



ELVIS AND RACE IN 1950S AMERICA

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did Elvis Presley's early career reflect race relations and racial tensions in mid-1950s America?

OVERVIEW

At the end of World War II, the United States sat poised on the brink of a Civil Rights movement that would challenge the nation's inherent racial inequality and push for the integration of the races throughout American society. The second-class status of African Americans was a fact of life throughout the country, but particularly palpable in the Jim Crow South, where segregation prevented African Americans from voting, attending certain schools, sitting alongside whites on public transportation and even drinking from the same water fountains as whites.



On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court issued its landmark ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, declaring that state-sponsored segregation in America's public schools was inherently unconstitutional. Though the decision marked a critical turning point in race relations, it would be many years before its promise of dismantling the machinery of segregation and ensuring full enfranchisement of minorities would begin to bear fruit.

Two months after the *Brown* ruling, 19-year-old Elvis Presley released his first single on Sun Records. The first side was a cover of "That's All Right," a 1940s Rhythm and Blues song written and originally recorded by African-American Bluesman Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup. The "B" side of the single was a cover of "Blue Moon of Kentucky," a 1946 tune written and popularized by Bluegrass musician Bill Monroe.

The single showed that black and white music could live side by side on a 45 RPM slice of vinyl in 1954, even if the men who wrote the songs often could not in public life. In some ways, Elvis' first single did what the Supreme Court could only dream of doing at that moment, integrating black and white culture in one neat package that would have enormous influence on millions of Americans.

On the other hand, the fact that this melding of black and white culture was delivered through the voice of a white teenager demonstrates the racial realities of the mid-1950s. White audiences may have been ready for African-American-inspired Rock and Roll, but not necessarily to embrace



OVERVIEW (CONTINUED)

music actually performed by African-American artists. Indeed, Sam Phillips, who produced Elvis' first single, is said to have commented, "If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars." When radio audiences responded enthusiastically to the first airing of Presley's "That's All Right," Memphis disc jockey Dewey Phillips went out of his way to let listeners know that Elvis was white.

In this lesson, students will investigate how Elvis' first single offers a window onto the complex race relations of 1954, and how it fits into the broader narrative of *Brown v. Board of Education* and the early stirrings of the Civil Rights movement.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The provisions of the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*
- The impact of segregation and Jim Crow laws on African Americans in the southern United States
- The complexities of race relations in 1950s America
- The importance of both African-American and white musical forms to the development of early Rock and Roll

2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Evaluate the historical context in which music was performed
- Interpret how public reaction to popular music reflects the social norms and values of a particular historical era
- Make connections among political, legal, and cultural
- Common Core: The class will discuss the meaning of key words and phrases by comparing two texts highlighting the theme of race in reaction to the concerts of Elvis (CCSS Reading 4; CCSS Reading 9; CCSS Speaking and Listening 3)
- Common Core: Students will write a short answer response in which they use evidence from the lesson and take a position on the role of music for the Civil Rights movement in the wake of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (CCSS Writing 1; CCSS Speaking and Listening 2)

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

Play the video clip “American Segregation,” an excerpt from the 1987 PBS documentary *Eyes on the Prize*, which examines the state of race relations in the United States in 1954, on the eve of the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Discuss:

- What was segregation? What were Jim Crow laws?
- How did many whites feel about socializing with African Americans?
- What did the Supreme Court rule in *Brown v. Board of Education*?
- How did many whites affected by the ruling react to the decision?

PROCEDURE:

1. Display the map of Tupelo, Mississippi, and Memphis, Tennessee, Elvis Presley’s birthplace and the city where he attended high school.



2. Ask students what kind of music they imagine someone growing up in those places in the late 1940s and early 1950s might have listened to. Explain that you will play two examples for them.

3. Display the picture of Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys, “Blue Moon of Kentucky” (1946), and discuss:

- How would you describe this music? (Note to instructor: Students should be able to identify this as a Country song recorded by white artists.)



4. Display the picture of Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup and play the excerpt from “That’s All Right” (1947), and discuss:

- How would you describe this music? (Note to instructor: Students should be able to identify

this as a Rhythm and Blues song recorded by an African-American artist.)

- How is it different from the first song?
- Why might a white southern boy, or any other teenager, have listened to this kind of music? What was appealing about it?
- Why might white teenagers, especially in the South, have been discouraged from listening to this kind of music?
- What barriers might have prevented artists such as “Big Boy” Crudup from becoming major recording stars in the late 1940s and early 1950s? Why might certain radio stations not have played their songs?



5. Distribute Handout 1: Sun Records and Race Records. Ask for volunteers to read it aloud, one student per paragraph. Instruct all students to underline key words and phrases as they listen and follow.

