



Music of the Civil Rights Movement

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did music advance the goals and inform the tactics of the Civil Rights Movement?

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students explore the relationship between music and the Civil Rights Movement. They will examine the development of the music within the movement and discover how that music helped organize the movement. Additionally, students will identify how singing songs served as a nonviolent protest tactic that characterized the movement. Students will discuss video clips, examine song lyrics and quotes, and analyze Freedom Songs to determine how music contributed to the success of the Civil Rights Movement.



The Civil Rights Movement of the mid-20th century was inextricably linked to music. The songs that Civil Rights activists sang became collectively known as Freedom Songs. Freedom Songs articulated the committed spirit and progressive themes of the movement. And since they were sung together by large masses of people, Freedom Songs demonstrated the organized group solidarity that was essential to the movement. But Freedom Songs were also sung by activists for many other reasons; to assuage their fears, to summon their courage, to express their joy, and as an act of nonviolent protest.

Most Freedom Songs, and the themes expressed therein, were developed from African American Spirituals. Spirituals are a type of religious song created by enslaved African Americans in the southern U.S. that blended African musical elements and European church hymns. The use of Spirituals as the basis for Freedom Songs demonstrates the movement's origins in and development out of the Black Church, and the Church's cultural legacy within African American history.

Perhaps no song is more closely associated with the Civil Rights Movement than “We Shall Overcome.” With musical roots in numerous traditional Spirituals and hymns, its ubiquitous use in the movement can be traced back to the labor movement of the 1940s, as an early version of “We Shall Overcome” was sung by striking Black tobacco workers. But “We Shall Overcome” was not the only freedom song sung. Dozens of Freedom Songs were developed out of Spirituals, and more contemporary Gospel and popular music songs, and the lyrics were frequently modified to suit a particular moment in the movement.

Folk musicians like Odetta helped popularize Freedom Songs within the movement and throughout American society. As the profile of the Civil Rights Movement grew, popular music singer-songwriters like Sam Cooke wrote new Freedom Songs that reflected the themes of the movement, and their personal experience of racism as African Americans and offered inspiration and encouragement for transcending the hardship of oppression. Regardless of the origins or the person singing the song, Freedom Songs profoundly informed the Civil Rights Movement by serving as an organizational tool, a protest tactic, and an artistic expression of the myriad of emotions and intentions of the movement.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The essential role of music and singing during the Civil Rights Movement
- The African American history and culture of the music sung during the movement
- How music served as an organizational tool
- How singing was an act of nonviolent protest
- Important figures in the Civil Rights Movement

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to articulate the role of music and singing songs during the Civil Rights Movement by watching video clips, examining primary sources, and analyzing music.

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Play the video “The Black Church” by Black History in Two Minutes (or so) (<https://youtu.be/SwWqkk4Ha70>) and instruct students to take notes. (*The video contains accounts of violence and racism. Teacher discretion is advised.*) Then ask students:
 - In what ways has the Black Church shaped African American and American history?
 - What role did the Church play in the Civil Rights Movement?
 - What “musical legacy” was the source for many of the songs of the Civil Rights Movement? Who created that musical legacy?
 - Did you recognize the song being sung in the video when Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was introduced? If so, what’s the title of the song?

PROCEDURE

1. Distribute **Handout - “We Shall Overcome”** and inform students that the song in the video they just watched is called, “We Shall Overcome.” Ask student volunteers to read the introduction and lyrics aloud. Then ask students:
 - What are the cultural and religious origins of “We Shall Overcome”?
 - What are the songs that civil rights activists sang collectively known as?
 2. Play **Clip 1, “We Shall Overcome” by the Freedom Singers** and instruct students to read along (or sing along) with the lyrics. Inform students that the singing is led by the Freedom Singers, a music group of student Civil Rights activists. Then ask students:
 - What instruments are performing the music? What do you hear? What is absent?
 - What is the term for performing music solely with voices, without musical instrument accompaniment? (*If necessary, inform students that the term is “a capella” and in the context of the Civil Rights Movement, this style of group singing is often referred to as “congregational singing” since it is directly borrowed from a practice found in church services.*)
 - What might be the benefits of singing music without instruments? (*If necessary, guide students to consider: instruments can be taken away but not your voice, anyone can join in singing - they don’t need a musical instrument to participate, singing can be an individual act of nonviolent protest, etc.*)
 - What are some of the themes expressed in the lyrics? How might the congressional singing and the themes expressed in the lyrics be representative of African American history? (*If necessary, guide students to consider the history detailed in the video they watched earlier.*)
 - How does the song make you feel? Why might the song make you feel that way? (*If necessary, guide students to consider: Is it the lyrics? Is it the sound? What else might it be?*)
 - What emotions and thoughts does it arouse? Why might the song bring up those emotions and thoughts? (*If necessary, guide students to consider: Is it the lyrics? Is it the sound? What else might it be?*)
3. Inform students that they will now watch a video that reveals what Freedom Songs like “We Shall Overcome” meant for people in the Civil Rights Movement. Play the video “Georgia Stories: Singing Freedom” by GPB Education and instruct students to take notes (<https://youtu.be/SwWqkk4Ha70>). (*The video contains accounts of violence and racism. Teacher discretion is advised.*) Then ask students:
 - According to Charles Sherrod, what strategy was used to fight Jim Crow segregation during the Civil Rights Movement? (*If necessary, share with students the definition of Jim Crow.*)
 - What words does Rutha Mae Harris use to describe what Freedom Songs and singing did for those participating in the movement?

