



## Student Activism and Music During the Civil Rights Movement

### OVERVIEW

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did activism by Black students challenge Jim Crow segregation during the Civil Rights Movement, and what unique role did music play as an organizing tool?

#### OVERVIEW

*In this lesson, students explore student-led efforts to end Jim Crow segregation during the Civil Rights Movement by examining significant events and identifying the unique role of music in calling people to action.*



Photograph: Ed Jones, The Birmingham News

During the 1960s, Shelley “The Playboy” Stewart played new hit records by current artists on Birmingham, Alabama’s WENN radio station. So when he played Big Joe Turner’s 1954 hit song “Shake, Rattle and Roll” one day in May 1963, it sounded out of place. Stewart intended it that way.

Stewart wasn’t simply playing an “oldie” for his listeners. He was using music as an organizing tool to call people to action, particularly young people. On May 2, 1963, hundreds of Black students in Birmingham boycotted school and marched downtown to protest the city’s pervasive Jim Crow laws, laws that included racially segregating the public schools that those same students attended. Earlier that day, Sterns played “Shake, Rattle and Roll” to send a covert message to his organized student listeners: it’s time to rally.

Nearly ten years earlier in 1954, the same year “Shake, Rattle and Roll” was a No. 1 hit, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. In the ruling, the Court instructed all public schools to desegregate but did not specify a deadline. This historic ruling reversed the long-standing legal doctrine of “separate but equal,” which had determined that racially segregating public schools was constitutional.

Under “separate but equal,” as long as a segregated school attended by Black students was equal in quality to a segregated school attended by white students, racial segregation was not violating the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution. In reality, while segregation had led to an American society that was racially separated, inequality was widespread and disenfranchised Black communities. The inferior quality of the public schools attended by Black students was a glaring example, and the Brown ruling in 1954 acknowledged it.

Unfortunately, segregation in public schools endured even after the Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional due to local and state resistance, which was why in 1963 students in Birmingham were marching in protest. But this was not the first time students had protested the inequality of segregated public schools.

In the early 1950s, years before the Brown ruling, Black students in segregated schools organized and led walkouts and strikes to protest substandard school facilities and education resources. The purpose of their activism was not necessarily to desegregate schools but rather to attend schools that were as equally equipped as those of their white counterparts—the equality in “separate but equal.” Their actions produced results: improved school facilities, recognition of their efforts by the media, and support from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Black student activism directly informed the NAACP’s legal strategy in challenging “separate but equal” in court during the early 1950s. The NAACP included a 1951 student walkout and strike in Virginia as one of the cases in their class-action lawsuit that eventually became the historic Brown case. Working with the NAACP, future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall was the lead attorney that successfully argued Brown before the Court. However, even as local and state resistance allowed school segregation to endure, student activism continued to challenge it into the 1960s.

Student activism during the Civil Rights Movement also confronted racial segregation in other public spaces. In early 1960, Black college students began “sit-in” demonstrations to protest segregation in restaurants. Out of that action, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was founded. The SNCC (more-commonly pronounced, Snick) was formed under the mentoring of Civil Rights Movement leader, Ella Baker. A decades-long veteran of the movement, Baker encouraged young people to recognize their own leadership capabilities and assemble their own independent organizations.

With singing being so important to the Civil Rights Movement, SNCC members formed the Freedom Singers music group. The group traveled around the U.S., performing concerts to raise funds for the SNCC and to inform their audiences about Civil Rights organizing happening around the country. The Freedom Singers activism and performances demonstrated another example of music as an organizing tool during the Civil Rights Movement. The group sang at, and the SNCC helped organize, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in Washington, DC on August 28, 1963. Notably, at the March, current SNCC National Chairman, and future congressman, John Lewis delivered remarks before the enormous crowd and later in the day Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous “I Have a Dream” speech.

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- Historic moments of student activism during the Civil Rights Movement
- The unique role of music in student-led school activism
- How music can be used as an organizing tool
- Important figures, events, and student organizations of the Civil Rights Movement

### 2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

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

## ACTIVITIES

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Play **Clip 1, Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka** and instruct students to take notes. Then ask students:
  - Why were schools segregated?
  - According to the video, where was segregation “outlawed”?
  - What branch of the U.S. government “outlawed” segregation and what year did it happen?
  - How did students contribute to Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka? How might students have contributed to the Civil Rights Movement in general?

### PROCEDURE

#### PART 1: STUDENT ACTIVISM

1. Inform students that they will be examining how students organized to protest racial segregation before and after the Brown v. Board of Education ruling, and how music served as an organizing tool for their protests.
  - What might the location of these events suggest about school segregation?
  - What might the timespan of these events suggest about school segregation?
  - How might students have heard about protests so they knew to attend?
2. Display **Image 1, Map of Student Activism in School Segregation, 1951 - 1969**. In small groups or as a class, consider the following questions:
  - What is causing students to take action? (*Hint: Examine the title of the map.*)
3. Display **Image 2, Music as an Organizing Tool** quote. Inform students that Black radio DJs contributed to the Civil Rights Movement by featuring Civil Rights leaders on their programs, surreptitiously promoting Civil Rights rallies over the air, and covertly

playing music that signaled activists to take action. (*The role of Black DJs in the Civil Rights Movement can be explored further in the Extension Activities section.*) Then ask students:

- Why might a song be a good tool for organizing people into action?
  - How might the title of a song or themes expressed in the lyrics of a song be important when organizing people to take action?
4. Explain to students that they will be they will be exploring in more detail some of the protest events that took place on the map they saw earlier.
5. Distribute **Handout – Student Activism Station Activity Guide**. Instruct students to organize into groups and assign a station for each group to visit. (*Students may visit multiple stations if time allows.*) Explain to the groups that at their station they will read an overview of the event, read a song title and a brief excerpt of the song’s lyrics, and view record covers of the song’s performers. They will then complete the Station Activity Guide and choose a song that they feel best matches with their Civil Rights student activism event.