6. Display the picture of Elvis’s first single, released in 1954.



PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

7. Play the excerpt from Elvis' recording of "That's All Right" and discuss:

- How is the recording similar to/different from "Big Boy" Crudup's recording of the same song?

8. Play the video clip of Dewey Phillips, "Red Hot and Blue," explaining to the class that Phillips was a highly popular disc jockey in Memphis who was known for his extroverted style and who played records by both black and white artists at a time when most radio shows catered specifically to either a black audience or a white one. Distribute Handout 2: "That's All Right" on Memphis Radio, July 1954. Ask for a volunteer to read it aloud. All students should underline key words and phrases as they listen and follow. Discuss:

- How did the audience react to the record?
- Why might listeners have thought Elvis was African-American? Why would it have mattered in

a southern state in 1954?

- In 1954, how could a resident of Memphis have known the race of a person simply by knowing where he went to high school?
- Why do you think Dewey Phillips wanted the audience to know that Elvis was white?

9. Play the excerpt of Elvis' recording of "Blue Moon of Kentucky" and discuss:

- How is the recording similar to/different from Bill Monroe's recording of the same song?
- Does this recording seem to have been at all influenced by Rhythm and Blues – in other words, by African-American music? If so, in what way?

11. Why do you think Elvis put these two particular songs on the same record? Does the appearance of these two songs on the same record in any way reflect what was happening in the United States in 1954, particularly in terms of race relations? If so, how?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

1. Explain to students that while the audience reaction to Elvis' first single was largely very positive, many people, particularly in positions of authority, were angered by Elvis and his music. Display the two quotes below:

"The big show was provided by Vancouver teenagers, transformed into writhing, frenzied idiots of delight by the savage jungle beat music."

-- Review of an Elvis Presley concert in *The Vancouver Sun*, September 3, 1957

"When our schools and centers stoop to such things as 'rock and roll' tribal rhythms, they are failing seriously in their duty."

-- Letter from Samuel Cardinal Stritch, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Chicago, banning Catholic school students from attending Presley concert, Feb. 28, 1957

2. What do you think the authors meant by the terms:

- "Savage jungle beat music"?
- "Tribal rhythms"?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY: (CONTINUED)

3. Why might these authors have used these terms to describe Presley's music? What do they seem to fear about Presley?
4. Where were these comments made? What conclusions can you draw about racial tension in the mid-1950s in other parts of North America besides the South?
5. Ask students to think back to the video from Eyes on the Prize at the beginning of the lesson, and discuss:
 - In this historical context, why might it have been more acceptable for some people to hear African-American music from a white artist than from an African-American artist?
 - Why might any type of music bearing an African-American influence have been unacceptable to some people in this climate?
 - How did Elvis' first single reflect the racial and social climate in America in 1954?
 - Looking ahead, how do you predict Elvis' embrace of African-American music would influence the way people would come to think about race in the late 1950s?

WRITING PROMPT:

Write a short response in reaction to the class discussion. Take a position in answering the questions below, or use one of the questions posed in class, citing evidence from the texts and videos in your analysis.

- What was the Supreme Court trying to accomplish when it issued its ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954?
- How might music have helped accomplish what the Supreme Court was trying to do in the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY:

1. Have students read Robert Palmer's 1978 article "Sam Phillips: The Sun King" and write a short paper of several paragraphs explaining who Phillips was and what he accomplished at Sun Records. Among the points they should address: What made Sun Records important? Why was Phillips uniquely in a position to "discover" Elvis Presley?
2. Have students read the chapter essay *Elvis: Hillbilly Becomes Country, Rockabilly Becomes Rock and Roll* written by Colin Escott. Write a short paper of several paragraphs explaining how Elvis redefined pop music with his recordings at Sun Records. Describe the birth of Rock and Roll; how did it challenge the conformity of 1950s America?

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Reading Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 for Literature and Informational Text

Reading 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.

Reading 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 Writing Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects

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

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 6-12

Speaking and Listening 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Speaking and Listening 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

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

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

Core Music Standard: Responding

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

- American Segregation (1954)
- Bill Monroe – Blue Moon of Kentucky (1946)
- Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup – That’s All Right (1947)
- Elvis Presley – Blue Moon of Kentucky (1954)
- Dewey Phillips – Red, Hot and Blue (1952)
- Elvis Presley – That’s All Right (1954)

FEATURED PEOPLE

- Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup
- Bill Monroe
- Dewey Phillips
- Sam Phillips
- Elvis Presley

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1: “That’s All Right” on Memphis Radio, July 1954
- Handout 2: Sun Records and Race Records