- How were traditional African American spirituals modified to become Freedom Songs?
- Were there any themes you noticed in the songs sung in the video? If so, what were they?

4. Display **Image 1, Music of the Civil Rights Movement Quotes**. (If necessary, inform students that “gospel” is a Christian music genre created by African Americans that evolved from spirituals.) Ask students volunteers to read the quotes aloud. Then ask students:

- Considering the quotes, in what other ways did music play an essential role in the Civil Rights Movement?
- How might singing Freedom Songs be an effective nonviolent tactic?
- Why might it be an important responsibility to choose a song to sing at a civil rights event?
- What might be necessary to consider when choosing new lyrics to create a freedom song?

5. Organize students into small groups and assign each group a station to visit. Explain to students that each group will work together to analyze a particular freedom song from the Civil Rights Movement. Inform students that

during their analysis, they will be: discovering the song’s origins, identifying lyrical themes, comparing and contrasting the song with other Freedom Songs, and more.

- **Station 1: “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize”**
 - Materials Packet
 - “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize” recording
- **Station 2: “This Little Light of Mine”**
 - Materials Packet
 - “This Little Light of Mine” recording
- **Station 3: “Oh, Freedom”**
 - Materials Packet
 - “Oh, Freedom” recording
- **Station 4: “A Change Is Gonna Come”**
 - Materials Packet
 - A Change is Gonna Come” recording

6. After all groups have completed their station song analysis, have each group report to the class as a whole, summarizing the history and importance of the song to the Civil Rights Movement. The ask students:

- How does the song’s history in the Civil Rights Movement inform your understanding of the movement?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Distribute **Handout - Music of the Civil Rights Movement**. Ask student volunteers to read the text aloud and for all students to circle any words and phrases that they recognize and any that they do not. Then ask students:

- Why was music so important to the Civil Rights Movement?
- What does Bernice Johnson Reagon suggest music could provide for the movement? What does she suggest music could provide for participants in the movement?



- How can music help someone or some issue “become visible”?
- Is music simply a form of entertainment, or can it have other purposes as well?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Have students research the use of “We Shall Overcome” as a protest song in the years before and after the Civil Rights Movement. Students may either turn in their work as a written report or present and explain their song to the class.
2. Have students identify another song from the Civil Rights Movement and conduct research on the meaning and the purpose of that song. Students may either turn in their work as a written report or present and explain their song to the class.
3. Explore more about Freedom Songs at the Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement Archive (<https://www.crmvet.org/info/fsongs.htm>).
4. Explore more about civil rights activists, including those featured in this lesson, at the SNCC Digital Gateway (<https://snccdigital.org/>).
5. Watch a video of the Freedom Singers performing the freedom song, “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me ‘Round” at the White House in 2010 (<https://youtu.be/hhafyl6-Bp0>).



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: Responding

Select: Choose music appropriate for a specific purpose or context.

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

Core Music Standard: Connecting

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



RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- “We Shall Overcome” by the Freedom Singers
- “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize” by Bob Moses
- “This Little Light of Mine” by Fannie Lou Hamer
- “Oh, Freedom” by Odetta
- “A Change is Gonna Come” by Sam Cooke

HANDOUTS

- Handout - “We Shall Overcome”
- Station Activity - “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize”
- Station Activity - “This Little Light of Mine”
- Station Activity - “Oh, Freedom”
- Station Activity - “A Change is Gonna Come”
- Handout - Music of the Civil Rights Movement