

FUNK UPON A TIME: THE BEGINNINGS OF FUNK

Est. Time: 75-90 minutes

Subjects: Art, General Music, Social Studies/History

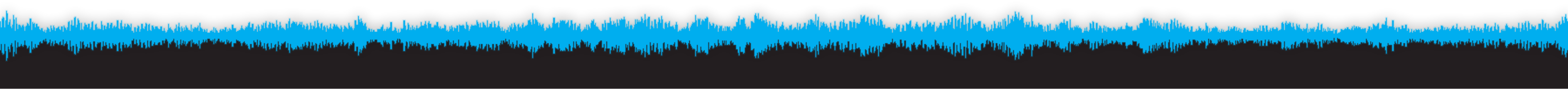
Age Range: Middle & High School

★ *TEACHROCK* ★



How did Funk emerge in Black communities across American cities during the decade following the Civil Rights movement?

In this lesson, you will:


- Learn about activist Fannie Lou Hamer and her testimony at the 1964 Democratic National Convention
 - Examine how many of the changes fought for in the Civil Rights movement had not materialized by the early 1970s
 - Investigate the phenomenon of “White Flight” and how it contributed to inner-city decay
 - Analyze the environment in Los Angeles that led to the Watts Rebellion
 - Discover why and how artists like James Brown, Aretha Franklin, George Clinton and Curtis Mayfield created music and art specifically reflecting the African-American experience
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Fannie Lou Hamer

Fannie Lou Hamer was one of the leaders of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP).

Organized in 1964 with the help of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the MFDP sought to challenge the legitimacy of the Mississippi Democratic Party, which continued to embrace a segregationist platform.






Fannie Lou Hamer gained national attention when she spoke as the official delegate from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party during the 1964 Democratic National Convention. In her speech, she recounted her experience of being brutally physically assaulted by policemen when she was arrested on false charges after registering to vote.

Watch [this video](#) to learn about Fannie Lou Hamer's famous testimony.





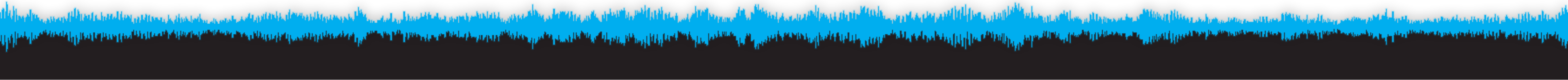
“I was in jail when Medgar Evers was murdered. All of this on account of we want to register, to become first-class citizens. And if the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America. Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?”


-Fannie Lou Hamer







Consider or ask a friend:

- Where did Fannie Lou Hamer live?
 - Where was Fannie Lou Hamer arrested?
 - Why was she harassed, threatened, and arrested? What was she attempting to do?
 - Why was the broadcast of her testimony disrupted?
 - According to interviews in the video, why was Fannie Lou Hamer's testimony considered to be particularly dangerous?
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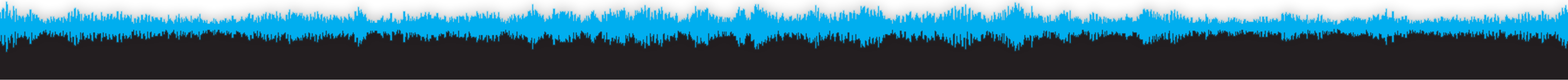


Activists like Fannie Lou Hamer and many men, women and children whose names will never be known created a movement through a series of brave acts of self-sacrifice that regularly led to their suffering violence, and many times led to their death.





These activists lived through the murder of 14 year old Emmet Till in Mississippi in August 1955. The assassination of Medgar Evers in Mississippi in June 1963. The bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama by Ku Klux Klan members in September 1963 that killed four young girls. The murders of activists James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner in Mississippi in June 1964. The assassination of Malcolm X in New York in February 1965.



When Black Americans and their allies demanded that all Americans receive equal protection and access under the law, they were met with systematized assault and torture from their neighbors, elected officials, and social institutions. America- its government and its people- refused to live up to their national legal obligation and international human rights law.





White Flight and Suburbanization

While activists were fighting for racial justice, segregation was continuing to occur-both in the South and the North.


Major cities across the U.S. experienced “White Flight,” or the large-scale migration of white homeowners from urban to suburban regions after WWII. Some of these suburbs were created with codes that specifically prohibited Black inhabitants, and some were developed with government subsidies.


