GOSPEL MUSIC AND THE BIRTH OF SOUL

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did Gospel influence American popular music?

OVERVIEW

Gospel music first emerged from the fusion of West African musical traditions, the experiences of slavery, Christian practices, and the hardships associated with life in the American South. Over time, as the influence of the African-American church grew and the Great Migration transported thousands of African Americans from the South to America’s northern industrial cities, the influence of this musical genre expanded. Ultimately, Gospel’s reach would extend well beyond the religious realm, directly affecting the world of secular music.

In some cases, a mere change of lyrics could transform a Gospel song into a successful work of Pop, wherein the worshipped God (“He”) became the prosaic object of worldly affection (“she”). When Sam Cooke and the Soul Stirrers recorded “Wonderful,” they declared that “Whenever I need, the Lord will provide/And praise my Lord’s name/I know he’s so wonderful.” Singing initially under the name “Dale Cook” so as not to offend his Gospel listeners, Cooke would propel the same tune to Pop success by singing, “There’s not quite another/Quite as sweet as you/I love my girl, she’s so lovable.”

In other cases, it was the rich vocal harmonies of groups such as the Jordanaires and the Golden Gate Quartet that informed the sound of Pop, exerting an influence on everyone from the Girl Groups of the late 1950s and early 1960s to the hits of Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons. Elvis Presley’s vocal stylings bore the unmistakable influence of the Gospel sound he had heard growing up in the poor neighborhoods of Tupelo and Memphis, where contact with African-American culture was often very direct. And, with the Jordanaires a part of his recording ensemble, white Gospel traditions were woven into the fabric of his music.

In this lesson, students will trace the influence of Gospel music on early Rock and Roll, particularly in R&B’s embrace of such key musical features as the call-and-response and in the uses of complex rhythms. The class will make side-by-side comparisons of Gospel and early Rock and Roll songs, as well as work in groups to chart the overall influence of Gospel on a range of different popular music genres.
Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. **KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):**
   - Basic elements of Gospel music, including “call-and-response,” complex rhythms, group singing, and the employment of rhythmic instrumentation
   - Ways in which other musical genres “borrowed” musical elements from Gospel Music to create new sounds

2. **BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):**
   - Make thematic connections between genres of music
   - Common Core: Students will analyze music and lyrics and how the selection of words and images changes the central meaning of the song (CCSS Reading 6; CCSS Speaking and Listening 2)

**MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:**

1. Play an excerpt from the Southern Tones’ “It Must Be Jesus” (1954). As they listen, ask students to:
   - Listen closely to the lyrics and identify the central message of the song. Have students identify the key figure mentioned in the lyrics (i.e., Jesus).
   - Think about whether the song reminds them of any music they have heard previously.

2. Play Ray Charles’ “I Got A Woman” (1954). As with the first song, ask students to:
   - Listen closely to the lyrics and identify the central message of the song. Have students identify the key figure mentioned in the lyrics (i.e., “a woman.”)
   - Think about whether the song reminds them of any music they have heard on the radio or on television. (Note to instructor: Students may recognize the hook “She gives me money/When I’m in need” as the same hook sampled in the song “Gold Digger” by Kanye West.)

3. Play the short clip from Kanye West’s “Gold Digger.” (Note to instructor: There are two versions of this song; this clip is from the “non-explicit” version.) As with the first two songs, ask students to:
   - Listen closely to the lyrics and identify the central message of the song. Have students identify the key figure mentioned in the lyrics (i.e., “gold digger”)

4. Discuss:
   - How similar are the three songs, musically speaking? What is similar, and what changes?
   - How has the central figure in the song changed through the three versions? (The instructor may wish to notate: Jesus --> A Woman --> A “Gold-Digger” on the board.)
   - What has happened to the overall meaning of the song and the emotions it portrays through the three versions? (Again, the instructor may wish to notate the evolution on the board, for example: Love of Jesus --> Love of a Woman --> Anger at a Woman.)
MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY: (CONTINUED)

- Who is Kanye West? What kind of music is he known for?
- Does “Gold Digger” have anything to do with Jesus? With religion in general? With love?
- Why might Kanye West have borrowed from a traditional R&B song in “Gold Digger”? What does the Ray Charles sample bring to West’s song?
- What do these three clips suggest about how Gospel music has influenced and continues to influence popular American music? About how musicians have taken elements of Gospel and transformed them into something new?

PROCEDURE:

1. Divide students into groups of 3-4. Explain that students will work with their groups to investigate how popular songs of the 1950s and 1960s were influenced by Gospel music. In this activity, students will hear three different pairs of songs, each consisting of one Gospel recording and one Pop song. For each pairing, students will work to identify the influence of the Gospel recording on the Pop song.

