

“Alright” and the History of Black Protest Songs

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How have black artists throughout the 20th century used music to speak about racial injustice in America?

OVERVIEW

(Note: this lesson contains racial slurs and violence. Teacher discretion advised.)



In this lesson, students compare Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright” with black protest songs of the past in order to identify common themes and ideas that artists have used to illustrate black experience in the United States. In so doing, they come to understand that using music to address racial injustice has been a long tradition within the Black community.

“We gon’ be alright! We gon’ be alright!” This phrase became a common refrain at demonstrations following the murders of teenager Michael Brown, 12-year old Tamir Rice, and father Eric Garner, whose last words, “I can’t breathe,” became a rallying cry in protests against police brutality. Many journalists and writers noted that chanting these lines collectively was reminiscent of “We Shall Overcome,” the unofficial song of the Civil Rights Movement. But unlike the origins of “We Shall Overcome,” the chant “we gon’ be alright” wasn’t based on a gospel song - rather, it came from the 2015 hit “Alright” by Grammy award-winning rapper Kendrick Lamar.

By being adopted into these demonstrations and into the Black Lives Matter movement more generally, Lamar’s “Alright” has solidified its position within a historic repertoire of songs that speak to African American’s continued struggle against injustice. These songs transcend genres and generations, from Billie Holiday’s haunting anti-lynching song “Strange Fruit,” to Nina Simone’s “Mississippi Goddam,” sung as a reaction to the murder of Civil Rights leader Medgar Evers and the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing, to James Brown’s jubilant “Say it Loud - I’m Black and Proud,” often regarded as an anthem for black pride. “Alright” additionally points to the role hip-hop has played in speaking out against racial injustice, from Public Enemy’s assertive “Fight the Power” to N.W.A.’s “Straight Outta Compton,” which brought to light issues of urban poverty and dispossession among the black community. from the Women’s Rights, Civil Rights, and LGBTQ+ Rights movements.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- Kendrick Lamar's "Alright," and its incorporation into Black Lives Matter protests
- Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit"
- Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddam"
- Aretha Franklin's "Respect"
- James Brown's "Say it Loud - I'm Black and I'm Proud"
- Marvin Gaye's "What's Goin' On"
- Public Enemy's "Fight the Power"
N.W.A's "Straight Outta Compton"
- The historic role of music in protest movements

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE

- Students will be able to draw thematic and topical connections between Kendrick Lamar's "Alright" and songs in the past that became incorporated into protest movements.

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Play **Clip 1, Soundtracks - "Alright."** Ask students:

- Have you heard this song before? Where?
- How is the song being presented in the clip? What are the circumstances under which this song is being sung?
- According to the clip, why did the protesters at Ferguson choose not to sing the more traditional song "We Shall Overcome"? (*Teachers can play a clip of "We Shall Overcome" sung during the March on Washington here. The song begins around the 2:00 minute mark.*)
- In general, why might younger generations choose a new song to for their protests and activism?
- How do the people in the clip argue that "Alright" is an ideal song for the context of a protest? Do you agree or disagree?

PROCEDURE:

1. Show **Image 1, "Alright" Lyric Excerpt**, and ask students:
 - What about these lyrics might make "Alright" an appropriate protest song?
 - How might these lyrics express the feelings of people protesting the deaths Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and others?
 - How might chanting this song be helpful for protesters? How might it build optimism or solidarity?
2. Watch **Clip 2, Soundtracks - Hip Hop Swagger**. Ask students:
 - Why might have the woman mentioned in the clip found "Alright" to be "foul and disgusting?"
 - In the clip, Nelson George argues that the assertive lyrics to "Alright" is what makes it effective. What do you think makes a song effective for use at protests?
 - What do you think Daphne Brooks means when she says that "Hip Hop Swagger" can be a tool to fight everyday battles?
 - What everyday battles might she be referring to in this context?
3. Tell the class they will now be doing an activity to examine how Kendrick Lamar's "Alright" compares to older black protest songs.
4. Split students into 5-7 groups (pending classroom size), and assign each group a viewing station. Display **Image 2, Discussion Questions**. Ask student groups to go over the materials together, and be prepared to answer the questions before the class. Stations include (see online lesson for station videos and handouts):
 - **Billie Holiday - "Strange Fruit" (1939)**
 - **Nina Simone - "Mississippi Goddam" (1964)**
 - **Aretha Franklin - "Respect" (1967)**
 - **James Brown - "Say it Loud - I'm Black and Proud" (1968)**
 - **Marvin Gaye - "What's Going On?" (1971)**
 - **N.W.A - "Straight Outta Compton" (1988)**
 - **Public Enemy - "Fight the Power" (1989)**
5. Have each group present the answers to Image 2 to the class.

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Pass out to student groups **Handout 1 - Song Comparison**. Ask students to fill out the table as instructed in the handout.
2. Ask students to share with the class the results of their chart.
3. Ask students:
 - Based on what the groups have shared, what are some of the similarities between "Alright" and the other songs discussed in class? What are some of the differences?



- What do all these artists have in common?
- What are some of the issues these songs tackle? Do any of the songs tackle the same issue? What might this say about the issues that have historically affected the Black community?
- Do you think Kendrick Lamar's "Alright" will retain its status as a protest song, as the other songs discussed in class have? Why or why not?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

1. Many of the songs covered in the class are discussed in the full Soundtracks Martin Luther King Jr. episode, available here: <https://www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2017/11/09/cnngo-soundtracks-episode-102-mlk-assassination.original-series>. Watch the full episode, and discuss: did the people interviewed in the episode reach the same conclusions as the class did? If not, what did they say that was not discussed by the class?
2. Examine the lyrics to Kendrick Lamar's "DNA." How might that song relate to the history of social injustice toward black Americans?



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.

Reading 3: Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Craft and Structure 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

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 8: Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

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.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity 10: Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

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

Text Types and Purposes 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

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.

Production and Distribution of Writing 4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge 7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.



Research to Build and Present Knowledge 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

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.

Language 3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in a word meaning.

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.

NATIONAL CURRICULUM STANDARDS FOR SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions



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

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

- Soundtracks - "Alright"
- Soundtracks - Hip Hop Swagger

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1 - Song Comparison
- Aretha Franklin, "Respect"
- Billie Holiday, "Strange Fruit"
- James Brown, "Say it Loud - I'm Black and I'm Proud"
- Marvin Gaye, "Whats Going On"
- N.W.A, "Straight Outta Compton"
- Nina Simone, "Mississippi Goddam"
- Public Enemy, "Fight the Power"