



## THE MEMPHIS SOUND: A CASE STUDY OF MUSIC AND INTEGRATION IN MID-CENTURY AMERICA

### OVERVIEW

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How has Memphis music culture provided one example of art's capacity to challenge the racial boundaries that have so often structured American life?

#### OVERVIEW

In the early 1950s, Elvis Presley, the future “King of Rock and Roll,” would wander down to the Beale Street area of Memphis on breaks from his job as an usher at Loew’s Theater. Beale Street was a predominantly black part of Memphis. As a white teenager in a segregated city, Elvis was crossing a line. But he was enthralled by African-American life. Window-shopping for clothes at establishments like Lansky Bros. and expressing his love for the music he heard coming from black Memphis, Elvis was resisting racial norms. Beale Street had an energy he couldn’t ignore. With its rich musical history and bustling shops, many of them owned by African-Americans, that part of town had a vibrancy that appealed to many, both black and white. At the level of culture, it was impossible to segregate Memphis.



Memphis is just one example within a larger, national story about music and culture providing an alternative to the systems of segregation, official and unofficial, that defined American life during the 1950s and 60s. In large cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, and New York City, as well as smaller communities like Muscle Shoals, Alabama, music played a powerful role in breaking down racial boundaries. Segregation had been written into American law through legislation such as the 1896 Supreme Court decision *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, which established the mandate of “separate but equal” as a basis for the oppressive Jim Crow laws. And segregationist policies did not only affect the South. Prior to the 1954 landmark decision of *Brown vs. Board of Education*, states as far West as Wyoming and Arizona had school segregation codes. And blacks in northern cities like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia were denied certain job, housing, and loan opportunities.

This lesson will explore how Memphis, set against this backdrop, was one musical city that would change how America viewed race relations. The 1960s Soul music recorded in Memphis was a blend of black and white styles, combining elements of Country, R&B, Gospel, and Pop. And Memphis musicians like Elvis Presley, and later the Mar-Keys and Booker T. and the MGs, became powerful examples of a national trend wherein art and

## OVERVIEW (CONTINUED)

culture challenged racial norms. One turning point occurred in 1957, when siblings Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton founded Satellite Records and soon changed their company's name to "Stax." Stewart and Axton, both white, established their headquarters on McLemore Avenue in a predominantly black Memphis neighborhood. They made a decision to open their studio and offices to any person with talent, regardless of skin color; like Presley's refusal to hide his love for African-American culture, these were bold moves in a city that was still widely segregated.

The musicians who performed and played on Stax recordings were no strangers to the effects of a city divided by skin color. In the mixed-race ensemble Booker T. and the MGs, all of the musicians had graduated from segregated Memphis schools. But music brought them together across institutionalized color lines. When Booker T. and the MGs released their breakthrough hit "Green Onions" in 1962, there were still many restaurants in the South where the band could not sit down together for a hamburger – even with a hit song at No. 3 on the Billboard Pop singles chart.

In this lesson, students embark on a "walking tour" of Memphis, using the city as a case study through which to view complex race relations and integration issues that affected communities across the U.S. While plotting points of historical interest on a map, students consider how artists such as Elvis, the Mar-Keys, and Booker T. and the MGs resisted social norms through their music and performances. Listening to oral history from Stax owner Jim Stewart, students explore how an integrated record label operated in the middle of a segregated community and was able to create a unique and powerful Soul sound that signaled a shift in race relations in America.

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The power of music to transcend race and challenge social norms in Memphis, and in cities across the United States, in the years before the Civil Rights Act
- The history of race relations in Tennessee and national systems of racial discrimination, including Jim Crow laws
- How high schools in Memphis remained segregated despite the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, and how musicians questioned and challenged these racial barriers
- How Memphis music was shaped by the city's diversity

### 2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Use a map of Memphis to integrate technical analysis with qualitative analysis in print materials.
- Common Core: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally (Speaking and Listening 2)
- Common Core: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric. (Speaking and Listening 3)

## ACTIVITIES

### PRE-CLASS SETUP:

Set up the room with eight sites using **Handout 1: Walking Tour Locations**. Sites 1-3 can be placed close together at the front of the classroom. These three locations will be visited as a class before breaking up into groups to visit Sites 4-8.

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

Play video clip of Stax artists Sam and Dave performing “Hold On, I’m Comin’” in 1966, backed by Booker T. and the MGs. Ask students to privately reflect upon the artists’ performances and the emotions conveyed during the song. Have students jot down their reactions. [Note to teacher: Students will return to these initial reflections at the end of the lesson.]

