

Learning Rhythm through Gospel

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How can Gospel music help students identify the musical concepts of beat, meter, backbeat, subdivision, and syncopation?

OVERVIEW

Popular music today would sound very different without the influence of Gospel. From Little Richard to Sister Rosetta Tharpe to Mavis Staples to Sam Cooke, many of the musicians who helped develop Rock and Roll and Rhythm and Blues were first influenced by the music from churches. And the Gospel-to-pop connection is not a thing of the past—the sound of church can still be heard in everything from Beyoncé to Chance the Rapper.



Photo: Camilo J. Vergara

But the connection between Gospel and popular music isn't a one way street: Gospel has also long been influenced by secular music. In the 18th and 19th centuries, traveling preachers would regularly evangelize to the public through days-long “camp meetings.” To make these meetings engaging, the preachers would encourage the audience to sing popular songs of the day, set to religious lyrics. Since then, Gospel composers have regularly drawn upon secular sources in creating new hymns, and many had careers in both religious and secular music. For example, Thomas Dorsey, considered by many to be the “Father of Gospel Music,” also regularly toured with popular blues musician Ma Rainey.

Perhaps more than anything else, what keeps the strands of Gospel and popular music so closely intertwined is the rhythms. A strong, syncopated beat is essential to both styles. This rhythmic influence can be traced as far back as the 1600s, when slaves sang spirituals and ring shouts while clapping and stomping the West African rhythms of their heritage.

In this lesson, Gospel music is used as a way to introduce students to the rhythmic concepts of beat, meter, backbeat, subdivision, and syncopation. By clapping and counting along to videos of Mahalia Jackson, Sam Cooke, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, The Staple Singers, and Beyoncé, students practice hearing and identifying these various aspects of rhythm. Students will also use an interactive TechTool to gain a deeper understanding of the syncopated rhythms that allows Gospel, as well a popular music in general, to inspire us to move.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The musical concepts of rhythm, beat, backbeat, subdivision, and syncopation
- About popular musicians inspired by Gospel, including Mahalia Jackson, Sam Cooke, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, The Staple Singers, and Beyoncé
- How to locate and create a beat, backbeat, subdivided rhythm, and syncopated rhythm
- The concept of call and response
- The relationship between Gospel and Popular music

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to locate and perform a beat, a backbeat, a subdivided rhythm, and a syncopated rhythm by listening to Gospel and Gospel-inspired musicians.

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Ask students:

- What is rhythm? Is rhythm only found in music, or can it be found other places? (*Ask students if something like a moving train, a washing machine, or a jackhammer can have a rhythm, and encourage them to consider the rhythms of nature such as sunrise and sunset, ocean tides, or moon cycles.*)
- One way to define rhythm is “the organization of sounds in time.” What might this mean? Can you give an example of when sounds are organized in time?

PROCEDURE

1. Tell students that they will explore various aspects of rhythm by listening to Gospel music. Ask students:

- Have you ever heard Gospel music? What is it? (*See lesson overview for a brief introduction to Gospel music*)
- Gospel music is widely believed to influence American popular music, from Rock and Roll to Rhythm and Blues. Why

do you think so many musicians might be influenced by Gospel music? (*Encourage students to consider where many popular musicians might have first heard and performed music, and the historic role the church has played as a place for music.*)

2. Tell students that in music, one of the most important aspects of rhythm is the beat, and that a strong beat is important for both

Gospel and popular music. Ask students:

- What is the beat in a song? What instruments do you think of as providing the beat in a song? (*Students should note that the beat is the underlying pulse. It is also, in a modern sense, what the drum sounds play in a song.*)
- How do people listening to music acknowledge the beat? (*Encourage students to consider dancing, tapping their feet, clapping, nodding their head, etc.*) How do you think you might make a song have a “strong” or “powerful” beat?

3. Play **Clip 1, Mahalia Jackson, “Old Time Religion.”** While the song is playing, ask

students to lightly clap the beat to the song. If necessary, demonstrate where the beat is for students. Then, play **Clip 2, Sam Cooke, “Loveable,”** again asking students to clap along (*the beat begins around the 0:25 mark*). Demonstrate the beat if necessary. Ask students:

- Were you able to find the beat easily to these songs? What did you listen to that helped you find the beat?
- Was one song harder than another to find the beat? Why?
- Did one song have a stronger beat than the other?
- Which song had a faster beat?

