

# “ALRIGHT” AND THE HISTORY OF BLACK PROTEST SONGS

Est. Time: 60 minutes


Subjects: General Music, SEL, History/Social Studies

Age Range: Middle & High School

See the full lesson [here!](#)


Note: this lesson contains racial slurs and violence. Teacher discretion advised.

★ *TEACHROCK* ★



How have Black artists throughout the 20th century used music to speak about racial injustice in America?

In this lesson, you will:

- Consider the connections between social movements and songs
  - Understand the history and meaning behind Kendrick Lamar's "Alright," Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddam," Aretha Franklin's "Respect," James Brown's "Say it Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud," Marvin Gaye's "What's Goin' On," Public Enemy's "Fight the Power," and N.W.A's "Straight Outta Compton"
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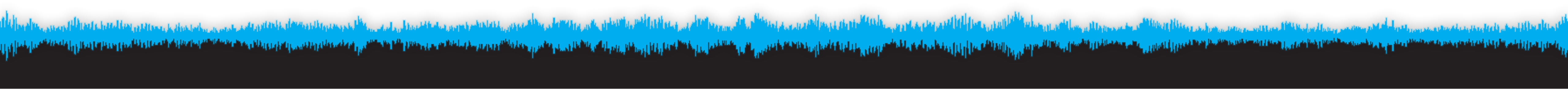



## ALRIGHT

Watch [this video](#) on the relationship between the Black Lives Matter movement and Kendrick Lamar's "Alright."




Consider or ask a friend:

- How is the song being presented in the clip? What are the circumstances under which this song is being sung?
  - According to the clip, why did the protesters at Ferguson choose not to sing “We Shall Overcome,” a song associated with a civil rights movement from an older generation?
  - How do the people in the clip argue that “Alright” is an ideal song for the context of a protest? Do you agree or disagree?
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Examining **these lyrics**, consider or ask a friend:

- What about these lyrics might make “Alright” an appropriate protest song?
  - How might these lyrics express the feelings of people protesting police brutality and the murders of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and many others?
  - How might chanting this song be helpful for protesters? What do you think this song represents to them?
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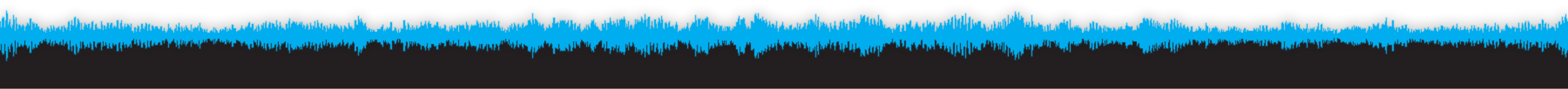


## DISCUSSING “ALRIGHT”

Watch [this video](#) offering further discussion on Lamar’s “Alright.”



Consider or ask a friend:

- Why might the Civil Rights-era Washington Post writer mentioned in the clip have found “Alright” to be “foul and disgusting?”
  - In the clip, Nelson George argues that the assertive lyrics to “Alright” is what makes it effective. What do you think makes a song effective for use at protests?
  - What do you think Daphne Brooks means when she says that “Hip Hop Swagger” can be a tool to fight everyday battles? What everyday battles might she be referring to in this context?
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## ALRIGHT

Kendrick Lamar's "Alright" is part of a long legacy of anthems by Black musicians in protest of unjust treatment, either at the hands of police officers or of vigilantes who are rarely held accountable for their crimes.



## Billie Holiday, “Strange Fruit”

Recorded in 1939, singer Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” is a protest against the practice of Lynching, and remains one of the most poignant, sorrowful, and powerful Black anthems in American history.

Watch Billie Holiday perform the song [here](#), and learn more about the song [here](#).



## Nina Simone, “Mississippi Goddam”

Written in 1964, “Mississippi Goddam” was a powerful anthem on the assassination of Civil Rights Leader Medgar Evers by a Ku Klux Klan member.

Watch Nina Simone perform the song [here](#), and learn more about the song [here](#).



## Aretha Franklin, “Respect”

One of the biggest and most beloved songs of the 1960s, Aretha Franklin’s 1967 “Respect” was a response to Otis Redding’s 1965 song of the same title. The song has gone on to become both an anthem for Black Americans and women across races.

Watch Aretha Franklin sing the song [here](#), and learn more about the song [here](#).



## James Brown, “Say it Loud – I’m Black and I’m Proud”

One of James Brown’s most iconic songs, “Say it Loud - I’m Black and I’m Proud” was written and recorded in 1968 as a song of empowerment.

Watch James Brown perform the song [here](#), and learn more about the song [here](#).



## Marvin Gaye, “What’s Going On”

Recorded in 1970, “What’s Going On” signals Marvin Gaye’s stark creative pivot from romantic and light-hearted pop songs toward socially conscious songs and messages. The song is considered by many to be Gaye’s masterpiece.

Watch Marvin Gaye perform the song [here](#), and learn more about the song [here](#).



## N.W.A., “Straight Outta Compton”

N.W.A.’s 1988 “Straight Outta Compton” remains one of the most powerful statements on police brutality and gang violence of the Hip Hop genre.

Watch an excerpt from the music video to “Straight Outta Compton” [here](#), and learn more about the song [here](#).



## Public Enemy, “Fight the Power”

One of the most iconic songs in Hip Hop, Public Enemy’s 1989 hit “Fight the Power” connects the hip hop genre with militant and radical politics.

Listen to “Fight the Power” [here](#), and learn more about the song [here](#).



# SUMMARY

- Black artists have consistently used music as a vehicle to express racial injustice, in the process creating some of the most powerful and celebrated songs in American history





# BE CREATIVE

- **Recipe for an anthem:** What does it take for a song to become an anthem? Craft a poem or piece of creative writing that outlines the “recipe” to make an anthem.
- Do you have a personal anthem? Write a short piece on a song that you find particularly inspiring, and explain why.
- Examine the lyrics to Kendrick Lamar’s “DNA.” How might that song relate to the history of social injustice toward Black Americans?



# BE CURIOUS

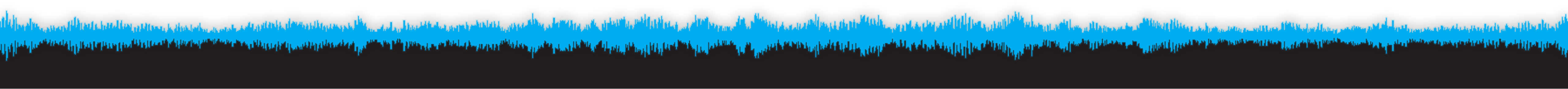
Explore these related TeachRock Lessons and listen to the TeachRock: “Alright” and the History of Black Protest Songs DLP playlist on [Spotify](#) and [YouTube](#).

- [“Glory” and the Continuing Civil Rights Movement](#)
- [The Music of the Civil Rights Movement](#)
- [#BlackLivesMatter: Music in a Movement](#)



# CONNECT

Share it with us! Either you or an adult in your life can share your anthem recipe, or personal anthem essay with TeachRock on **Instagram** or **Facebook**, email to **info@teachrock.org**, or Tweet it to **@TeachRock**





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Please check back to [teachrock.org/distancelearning](https://teachrock.org/distancelearning) frequently as we will update the material weekly!