**PROCEDURE:**

1. Show the class archival newsreel footage of a 1925 Ku Klux Klan march in Washington D.C. in Washington, D.C. where, according to the New York Times, an estimated “50,000 to 60,000 white-robed men and women marched.” Ask students:

- What do you know about the Klu Klux Klan (KKK)? What are your reactions to seeing this march?
- What do you think was the message in mixing a character dressed as Uncle Sam with Klan members?
- What does this footage imply about race relations in America during the 1920s?

Explain that the first branch of the KKK was founded in 1866 in Pulaski, Tennessee by a small group of Confederate veterans who violently opposed Reconstruction policies. By the 1920s, there were 4 million members nationwide.

2. Display images of a political cartoon and an excerpt of an editorial printed in the Memphis-based newspaper The Commercial Appeal in 1923.



**THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL**

Memphis, Tenn. March 17, 1923

No group of men in any community is bigger than the constituted authorities. No aggregation of individuals has a right to take unto themselves the duties of judges and juries. There can be no such thing as a state within a state or a state above a state. There has been lawlessness. There has been murder and nothing will be settled until the lawlessness is put down and until the murderers are hunted out and brought to par of the courts of their country.

- Excerpt of editorial by C.F.J. Mooney

Ask students:

- Read the title of the cartoon. What year was it published and where? What is depicted? What is the symbolism of the hand and the message to “halt”? How is the artist challenging the presence of the KKK in his city?
- What does this editorial address? What does the author call for in regards to the violent actions of the KKK?

The Commercial Appeal took a bold stand and, in 1923, it won the Pulitzer Prize “for its courageous attitude in the publication of cartoons and the handling of news in reference to the operations of the Ku Klux Klan.”

Ask students:

- How might The Commercial Appeal, a newspaper in a city with an estimated 10,000 Klansmen, be taking a risk in criticizing the activities of the KKK?

3. Despite some institutions like The Commercial Appeal taking a stance against racist extremism, many cities in the South remained a deeply segregated into the 1950s and 60s, including Memphis. Distribute Handout 2: Systems of Segregation and direct students to Part 1: Jim Crow Laws. Students can read over this section individually, or you can invite student volunteers to read it aloud.

Ask students:

- If you were a black teenager growing up in a segregated city, how do you think Jim Crow laws would have affected your daily life? Which of these laws do you think would have had the biggest impact on your life? Why?
- What do you imagine black life was like in segregated Memphis?

4. Play the video “Images of Beale Street, 1939-1956” featuring photographs of Beale Street and music from B.B.

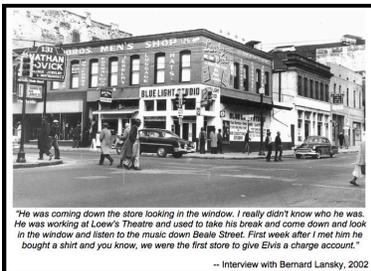
## PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

King’s “You Upset Me Baby,” a song that reached No. 1 on the Billboard Rhythm and Blues chart in 1956.

Ask students:

- What are some of your observations and reactions to the photographs of Beale Street taken between 1939 and 1956? What are some of the street signs, businesses, and activities you see? What are some of the people in the photographs doing?
  - How does this depiction of Beale Street compare with your conception of what black life was like in segregated Memphis?
  - Beale Street bustled with clubs, restaurants, and hotels, many of which were owned and operated by African Americans. Do you think the activity along Beale Street might have also appealed to non-black audiences? Why or why not?
7. Beale Street’s music and magnetic energy appealed to white Memphians as well. Its history as a musical center was deep and included visits from Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Muddy Waters, B.B. King, and many more. In the 1950s, a teenage Elvis Presley often wandered around Beale Street, drawn to the music and fashion there. He shopped at Lansky Bros., a clothing store that had dressed many famous black musicians, including B.B. King.

Display the following photo of Lansky Bros. and a quote by owner Bernard Lansky. Invite a student volunteer to read the quote aloud about the first time he met Elvis.



Ask students:

- Based on this account, what did Elvis like to do when he visited Beale Street?
  - When Elvis released his first single on Memphis-based Sun Records in 1954, “That’s All Right,” it was a 1940s Rhythm and Blues song written and originally recorded by African-American Bluesman Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup. In what ways did Elvis’s song choice relate to his experiences on Beale Street?
  - Much as the Commercial Appeal challenged racism in Memphis, how did Elvis resist racial norms by spending time on Beale Street and recording Rhythm and Blues music?
6. Distribute Handout 3: Map of Memphis. Tell students that they will be taking a “tour” through Memphis, stopping at several sites to explore segregation, race relations, and music. In this lesson, Memphis will serve as a case study to explore the power of music to transcend race and break down social barriers. The class will explore the first three sites together before breaking up into groups to explore additional locations. The first site is an auditorium where Elvis Presley played his first big show in Memphis to a sold-out audience in 1955.

