depict two responses to Che’s life: the first being a respected success ,and the other not as much.
- While Che held many high positions and was well regarded by many, his methods were not always the most ethical. In fact, while heading the La Cabaña prison, it is believed several hundred people were sentenced to death by Che. Of course, there were many more instances of killings during revolutionary missions, and at times we see Che show disdain for different groups of people, though he speaks of “equality.” It is because of these reasons that many find Che controversial.
- The music I selected is described as atonal. This means the piece lacks a tonal center and therefore may sound chaotic and strange to our ears, since most of the music we listen to is tonal in nature. Meanwhile, there are no words. I felt this would be best to start describing this perspective of Che. There is plenty evidence of Che’s harshness at times and how his actions did not always match his words, which I find fits well with an atonal piece. I get the sense of a warped or distorted picture while listening, and, when considering what some view as Che’s success through the lenses of murder and cruelty, I feel Che becomes distorted as well.

## Music

- **Tenth Selection:** “Prelude in G Minor” by Sergei Rachmaninoff
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2GKgFZ\\_ioQ&start\\_radio=1&list=RDI2GKgFZ\\_ioQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2GKgFZ_ioQ&start_radio=1&list=RDI2GKgFZ_ioQ)

## Explanation

- Of all the selections listed, this piece describes my view of Che’s life best. Rachmaninoff’s piano prelude is full of personality, as it sounds like a prideful, loud, and arrogant march. Interestingly , the piece’s tonal center is in the key of G minor, which results in a dreary and brooding sound. There are points when the music introduces new ideas that start to propel the piece upwards to new heights, such as the keys of the relative major (B Flat) and the dominant (D). In spite of these efforts, the selection ultimately falls back into the significantly darker minor key at the conclusion.

- Indeed, some might say that this could be compared to Che's life. A bittersweet story in its own right, I feel that Che was a misguided figure. While some of his ideas were well founded and even hinted at the beginnings of real and significant change, I believe Che's method of execution pulled him down in the end, resulting in a life that could be viewed as a long minor strain.