4. Play **Clip 3, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, “Didn’t It Rain,”** and ask the students to clap the beat to the song. (*Encourage students to listen to the bass, which is playing the beat most directly.*)

5. Tell students that this song is organized around a repeating pattern of four beats. This is called the meter, and different songs have

different meters - some might be organized around three beats or five beats.

6. Watch **Clip 3** again, but this time, tell students that rather than clapping, they will count the meter. Help students find the downbeat of the song, and then repetitively count to 4 with the class as the song progresses.

7. After you feel the students have a grasp on counting the meter of the song, pause the clip. Ask students to continue to count the meter when the clip begins again, while also trying to identify which beats the audience clapping is occurring in the song. Ask students:

- What beats in the meter is most of the audience clapping on? Do you know what this is called? (*Help students locate the hand claps on beats 2 and 4. Tell them that beats 2 and 4 are called the backbeat, and that emphasis on the backbeat is a common characteristic of Gospel music.*)

8. Play the portion of **Clip 4, Soundbreaking – Mavis Staple and the Staple Singers.** (*Teachers can find the full performance of the song featured on YouTube, and can optionally ask students to count along with the song as they did in the previous clip, for more practice. Note that links to YouTube videos may begin with an advertisement, so we suggest loading the video before class.*) Ask your students:

- Do you think the Staple Singers are clapping on the backbeat in this clip?
- Do you notice anything else about the clapping? Is Mavis Staples, the singer in the clip, clapping in any other sort of way? (*If necessary, replay the video, pointing out that Mavis Staples claps faster at times, such as at 0:47.*)

9. Tell students that while the Staple Singers are clapping the backbeats, at times they are also subdividing the beat. Ask students:
- What do you think it means to “divide” a beat? Can you hear it in the music here? (*Note: You may find it useful to have students think of something physical they might divide, such as a pie, or a chocolate bar.*)
10. Explain to students that “subdividing” the beat is a way of dividing it into a faster rhythm. Then, have students stand up for a rhythm activity.
- First, have students stomp an even beat with their feet, like marching.
 - Once everyone is stomping on the same beat, tell students to clap twice as fast as they are stomping (*Note: This is quarter notes and eighth notes when written. Depending on your students’ proficiency, you may wish to demonstrate it yourself.*)
11. Show **Image 1, Subdivision 1**. Explain to students that, if you were to notate the activity they just completed, it would look like the image. The notes at the top of the image represent what their feet were doing, and the notes below represent what their hands are doing. Ask students:
- How many notes are on the top row of the image?
 - How many notes are on the bottom row of the image?
 - The notes on the top row are called quarter notes. What might “quarter” mean?
 - If the four notes on the top are called quarter notes, what might the eight notes on the bottom be called?
12. Show **Image 2, Subdivision 2**, and ask students:
- If the eighth notes are further divided into two, how many are there?
 - What might these notes be called?
 - How do the quarter notes, the eighth notes, and the sixteenth notes each look different?
 - How do you think this might sound if we added it to our clapping and stomping? (*Feel free to have the class perform Subdivision 2.*)
13. Show **Clip 5, Soundbreaking - Beyoncé, “Single Ladies”** (*If you’d like students to practice to the entire song, the full performance is available on YouTube. Note that YouTube links may begin with an advertisement, so we suggest loading the video before class.*) Ask your students:
- In this song, is the clapping on the backbeat, or all four beats? (All four beats)
 - What might the meter of this song be?
14. Open the **Soundbreaking Rhythmic Layers – Beyoncé TechTool**, and tell students they will be analyzing the beat to “Single Ladies” visually. Click on the “Claps” section of the tool, play it for a moment, and then ask students:
- How many squares do you see on each row?
 - Knowing there are sixteen squares on each row, what do you think these squares represent?

