



## Black Radio and the Civil Rights Movement

### OVERVIEW

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did Black radio empower Black Americans, aid the Civil Rights Movement, and influence U.S. society?

#### OVERVIEW

*In this lesson, students will investigate radio's connection to the Civil Rights Movement by identifying important figures and stations in the history of Black radio and examining how Black radio aided in social progress.*



Herb Kent, deejay at radio station WVON in Chicago, IL, 1982 / Credit: Kathleen Reeve, of Chicago Sun-Times

In October 1948, the radio station WDIA in Memphis, Tennessee hired Nat D. Williams to host an afternoon show marketed towards Memphis' Black community. Williams was a school teacher, columnist, and beloved local leader who is now recognized by many to be the first publicly known Black on-air radio personality in the segregated South. The show he hosted, *Tan Town Jubilee*, was a pioneering American radio program and it was the first to be designed specifically for a Black audience. Williams' work would prove to be profoundly influential locally, nationally, and historically. In the following years, WDIA would become the number one station in Memphis after transitioning to an all-Black programming radio station. Its 50,000 watts of broadcasting power is estimated to have reached 10 percent of America's total Black population.

The decision to initially hire Williams was not rooted in the pursuit of empowering Black Americans, it was a business decision born out of impending bankruptcy. WDIA's white owners chose to develop programming for Memphis' Black community due to the fact that it was a large but ignored demographic in the local radio market and WDIA was floundering with a low market share. The change made all the difference. As the station introduced more Black programming, WDIA became a valued community resource for Black listeners in Memphis and beyond its city limits. Black leaders in other southern cities took note and began making plans to build on WDIA's achievement.

Heeding the NAACP's work to end segregation in broadcast radio and recognizing the success at WDIA, Jesse B. Blayton, Sr. established the all-Black formatted radio station WERD in Atlanta, Georgia in 1949. A Black American, Blayton was a bank president and university professor who purchased the station for \$50,000. In doing so, WERD became the first Black-owned and operated radio station in the United States. WERD was located in the Prince Hall Masonic Grand Lodge building in downtown Atlanta. In the building at the same time were the headquarters for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The SCLC was an advocacy organization founded by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other Civil Rights activists. WERD would aid the

SCLC in its social justice efforts by broadcasting SCLC announcements about upcoming meetings and events. The partnership provided beneficial media power to the ongoing Civil Rights Movement and Black radio stations around the country played a similar role.

Black radio stations proved to be vital to the Civil Rights Movement. By 1960, the location of stations and the strength of their broadcast signal correlated with increased rates of Black voter registration throughout the South—a core goal of the movement that transformed American society. Black radio served as both a town hall-like space and a powerful source of empowerment for Black Americans, and it continues to do so today. Black radio has endured beyond its historic contribution to social progress. In fact, it has been a leader in the evolution of broadcast radio by directly influencing the formatting, programming, and personalities that we hear on the radio, and other media formats, everyday.

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The connection between Black radio stations and the Civil Rights Movement
- The pioneering role of Black radio stations in Memphis, Atlanta, and the southern United States
- The history of creating radio programming for Black audiences
- Important figures in the history of Black radio and the Civil Rights Movement
- Important people, groups, and events in ending racial segregation in the United States

### 2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to explain the history of Black radio, articulate its connection to the Civil Rights Movement, and describe how media can influence U.S. society by analyzing images, viewing videos, and discussing terms.

## ACTIVITIES

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Display **Image 1, Hip Hop Radio Spotify Playlist**. Then ask students:

- Is this image familiar to you? If so, how is it familiar?
- Do you listen to streaming radio (satellite and internet -based) and/or terrestrial radio (land-based, AM/FM radio)?

2. As a Whip Around Poll, ask students the following question:

- Yes or no, do you think it is possible for a radio station to have a social and political impact on U.S. society?

3. Tally students' responses and write them on the board (answers will be referenced again later in the lesson).
4. Inform students that they will be investigating the important role of radio during the Civil Rights Movement and that their investigation will begin by examining two radio stations.

## PROCEDURE

1. Distribute **Handout - Radio and the Civil Rights Movement Graphic Organizer** (Teacher's Guide available here). Organize students into pairs and explain that they will work in pairs to complete the handout throughout the lesson.
  - Have you heard of the NAACP? If so, what is it?
2. Distribute **Handout - Black Radio**. Instruct students to read the WDIA radio station in Memphis, Tennessee section of the handout and to summarize "WDIA" on their graphic organizer.
3. Play the YouTube video "Hidden History: WDIA Radio – The 'Heart And Soul Of Memphis'" (<https://youtu.be/T3IWkAeKxqg>) and instruct students to summarize "Nat D. Williams" and "Tan Town Jubilee" on their graphic organizer (*pause and replay sections of the video if necessary*). Once finished, ask students to share their summaries and, when appropriate, guide further discussion on the similarities and differences between the summaries. If necessary, provide support with the Teacher's Guide.
4. Instruct students to read the WERD radio station in Atlanta, Georgia section of the handout and to summarize "WERD" and "Jesse B. Blayton, Sr." on their graphic organizer. Once finished, ask students to share their summaries and, when appropriate, guide further discussion on the similarities and differences between the summaries. If necessary, provide support with the Teacher's Guide. Then ask students:
  - What campaign was Jesse B. Blayton "following in the footsteps" of when he purchased WERD in 1949?
5. Display **Image 2, NAACP**. Read the text together as a class and instruct students to summarize "NAACP" on their graphic organizer. Then ask students:
  - What does the NAACP work to abolish, oppose, and ensure?
6. Instruct students to read the Prince Hall Masonic Grand Lodge building in Atlanta, Georgia section of the handout and to summarize "Prince Hall. . ." on their graphic organizer. Then ask students:
  - What organization had offices in the Prince Hall Masonic Grand Lodge where the radio station WERD was located?
7. Display **Image 3, SCLC**. Read the text together as a class and instruct students to summarize "SCLC" on their graphic organizer. Then ask students:
  - What does the SCLC work to "coordinate and assist"?
  - Considering the WERD section of the handout, how might the SCLC's announcements on WERD have taken place?
8. Display the webpage for the Google Arts & Culture audio documentary, Golden Age of Black Radio - Part 4: Gender Equality and Civil Rights (<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/BAXhpUDz5Mbzkw>) and scroll