### Site 1: Ellis Auditorium, Corner of Poplar and Front Streets

7. Direct students to locate the Ellis Auditorium at the corner of Poplar and Front Street on their maps. Invite a student volunteer to come forward and read aloud information about Site 1.

Ask students:

- While Elvis’s 1955 concert at Ellis Auditorium was a segregated event, the audience, made up of both white and black Memphians, filled the 12,000 seat auditorium to capacity. What might this imply about the appeal of Elvis’s music in the 1950s?

**PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)**

8. Play a clip of Otis Williams of the Motown vocal group The Temptations as he discusses performing a concert in the South, at a venue similar to the Ellis Auditorium.

Ask students:

- What did Otis Williams notice about the audience at his first concert in South Carolina? What had changed in the audience by the second concert?
- What does Otis Williams’s observation at the second concert suggest about the relationship between music and social change?

Ellis Auditorium was used by both white and black audiences. Other musical venues were more clearly delineated for either black or white audiences. The chitlin’ circuit, a name derived from the soul food item “chitterlings,” was a network of all-black clubs throughout the U.S. where African-American performers appeared during and after segregation.

**Site 2: Currie’s Club Tropicana, 1331 Thomas Street**

9. Direct students to locate Currie’s Club Tropicana at 1331 Thomas Street on their maps. Invite a student volunteer to come forward and read aloud information about Site 2.

Ask students:

- “Chitlin’ circuit” clubs across the U.S., including the Tropicana, catered specifically to African-American audiences. When the Mar-Keys were touring the “chitlin’ circuit,” why do you think club owners and audiences might have been initially reticent towards a white band appearing there?

10. Play audio clip of “Last Night” recorded by the Mar-Keys. Tell students this song was released in 1961.

- “Last Night” reached No. 3 on the Billboard Pop singles chart and No. 2 on the Rhythm and Blues chart – a list dominated by African-American artists. What does this chart success suggest about the song’s commercial appeal?
- How does the success of “Last Night” continue the tradition started by Elvis of challenging racial norms through music?

The Mar-Keys are part of a larger narrative of Stax Records, a Memphis-based label that continually challenged racial norms through music.

**Site 3: Stax Records, 926 E. McLemore Avenue**

11. Each student should find Stax Records at 926 E. McLemore Ave on their maps. Invite a student volunteer to come to the front of the class and read aloud the information about the record label.

Ask students:

- What role did Stax play for musicians in Memphis? What does Mar-Keys member Wayne Jackson attribute Stax with providing him as a young musician?

12. Play clip of Stax co-founder Jim Stewart discussing racial integration at Stax Records in a 2007 interview.

Ask students:

- How does Stewart describe race relations in the South during the 1950s and 1960s? How did Stewart’s upbringing influence his thoughts about race?
- What does he say was unique about the hiring policy at Stax Records?
- If you were a teenage musician in a segregated community such as Memphis, how do you think it might have felt to have a place like the Stax studio and the Satellite Record Shop in your town?

## PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

13. Booker T. and the MGs became one of the best-known bands to record for Stax Records. Play clip of Booker T. and the MGs performing “Green Onions” live in 1967. Tell students that the band, which included Steve Cropper and Donald “Duck” Dunn originally of the Mar-Keys, along with Booker T. Jones and Al Jackson, Jr., first recorded this song at Stax in 1962.

Ask students:

- What might have been some of the challenges of belonging to a mixed-race ensemble in a segregated city?
- Building upon the example of Elvis and the Mar-Keys, how do Booker T. and the MGs advance the idea of challenging racial norms through music?

14. All of the members of Booker T. and the MGs had graduated from segregated high schools in the Memphis area. Refer students back to Handout 2: Systems of Segregation and have a student volunteer read aloud Part 2: Brown v. Board of Education.

Ask students:

- What language used in the Brown vs. Board of Education ruling allowed communities to draw out the school desegregation process, even after segregation was ruled unconstitutional?
- Given that the members of Booker T. and the MGs all attended segregated Memphis high schools, how do you think it felt for them to come to work at Stax?

