



THE MUSIC OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did popular music reflect the values of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and help the movement convey its message?

OVERVIEW

There is no American social movement of the 20th or 21st century more closely connected to music than the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Protesters, some in prison, sang freedom songs to keep their spirits up. Folksingers, black and white alike, wrote songs about the paradoxes and pains not just of the Jim Crow South, but of the racism that had long troubled American life.



Perhaps no song was more closely associated with the Civil Rights movement than “We Shall Overcome.” Based on a 19th-century African-American Gospel song, “We Shall Overcome” was picked up by the labor movement in the 1940s, during which time the folksinger/activist Pete Seeger first came across it. Seeger then helped popularize the song in the early phase of the Civil Rights movement, when it quickly became a ubiquitous sing-along anthem that crowds of activists embraced, often swaying side to side, arm in arm. Joan Baez performed it at the 1963 March on Washington; President Lyndon Johnson quoted it in his speech to Congress proposing the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Songs reflecting the themes of the Civil Rights movement were not limited to Folk – the genre commonly associated with American protest songs – but could be found in all types of popular music. The Jazz revolution of the 1960s was affected by the Civil Rights movement. A number of Blues songs compared the oppression of southern blacks in the early 1960s to the racial injustices earlier in the century and before. By the end of the decade, even Motown Records was releasing records by artists ready to speak out against American racism.

In this lesson, students will examine the history and popularity of “We Shall Overcome” and investigate six additional songs from different musical genres that reveal the impact of the Civil Rights movement. These are: Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit,” a poignant Blues song depicting the horrors of lynching; Bob Dylan’s “Oxford Town,” a Folk song about protests after the integration of the University of Mississippi; John Coltrane’s “Alabama,” an instrumental Jazz recording made in response to the September 1963 church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, that killed four African-American girls; Nina Simone’s “Mississippi Goddam,” a response to the same church bombing as well as the murder of civil rights activist Medgar Evers in Mississippi; Sam Cooke’s “A Change is Gonna Come,” a Soul song written after Cooke’s arrest for attempting to check in to a whites-only motel in Shreveport, Louisiana; and Odetta’s “Oh Freedom,” a spiritual that Odetta performed at the 1963 March on Washington.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The role of music as a motivating force in the Civil Rights movement
- The history of “We Shall Overcome” and its central importance to the Civil Rights movement
- The ways in which popular songs of different musical genres reflected the values and beliefs of the Civil Rights movement
- The effectiveness of music in spreading the message of the Civil Rights movement

2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Analyze the lyrics of popular music for meaning
- Analyze instrumental music for meaning and attitude
- Make connections between popular music and historical events
- Evaluate the role and effectiveness of music as a tool of political protest
- Common Core: Students will investigate text, audio and video to analyze the role of music in the Civil Rights movement (CCSS Reading 1; CCSS Reading 7; CCSS Writing 2; CCSS Writing 9; CCSS Speaking and Listening 2; CCSS Language 4)

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

1. Display the following quote on the board:

“Without these songs, you know we wouldn’t be anywhere. We’d still be down on Mister Charley’s plantation, chopping cotton for 30 cents a day.”

- Cordell Reagon, founding member of the Freedom Singers of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee

2. Briefly discuss:

- Who is the “we” Reagon is referring to?
- What does Reagon suggest about the importance of music to the Civil Rights movement?
- How might song be a particularly effective way to deliver a human message?

PROCEDURE:

1. Distribute Handout 1: “We Shall Overcome.” Ask for a volunteer to read the introduction out loud.

2. Play the video of Pete Seeger discussing how the song first came to the Civil Rights movement.

3. Play the at video of Joan Baez performing the song in 1966, and discuss:

- What do some members of the audience begin to do almost immediately after Baez begins singing?
- How does the song make you feel? What emotions does it arouse?
- In the Pete Seeger video, he mentions how the song was a big hit at the 1960 meeting he attended, and that other civil rights groups wanted to learn it. Why do you think it caught on? What is it about the song and the lyrics that made “We Shall Overcome” such a popular sing-along song? (Instructor: You may wish to emphasize the idea that it is a very easy song to learn and to sing, and thus very adaptable as a sing-along.)
- How does the song convey the main message of the Civil Rights movement? In terms of the lyrics? In terms of the tune? Why do you think it became so important to the movement?

4. Remind students that the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which made it illegal to prevent African Americans from voting, was one of the most important legal victories of the Civil Rights movement. Play the excerpt from President Lyndon Johnson’s speech to Congress proposing the legislation, and discuss:

- What is Johnson arguing for? Why does he say this is necessary?
- What phrase does he use at the end of this clip? What is the reaction of the senators and congressmen watching?
- Why do you think Johnson used this phrase?
- What does Johnson’s use of this phrase and the

reaction suggest about the influence of the song “We Shall Overcome” on the country’s view of the Civil Rights movement?