Analyze **this graph** of census data from the 1950s through the 1970s on the results of white flight.





Consider or ask a friend:

- How did white populations in central cities change over a period of twenty years?
 - What does the graph tell us about where whites and blacks lived in relation to one another from 1950 to 1970?
 - What are some aspects of urban life that may have been affected by “White Flight”?
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As a result of white flight, the demographics of American cities were transformed. The people left behind in the city were generally renters, not homeowners.


Black people and other non-white city dwellers were left to contend with eroded tax bases, failing schools, poor housing, and strained relationships with police.

Examine **this cartoon** published in 1977 in the Washington Post, which addresses some of these issues.





Consider or ask a friend:

- What paradox does the cartoon attempt to highlight?
 - What does the title of the cartoon reference? What commentary does the title suggest?
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Civil Unrest in the 1960's

Throughout the 1960s, civil unrest grew in American cities due to segregation and economic distress.


Violent demonstrations soon occurred in other cities that contained significant Black communities including Harlem (1964), Watts (1965), Newark (1967), Detroit (1967) and Washington, D.C. (1968).

Watch [this video](#) to learn what happened in Watts in 1965.





Consider or ask a friend:

- In what city is Watts located?
 - How is this section of Los Angeles described by the narrator?
 - What are the scenes featured in the footage?
 - What mood is conveyed by the narrator's voice and words, the music, and the footage featured?
 - What words are used to describe participants in the Watts Rebellion and how are they portrayed by the narrator?"
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The Watts Rebellion

Next, read [this analysis](#) of the conditions that led to the Watts Rebellion.