- Do you see a pattern on the bottom row of notes? Where do the claps occur?
 - If the notes on the bottom occur once every four sixteenth notes, what kind of notes are they? (If necessary, display image 2 again so that students realize they are quarter notes).
 - What about the top row? Where do those notes fall? (Students should realize these notes occur in between the quarter notes.)
 - Which row is playing the beat, and which row is playing the backbeat?
15. Split the class in half. Have one half of the room clap with the top row of the interactive tool, and the other half clap to the bottom half. Have students clap along with techtool at first, and then by themselves.
16. Select the “Drums” button in the TechTool. After playing it for a moment, ask students:
- In the top row, where do the drum sounds fall? (On the 1st, 2nd, 5th, 9th, and 12th box).
 - In the bottom row, where does the sound fall? (On the 14th box).
- What do you notice different about the drum sounds than the clapping sounds? Does one seem more regular or even to you?
17. Tell students that when beats don’t fall into a regular or even order, such as the drums in “Single Ladies,” this is called syncopation. Often, “the beat” in a song is a mix of even, subdivided rhythms, and syncopated, uneven rhythms. Click on the “all” button on the TechTool, and press play. Ask students to observe how the subdivided clapping sounds interlace with the syncopated drum sounds to create the complete beat or “groove.”
18. Have students stand up. While playing the “Drums” portion of the techtool, have them stomp the line labeled “Kick,” and clap the part labeled “Snare.” Once students have a grasp on the rhythm, turn off the tech tool and let them perform the beat by themselves. Emphasize to students that the rhythm they are stomping is uneven, making it a syncopated beat.

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Play **Clip 6, Soundbreaking – “Single Ladies” and the Church**. Ask students:
- In the clip, Tricky Stewart describes the music to “Single Ladies” as a “Sanctified Beat.” What might it be about the song that makes Stewart think of church?
 - How are the rhythms and instruments in “Single Ladies” similar to the other Gospel songs you heard in the class?
 - Would you put Beyoncé in the same category as the other musicians we discussed, such as Mavis Staples, Mahalia Jackson, and Sister Rosetta Tharpe? Why or why not?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

1. Play **Clip 4, *Soundbreaking* – Mavis Staple and the Staple Singers**. Ask students:
 - Who is singing in this clip? Is everyone singing together, at the same time?
 - What is the relationship between Mavis Staples, in front, and the choir behind her?
2. Tell students that the kind of singing featured in the clip is called “Call and Response.” In Call and Response singing, one person, called the “Leader,” sings something, and a group of other people, “the chorus” responds in some way. Tell students there is a variety of ways to perform call and response, and ask them:
 - In the video you just watched, how is the chorus behind Mavis Staples “responding” to her?
 - What is Mavis singing, and what is the choir behind her singing? Who is singing something different each time, and who is singing the same thing?
 - Can you think of another way call and response might occur? (*The choir repeating what the leader is saying exactly, for example.*)
3. Play **Clip 5, *Soundbreaking* - Beyoncé, “Single Ladies” (Excerpt)**. Ask students:
 - Is there call and response in this song? Where?
 - How would you describe how the call and response works when Beyoncé sings “All the single ladies”?
 - How does the call and response pattern change when Beyoncé sings the verse, beginning with “Up in the Club. . .”?
4. Divide students into groups, and have them choose a “leader” and a “choir.” Then ask them to develop their own form of call and response, and perform it for the class.

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-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.

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

Language 6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

Performing/Presenting/Producing

Anchor Standard #4: Select, analyze and interpret artistic work for presentation

Anchor Standard #5: Develop and refine artistic technique and work for presentation.

Anchor Standard #6: Convey meaning through the presentation of work.

Responding

Anchor Standard #7: Perceive and analyze artistic.

Anchor Standard #8: Interpret intent and meaning artistic work.

Anchor Standard #9: Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

Connecting

Anchor Standard #10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experience to art.

Anchor Standard #11: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understand.



RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- Mahalia Jackson, “Old Time Religion”
- Sam Cooke, “Lovable”
- Sister Rosetta Tharpe, “Didn’t it Rain”
- PBS *Soundbreaking* - Mavis Staple and the Staple Singers
- *PBS Soundbreaking* - Beyoncé, “Single Ladies”
- *PBS Soundbreaking* - “Single Ladies” and the Church

Lesson Materials



Image 1, Subdivision 1



Image 2, Subdivision 2