15. Break students up into small groups to engage in a “walking tour” of the remaining five sites. They will be moving through segregated Memphis from the perspective of one of four members of the integrated Stax band Booker T. and the MGs.

At each site, students should identify the location on their maps. They will read about the site and discuss what emotions their assigned band member might have felt at that site in the 1960s. (For example, band members may feel welcomed, excluded, threatened, inspired, conflicted, etc.)

Booker T. and the MGs band members include:

- Booker T. Jones, African American, Keyboard and Organ
- Steve Cropper, White, Guitar
- Donald “Duck” Dunn, White, Bass
- Al Jackson, Jr., African American, Drums

16. After the mapping exercise, students will return to their seats. Walking through each site, poll the class for their reactions: If your group was either Booker T. Jones or Al Jackson, Jr., the two African-American musicians, how did this site make you feel? What were some of your observations about the site? Pose the same question to the groups who went through the exercise as Steve Cropper and Donald “Duck” Dunn, the two white musicians.

Discuss as a class:

- How does segregation elude clearly-defined lines on a map? Use the data on your map and information gathered from the various sites to explain your answer.
- What is radio's importance within in a segregated community? How is a station like WDIA able to reach an integrated audience?
- Ask students to compare and contrast the pictures and descriptions of Messick and Booker T. Washington High schools. How do

## PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

you think segregation factored into the quality of resources and education offered to black and white students?

17. Once again, play the video clip of Stax artists Sam and Dave performing “Hold On, I’m Comin’” in 1966. Explain to the students that Booker T. and the MGs are the backing musicians in the video.

Ask students:

- What words would you use to describe this performance? What emotions do Sam and Dave convey?
- How has your understanding of this music changed since you have learned more about the Memphis community in which it was created? Students can refer back to their initial reactions which they recorded at the start of lesson.

## SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

Play the first four minutes of a 1967 interview with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the Merv Griffin Show.

Discuss as a class:

- Dr. King speaks about how a “creative and constructive coalition” between Blacks and Whites is integral to social equality. Why might music serve as a particularly powerful tool to encourage this type of coalition and collaboration?

## WRITING PROMPT:

Arts and culture, specifically music, were at the forefront of breaking down racial barriers in the 1950s and 60s. In a one-page written response, students will identify a contemporary work of art, whether it be a piece of music, a movie, a play, a painting, a photograph, or a television series that they feel is at the forefront of breaking down a racial, social, or gender barriers within society today. In their written response, students should include the following:

- What is the title of the work of art and who is the artist? Which racial, social, or gender barrier do you believe this piece of art is challenging?
- Why do you feel this work of art is particularly powerful? What specific details address the issue you've identified?
- Connect this work of art to the music coming out of Memphis during the 1950s and 60s. Use specific examples that you learned during class to draw out your comparison.

## EXTENSIONS:

Assign students to research the specific contributions of one pair (or group) of individuals related to Stax who were mentioned in this lesson. Students may select from the following list, or the teacher can assign individuals.

- Estelle Axton and Jim Stewart, co-founders of Stax Records
- Otis Redding (songwriter and performer) and the Bar-Kays, Stax artists
- Rufus and Carla Thomas, Stax artists
- Isaac Hayes and David Porter, Stax songwriters and producers
- Sam Moore and David Prater, Stax artists (Sam and Dave)
- Wayne Jackson and Andrew Love, members of the Memphis Horns

In a one-page report, students must explain how their subjects worked together and were integral to the success of Stax Records. Responses should reference at least one historical event they have learned about regarding segregation in Memphis during the 1950s and 60s.

## 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.

Reading 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

*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 of texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence

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

Writing 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

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

Speaking and Listening 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.

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 3: People, Places, and Environments

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices

## **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.

## RESOURCES

### VIDEO RESOURCES

- Booker T and The MGs – Green Onions (1967)
- Jim Stewart – Racial Integration at Stax (2007)
- Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Harry Belafonte – The Merv Griffin Show (1967)
- Ku Klux Klan March in Washington D.C. (1928)
- Sam and Dave – Hold On (1966)
- Otis Williams – Segregation in the South (2006)
- Images from Beale Street (1939-1956)
- The Mar Keys – Last Night (1961)

### FEATURED PEOPLE

- Booker T. and the MGs
- B.B. King
- Elvis Presley
- Otis Redding
- Sam and Dave
- Jim Stewart
- The Temptations

### HANDOUTS

- Handout 1: Walking Tour Locations
- Handout 2: Systems of Segregation
- Handout 3: Map of Memphis