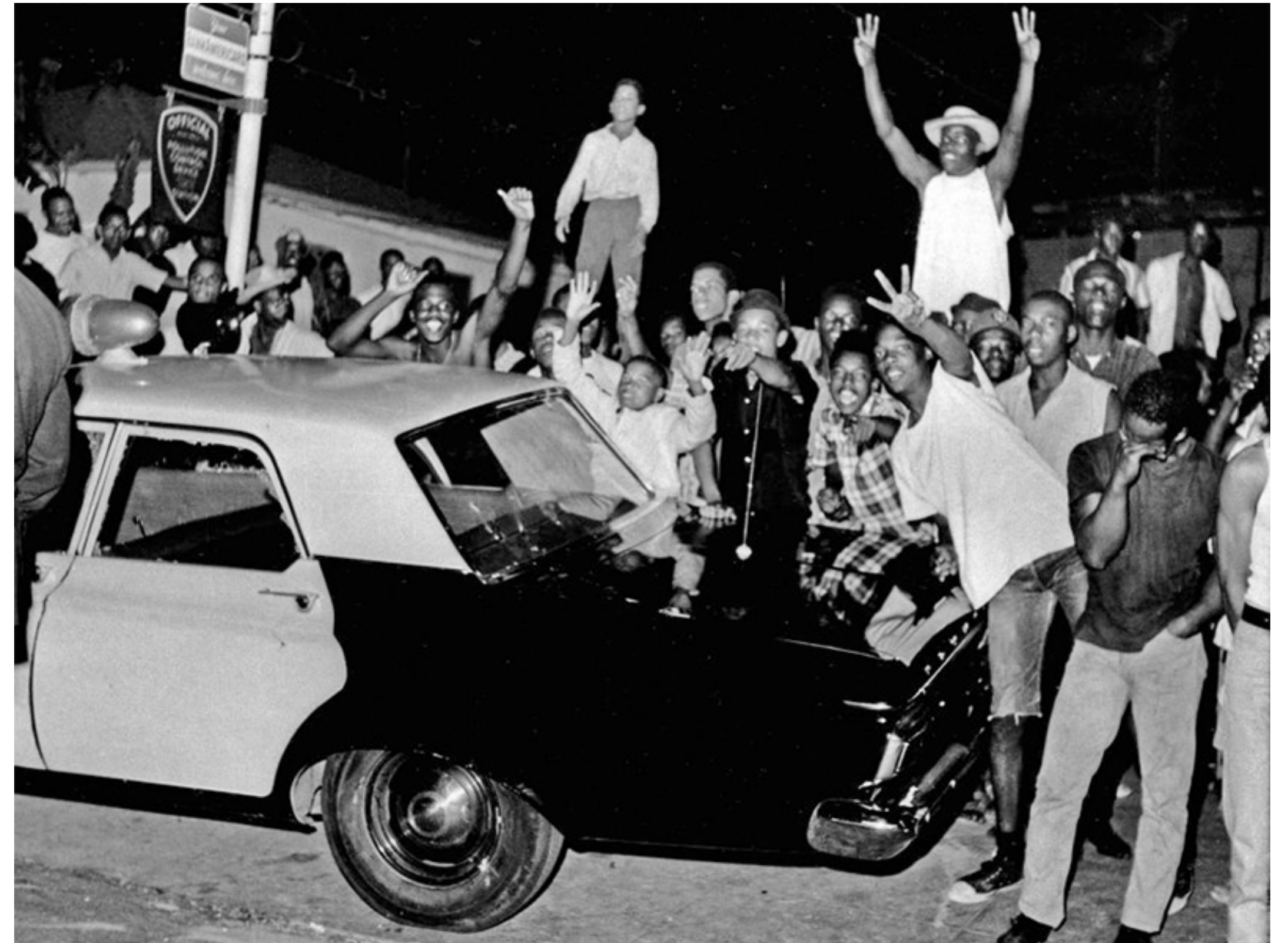


Consider or ask a friend:

- How did reading the article change your understanding of what happened in Watts?
 - Was the Watts Rebellion a surprise, or was it foreseen? Why did some anticipate it happening?
 - In what ways did the policies of the local government, especially Mayor Yorty, contribute to the conditions that led to the Watts Rebellion?
 - In what ways did the attitudes and actions of the LAPD contribute to the conditions that led to the Watts Rebellion?
 - In what ways did school policies contribute to the conditions that led to the Watts Rebellion?
 - How might have “White Flight” contributed to the conditions that led to the Watts Rebellion?
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The Watts Rebellion


Read [this short article](#) on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s visit to Watts shortly after the rebellion,





Consider or ask a friend:

- What two causes did Dr. King list in his comments on the Watts Rebellion?
 - Ultimately, who does Dr. King identify as the victims of the uprising? Why?
 - How would you refer to the event in Watts, as a riot or a rebellion? Both? Why or why not?
 - Does using one word versus the other change how the event might be understood by others?
 - Have you heard of a clash between police and Black citizens in recent news? If so, where did it take place and what happened?
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By the early 1970s, it had become obvious that while the Civil Rights Movement sought to secure the rights of Black citizens under the law, the power structure of the U.S. saw its own interests as mutually exclusive to those of Black citizens, whether they lived in the rural south or in abandoned American cities.

Artists and activists began speaking up.



Read [this article](#) about Aretha Franklin's support of activist Angela Davis

Think about or ask a friend:

- How does Aretha Franklin describe her support of jailed activist Angela Davis?
- Aretha describes a disagreement about this matter with someone close to her. Who is the person with whom she disagreed?

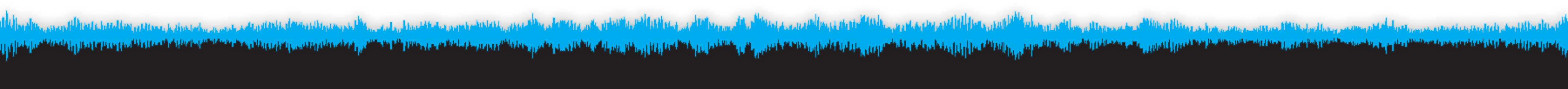




Artists and Activists

- Watch **this video** to see artist James Brown discuss the importance of the Civil Rights Movement to his artistic career.

Consider or ask a friend:

- Why might James Brown feel a responsibility as an artist to direct his music and attention towards his fans in major cities at this particular moment in history?
 - Why might James Brown say his fight is against “the past”?
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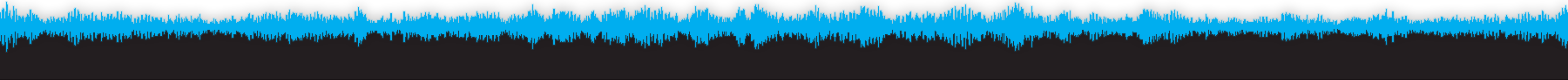
Nicknamed “The Godfather of Soul” James Brown and his band helped the genre of music called Funk. Built on a rhythmic groove and often featuring horns, Funk is equal parts dance and song.

Watch [this video](#) from 12:20 - 14:48 of James Brown in performance in 1971.