down to the segment, “Jack Gibson describes the relationship between radio station WERD and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference” (pause the audio). Then ask students:

- What signs do you see attached to the front of the building? (*WERD, S.C.L.C., and Prince Hall*)
- From your reading, what building is this? (*Prince Hall Masonic Grand Lodge*)

9. Play the segment, “Jack Gibson describes the relationship between radio station WERD and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference” (Transcript of audio available here as **Handout - WERD and SCLC**). Then ask students:

- How might the SCLC announcements broadcast on the radio have aided the SCLC in achieving its mission of “the full equality of African Americans in all aspects of American life”?

10. Distribute **Handout - Black Radio and Black Voter Registration Document Set** and **Handout - Guiding Questions for Document Set** (*Teacher’s Guide available here*). With students still in pairs, inform each pair that they are now going to pursue their investigation even further and examine radio’s role in voter registration. Instruct students to follow the instructions for the activity on the Handout - Guiding Questions for Document Set. Once completed, bring students back together as a class, then ask students:

- How might Black voter registration rates have had a social and political impact on U.S. society?

## SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Revisiting the earlier Whip Around Poll, ask students:

- Yes or no, do you think it is possible for a radio station to have a social and political impact on U.S. society?

2. Tally students responses, write them on the board, and compare them with the earlier tally. If necessary, guide further discussion on how the tallies may be different.

3. Distribute **Handout - Exit Ticket Activity**. Instruct students to answer the questions on the handout. Once completed, have students share their answers and then turn in the handout.

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Create a PSA to focus public attention on a current issue of your choice with StoryboardThat (<https://www.storyboardthat.com/articles/e/public-service-announcements>).

2. Create an infographic about one of the pioneering Black Radio deejays:

- Nat D. Williams - WDIA (<https://memphismusichalloffame.com/inductee/natdwilliams/>)
- Jack Gibson - WERD ([https://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/findingaids/view?doc.view=entire\\_text&docId=VAD5483](https://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/findingaids/view?doc.view=entire_text&docId=VAD5483))



3. Create an infographic about the Prince Hall Grand Masonic Lodge in Atlanta, GA (<https://www.atlantahistorycenter.com/prince-hall-masonic-grand-lodge/>).
4. Listen to the entirety of the Google Arts & Culture audio documentary, “Golden Age of Black Radio - Part 4: Gender Equality and Civil Rights” and discuss as a class (<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/BAXhpUDz5MbzKw>).
5. Read “A Point of View by Nat D. Williams – ‘BlackMonday’” and provide a brief summary of Williams’ point of view (<https://memphislibrary.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p13039coll2/id/614/>).
6. Research the National Association of Black Owned Broadcasters (<https://nabob.org/about-nabob/>) and the African American Public Radio Consortium (<https://aaprc.org/>) websites. Locate a member station close to your school, research the station’s history, and discover its role in advocating for social change both in the past and present.

## STANDARDS

### COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (K-12)*

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Reading 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Craft and Structure 4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing (K-12)*

Text Types and Purposes 2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)*

Comprehension & Collaboration 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Comprehension & Collaboration 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Comprehension & Collaboration 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

Presentation of Knowledge 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.



### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language (K-12)*

Language 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

Language 2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

### **SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)**

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices

### **NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION – NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR MUSIC EDUCATION (NAFME)**

#### *Core Music Standard: Connecting*

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

### **NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS**

#### *Connecting*

Anchor Standard 10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

Anchor Standards 11: Relate artistic ideas and work with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.



## RESOURCES

### HANDOUTS

- Handout - Radio and the Civil Rights Movement Graphic Organizer
- Handout - Radio and the Civil Rights Movement Graphic Organizer (Teacher's Guide)
- Handout - Black Radio
- Handout - WERD and SCLC
- Document Set - Black Radio and Voter Registration
- Handout - Guiding Questions for Black Radio and Black Voter Registration Document Set
- Handout - Guiding Questions for Black Radio and Black Voter Registration Document Set (Teacher's Guide)
- Handout - Exit Ticket Activity