5. Play the short clip from Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, delivered in front of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963, and discuss:

- Where is the speech taking place? What is in the background? Why is this significant?
- What is King’s main message?
- What happens in the crowd when the speech ends and you can hear the voice at the microphone saying “keep order”?
- Why do you think the crowd begins singing at that point?
- Who is in the crowd? Is it only African Americans? What does this tell you about the Civil Rights movement?
- What is the crowd doing while it sings? What impression does this convey?

6. Divide students into groups of 3-4; create duplicate groups to accommodate class size. Instruct students that each group will work together to analyze another important song that in some way came to be associated with the civil rights movement:

- Billie Holiday, “Strange Fruit” (1959)
- Bob Dylan, “Oxford Town” (1962)
- John Coltrane, “Alabama” (1963)
- Sam Cooke, “A Change is Gonna Come” (1963)
- Nina Simone, “Mississippi Goddam” (1964)
- Odetta, “Oh Freedom” (1961)

Distribute handouts for each group (Billie Holiday, Bob Dylan, John Coltrane, Sam Cooke, Nina Simone, and Odetta) and

PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

prepare a listening or viewing station for each group at which they will listen to or view a performance of the song.

8. After all groups have completed their investigations, have each group report to the class as a whole, summarizing the importance of its song to the Civil Rights movement. Briefly discuss:

- Was there a specific issue or incident that your song was responding to? What role did the song play in making people aware of that issue and encouraging support of the Civil Rights movement?
- Why did the artist record this song? Why do you think people wanted to listen to it?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

Distribute Handout 2: Music and the Civil Rights Struggle. Ask for a volunteer to read the paragraph aloud. Discuss:

- Why was music so important to the Civil Rights movement?
- What do the speakers in the article suggest music could provide for the movement? For participants in the movement?
- How can music help someone or some issue “become visible”?
- Is music simply a form of entertainment, or can it have other purposes as well?

WRITING PROMPT

Ask students to write a short essay on the role of music in the Civil Rights movement, referencing specific songs in their argument. Why do many historians say that music had such a crucial role in the movement? Discuss whether the movement helped to create the Civil Rights music studied in this lesson, whether the music helped to create the movement, or both. Students should select one of the songs analyzed in this lesson and describe its importance to the Civil Rights movement.

EXTENSIONS:

1. Ask students to research the involvement of folksinger Joan Baez in the Civil Rights movement. Baez performed “We Shall Overcome” at the 1963 March on Washington, and the song became closely associated with her. In 2009, Baez performed the song for President Barack Obama at the White House. Ask students to contemplate the significance of Baez performing this Civil Rights anthem for an African-American president. How has the setting changed since the 1966 performance included in the beginning of the lesson? How does the audience react in each case? Has the meaning of the song changed between 1963 and 2009?

EXTENSIONS: (CONTINUED)

2. Have students use the Internet to identify another song that reflects on the Civil Rights era and do research on the meaning and the purpose of that song. Students might be encouraged to seek out some of the “motivational anthems” of the movement, such as “Eyes on the Prize,” “Freedom Now,” or “We Shall Not Be Moved.” Students may either turn in their work as a written report or, ideally, present and explain their song to the class.
3. Have students research the use of “We Shall Overcome” as a protest song in the years since the Civil Rights movement. They may wish to explore its use during the “Velvet Revolution” that ended communist rule in Czechoslovakia or Bruce Springsteen’s performance of the song in Oslo, Norway, in the aftermath of the 2011 terrorist attack that killed 77 people, along with numerous other examples of its recurring use.
4. Mature students may wish to further investigate the issue of lynching at the center of Billie Holliday’s “Strange Fruit.” The “Without Sanctuary” website contains a film and numerous photographs of individuals lynched in the United States. The images are quite graphic, and this activity is recommended only for mature students for whom this material is appropriate.

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

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

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 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 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.

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

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language for Grades 6-12

Language 4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.

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

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

- Nina Simone – Mississippi Goddam (1964)
- Billy Holiday – Strange Fruit (1959)
- Sam Cooke – A Change is Gonna Come (1963)
- Pete Seeger – Discussing “We Shall Overcome”
- Bob Dylan – Oxford Town (1962)
- Joan Baez – We Shall Overcome (2009)
- Odetta – Oh Freedom (1961)
- Joan Baez – We Shall Overcome (1966)
- John Coltrane – Alabama (1963)
- Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. – I Have a Dream (1963)
- President Lyndon B. Johnson – Speech on Voting Rights (1965)

FEATURED PEOPLE

- Joan Baez
- Sam Cooke
- Bob Dylan
- Billie Holiday
- Pete Seeger

HANDOUTS

- Billie Holiday, “Strange Fruit”
- Bob Dylan, “Oxford Town”
- Handout 1: “We Shall Overcome”
- Handout 2: Music and the Civil Rights Struggle
- John Coltrane, “Alabama”
- Nina Simone, “Mississippi Goddam”
- Odetta, “Oh Freedom”
- Sam Cooke, “A Change is Gonna Come”