- **Station 1: Student Activism in Farmville, Virginia in 1951**

- Materials Packet

- **Station 2: Student Activism in Kinston, North Carolina in 1951**

- Materials Packet

- **Station 3: Student Activism in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963**

- Materials Packet

- **Station 4: Student activism in New York, New York in 1964**

- Materials Packet

6. Bring student groups back together to share their answers to the comprehension questions and explain their song selection using the lyrics as evidence.

## PART 2: STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS

1. Inform students that now they will be examining student organizations during the Civil Rights Movement and how music served as an organizing tool. Then ask students:

- Do you think racial segregation was happening in places beyond schools at this time? What sorts of places?
- Do you think students protested at these other places? How might have they protested?

2. Play the video “The Sit-In Movement” by *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement* and instruct students to take notes (<https://youtu.be/lcWxu5eFhXg>) (*Warning: the video contains images of violence and accounts of racism.*) Then ask students:

- Who started the sit-in movement? Where did it begin?
- How did a sit-in take place? What was the purpose of a sit-in?
- What new student organization helped the sit-in movement?

3. Distribute **Handout - Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)**. 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:

- How did the SNCC interact with the SCLC and Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.?
  - Why might the SNCC have taken their independent approach?
  - What veteran civil rights organizer and SCLC official encouraged the founding of the SNCC?
4. Play the video “Ella Baker: ‘The Mother of the Civil Rights Movement’” by *Black History in Two Minutes (or so)* (<https://youtu.be/McneFCdHUn0>). Then ask students:
- For what reason is Ella Baker “reverentially known as the Mother of the Civil Rights Movement”?
  - What advice did she give members of the SNCC when they visited rural areas promoting Civil Rights?
  - What did she encourage young people in the Civil Rights Movement to do?
5. Display **Image 3, SNCC Buttons**. Inform students that these are SNCC buttons that members and others could wear. Ask students:
- Of what movement was the Freedom Singers leader Cordell Reagon a “veteran”? What played an “important role” in that movement?
  - In what ways did the Freedom Singers represent how students led during the Civil Rights Movement and how music was an organizing tool?

### SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Explain to students that they are now going to take on the role of a student organization. Instruct students to organize into groups and explain that each group will need to:
  - Choose a contemporary cause of their choice.
  - Choose an organized action to call attention to their cause (for example: a school walkout, school boycott, sit-in, or another nonviolent action).
  - Choose a song that represents their cause and could be used as an organizing tool to signal students to action.
2. At a place in the classroom viewable to all, create three columns: Cause, Action, and Song. Ask student groups to share their choices and list them using the following prompts:
  - What would be your cause? Why?
  - What would be your method of action? Why?
  - What song would represent your cause and be used as an organizing tool? Why?
3. Finally, ask students:
  - How might the history that you explored in this lesson have informed the cause you chose, your method of action, and the song you chose?



## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Create an infographic about Barbara Rose Johns Powell. The following links can be used as resources:
  - Americans Who Tell The Truth (<https://americanswhotellthetruth.org/virginia-commission-selects-barbara-rose-johns-to-represent-virginia-in-u-s-capitol/>)
  - Robert Russa Moton Museum (<https://motonmuseum.org/learn/biography-barbara-rose-johns-powell/>)
  - Virginia Changemakers (<https://edu.lva.virginia.gov/changemakers/items/show/121>)
2. Create an infographic about the Freedom Singers (<https://snccdigital.org/inside-sncc/sncc-national-office/freedom-singers/>).
3. Create a student activism playlist.
4. Listen to Alabama Public Radio's "Civil Rights Radio" program to discover more about the role of Black DJs during the Civil Rights Movement (<https://www.apr.org/arts-life/2017-04-14/alabama-public-radio-civil-rights-radio>).
5. Read about the Teens Take Charge student activism event at a New York City school in 2019 to identify how school segregation endures (<https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2019/11/18/21121833/new-york-city-students-walk-out-of-class-pledging-weekly-strikes-to-demand-school-integration>).
6. Watch this Voices of the Civil Rights Movement's video to discover more about the Children's Crusade in Birmingham, AL in May 1963 (<https://youtu.be/FT-W4lypkfM>). (*Warning: the video contains images of violence and accounts of racism.*)

## 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.

### **NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS**

#### *Responding*

Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard 8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.





Anchor Standard 9: Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

*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

### VIDEO RESOURCES

- *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*
- “We Shall Overcome”

### HANDOUTS

- Handout – Student Activism Station Activity Guide
- Station 1 Materials: Student Activism in Farmville, Virginia in 1951
- Station 2 Materials: Student Activism in Kinston, North Carolina
- Station 3 Materials: Student Activism in Birmingham, Alabama
- Station 4 Materials: Student Activism in New York, New York
- Handout - Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)
- Handout - The Freedom Singers