2. Distribute Handout 1: Gospel and West African Musical Traditions. Review the four elements of Gospel music discussed on the handout:
   - Call-and-response
   - Group singing
   - Instrumentation emphasizing rhythm instruments (drums, rhythm guitar, etc.)
   - Complex rhythms or polyrhythms

3. Distribute Handout 2: Song Comparisons. Students will use the chart to help them identify specific features of each song they hear and record their observations.

4. Play the three song comparisons:
   - “(He Is) Wonderful” (1959), by Sam Cooke and the Soul Stirrers, and “Loveable” (1956), which was originally released under the name “Dale Cook.”
   - Sister Rosetta Tharpe, “Didn’t It Rain” (1964) and Little Richard, “Tutti Frutti” (1957).

5. After all groups have had adequate time to analyze and discuss each song comparison, poll groups on their summary statements for each comparison. Discuss:
   - In the first comparison, can you tell that the song is almost identical and the vocalist is actually the same person? (Explain to students that Sam Cooke was one of many artists to make the transition from Gospel singer to Pop singer. He changed his name to “Dale Cook” when he recorded “Lovable” in 1956, so as not to alienate fans of his Gospel singing; though some listeners were offended by the recording, Cooke went on to have a highly successful Pop career.)
   - Why do you think Cooke changed his name when he recorded “Loveable?” Why might fans of Gospel music be offended by changing a song about God (“Him”) to a song about a woman (“her”)?
   - Does the song work equally well in each version? Can the difference between a Gospel song and a Pop song be as simple as just changing the words?
   - What does the second comparison have in common with the first? Who are the singers singing about in each song?
   - Why do you think the complex vocal harmonies of Gospel songs such as “Dig a Little Deeper”
What overall effect do they have on the listener?

• What do the rhythms of a song like “Too Much” seem to borrow from Gospel? How do you imagine Elvis Presley, who was white, learned to master the vocal stylings of African-American Gospel artists? (Explain to students that as a young man, Elvis lived in a predominantly African-American neighborhood and had many opportunities to attend church services and other musical performances in that community.)

• How similar are the vocal stylings of “Didn’t It Rain” and “Tutti Frutti”? (Explain to students that like many African-American singers of his era, Little Richard grew up singing Gospel music in church.)

• Why might white audiences be receptive to music that was influenced by the music of the African-American church? Would it matter whether they were even aware of this influence when listening to popular music?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

On a slip of paper, ask students to complete an Exit Ticket in which they identify a particular song, artist, or style of music they enjoy listening to that might in some way have been influenced by Gospel music. Students should identify at least two specific elements of Gospel music that have influenced the song, artist, or genre they have identified.

WRITING PROMPT:

(Please note that it is up to the instructor to decide whether this activity will be completed in class or as a homework assignment. The instructor may wish to have students continue working in the same groups as during the lesson, or on an individual basis.)

1. Distribute Handout 3: Gospel Music Family Tree to each student or group.

2. Assign each student or group one of the five genres of popular music: Pop, Rock and Roll, Motown, Country, and Rhythm & Blues (R&B).

3. Each group will research and analyze the multiple ways in which their particular genre has been influenced by specific elements of Gospel music.

4. Each group will present its findings to the class. Students are encouraged to provide musical clips and other specific examples to illustrate their work.

5. The instructor may wish to construct a larger version of the top half of the family tree using poster board. Each group may then summarize and illustrate its findings on a piece of poster board. The entire family tree may then be displayed on the classroom wall.
EXTENSIONS:

Have students research the many Gospel songs recorded by Elvis Presley, including “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” and “I Believe in the Man in the Sky,” and compare them to Elvis’ Rock and Roll recordings. You may wish to address the following:

• What are the main similarities and differences?
• What musical techniques does Elvis emphasize in each genre?
• Do you think Elvis would have been as successful had he not grown up listening to Gospel? Why or why not? What did Gospel music add to his work?

Students may further wish to investigate Elvis’ use of Gospel groups such as the Jordanaires (featured in this lesson) as background vocalists for many recordings and concerts throughout his career.

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

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

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

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.

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

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.

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**RESOURCES**

**VIDEO RESOURCES**
- Sister Rosetta Tharpe – Didn’t It Rain (1964)
- Kanye West – Gold Digger (2005)
- The Southern Tones – It Must Be Jesus (1954)
- Chuck Berry – Guitar Solos
- Elvis Presley & The Jordanaires - Too Much (1967)
- The Jordanaires – Dig a Little Deeper (1950)
- Ray Charles – I Got a Woman (1954)
- Sam Cooke – Loveable (1962)
- Little Richard – Tutti Frutti (1957)
- Sam Cooke – Wonderful (1959)

**FEATURED PEOPLE**
- Ray Charles
- Sam Cooke
- Elvis Presley
- Sister Rosetta Tharpe
- Kanye West

**HANDOUTS**
- Handout 1: Gospel and West African Traditions
- Handout 2: Song Comparisons
- Handout 3: Gospel Family Tree