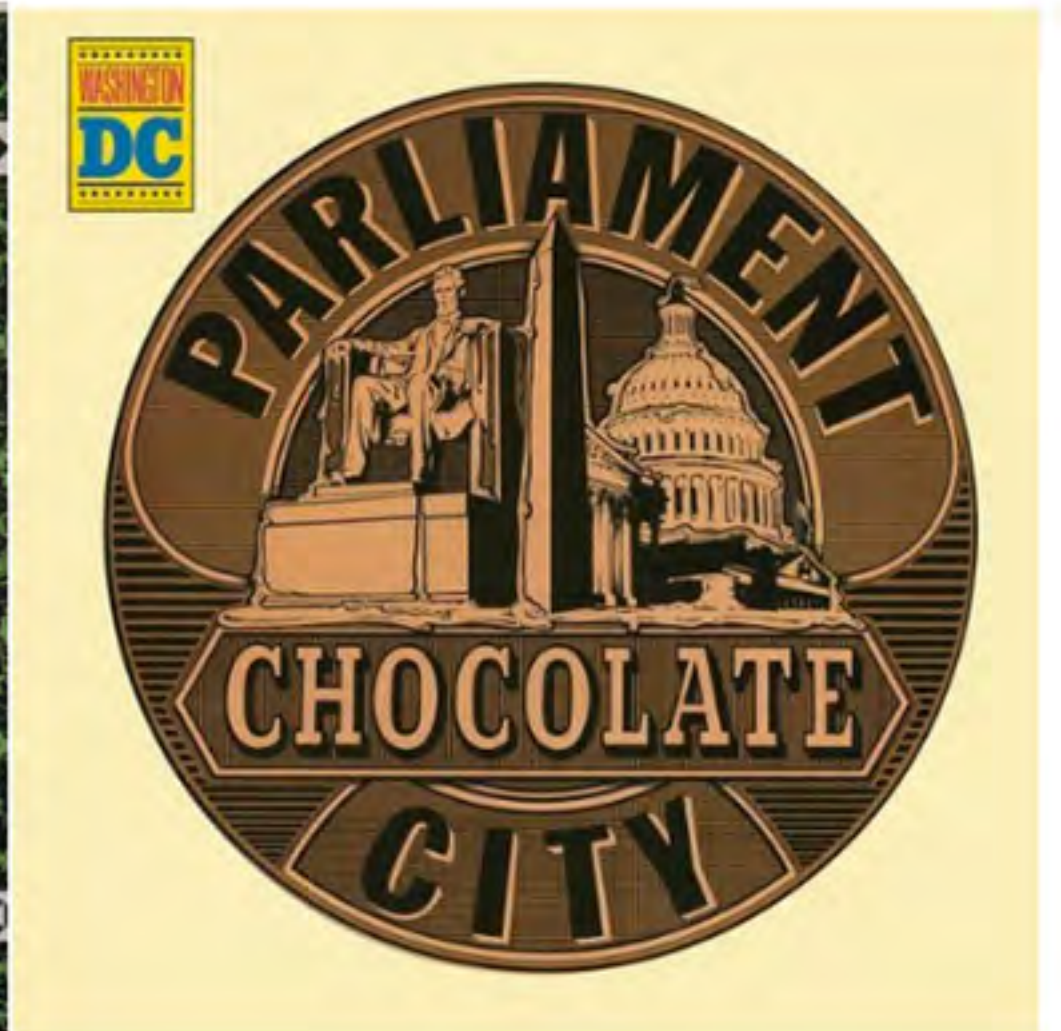


Think about or ask a friend:

- Who do you think James Brown is addressing in this song? How might you interpret the song's message?
 - Would you consider “Get Up, Get Into It, Get Involved” to be a dance song, a song that delivers a message, or both? Why?
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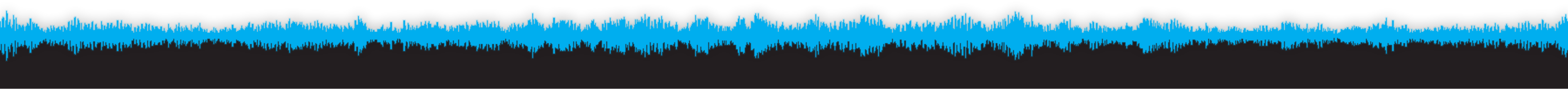
Parliament-Funkadelic's *Chocolate City* and *America Eats Its Young*

Examine the album covers of Parliament-Funkadelic's *Chocolate City* and *America Eats Its Young*






Think about or discuss with a friend:

- What imagery do you recognize on these album covers? How have those familiar images been modified?
 - The cover art on these albums is a visual commentary on Black life in this time period. How do you interpret these images? From your perspective what do they convey or mean?
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Led by George Clinton, the band Parliament-Funkadelic (aka P-Funk) became one of the leading visionaries of Funk music and African-American artistic expression in the 1970s.

Built around prominent basslines, deeply percussive instrumentation, and polyrhythmic melodies, P-Funk's irresistible groove allowed people to express themselves on the dance floor. At the same time, their imaginative lyrics conjured an alternative universe of characters, places, powers, and possibility that provided complex analysis of Black lives in America.



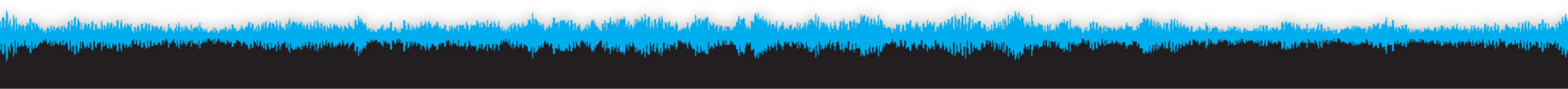
SUMMARY

- Artists like James Brown, Aretha Franklin, George Clinton pioneered Funk music - a unique rhythm-driven genre that grew out of and specifically reflects a range of Black experience
- Like the Blues and R&B that preceded it, Funk continued the tradition of bearing witness to Black life in a distinctive style of expression made up of musical style, lyrical content, fashion, and dance
- In many instances, Funk music expressed world views and social analyses born out of the distinctive culture and life experiences of Black people



BE CREATIVE

Watch “**Give Up the Funk (Tear the Roof Off the Sucker)**” then listen to “**Chocolate City**” while reading this **lyric sheet**. Both songs, created by Parliament-Funkadelic, highlight the trials, tribulations and triumphs of the African-American experience in the post-Civil Rights era of the 1970s.



BE CREATIVE

Write a review of the two P-Funk songs that answers the following questions:

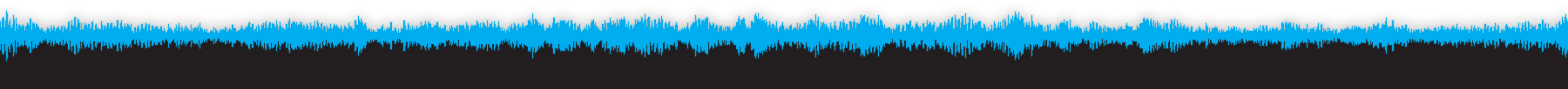
- How do you feel these songs reflect African-American identity and representation in arts and culture?
- What elements of the music, lyrics, costuming, and staging convey a sense of African-American “somebody-ness”?
- How do they echo things said by the activists and artists you’ve heard from in this lesson (Fannie Lou Hamer, James Brown, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Aretha Franklin)?
- Chocolate City or C.C. is a nickname for the nation’s capital, Washington, DC. Keeping this in mind, how do you understand the lyrics of “Chocolate City”?



BE CURIOUS

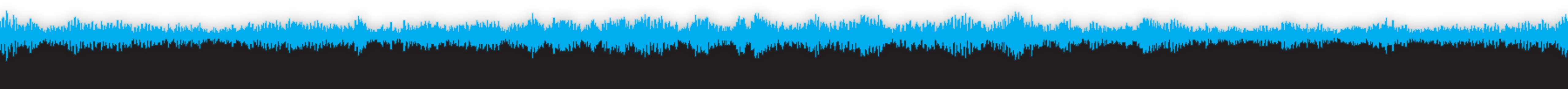
Learn more about Funk Pioneer Curtis Mayfield in this excerpt of **this documentary**.

Explore multiple dimensions of Funk by artists including Betty Davis, Sly and the Family Stone, Curtis Mayfield, Aretha Franklin, James Brown and Parliament on our **Spotify** or **YouTube** playlist.



CONNECT

Share it with us! Either you or an adult in your life can share your review of P-Funk with TeachRock on [Instagram](#) or [Facebook](#), email to info@teachrock.org, or Tweet it to [@TeachRock](#)





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