

WHO IS MAVIS STAPLES?

Est. Time: 60 minutes

Subjects: General Music, History

Age Range: High School

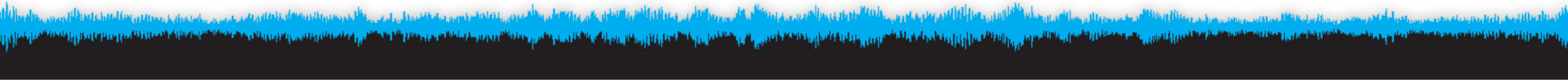
See the full lesson [here!](#)

★ *TEACHROCK* ★



Who is Mavis Staples?

In this lesson you will:

- Discover Mavis Staples' Mississippi roots
 - Explore Mavis Staples' activism for social justice
 - Learn about the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to cities in the North and West of the United States
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TRACE IT BACK: MAVIS STAPLES

Read a brief biography on artist Mavis Staples [here](#). Write down three things you learned about Mavis Staples by reading her biography.



I'LL TAKE YOU THERE

Watch the above [video](#) to see Mavis Staples perform her hit song "I'll Take You There" at the White House in 2016.



FIRE IN MY BONES

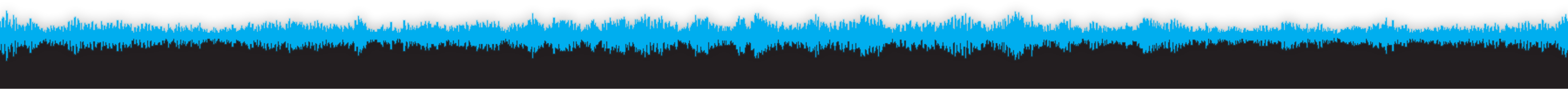
Now watch [this video](#) of Boyd Rivers and Ruth May Rivers singing “Fire in My Bones.”




Boyd Rivers was born in Mississippi in 1934, fifty years after Reconstruction.

Mavis Staples was born in Chicago to parents who had recently migrated north from Mississippi.


The elders of both artists witnessed the landmark election of two African American Senators immediately after the Civil War, and the terror campaigns of white Mississippians in response to African American progress.





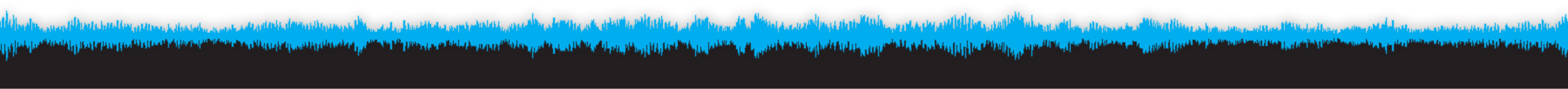
The song Boyd Rivers sings is part of the Blues tradition, which is passed down orally/aurally since the era of slavery.

“Fire in My Bones” features some of the defining characteristics of African American music, including the use of a call-and-response song structure in which the lyrics alternate between one vocalist and another or a lead vocalist and an ensemble.





Think about or ask a friend:

- How is “I’ll Take You There” different from “Fire in My Bones”?
 - What similarities exist?
 - What is the “there” that Mavis Staples sings about? What might those lyrics be describing? Is it a geographical location or something else?
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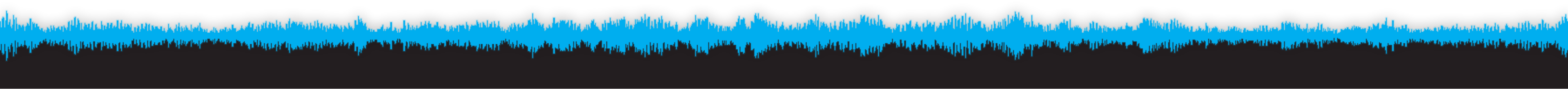


Listen to Mavis Staples sing “Down In Mississippi,” which describes the experiences of African Americans in 20th century Mississippi. After listening to the song, you may also **read the lyrics** to “Down in Mississippi.”





Consider or ask a friend:

- What are the tools mentioned in the first verse?
 - What do you think the lyric “the season was always open on me, nobody needed no bail” might be a reference to?
 - What does Mavis Staples’ grandmother tell Mavis she can’t do?
 - What establishment did Mavis Staples integrate without realizing it?
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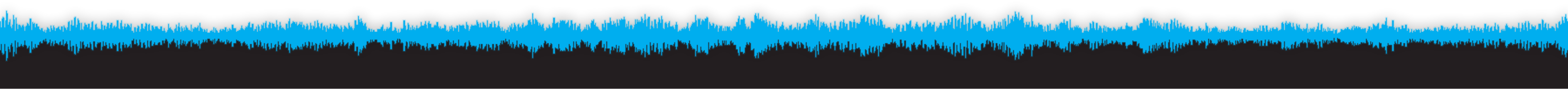


MAVIS STAPLES QUOTES

Read the first quote from Mavis Staples in [this handout](#), on her experience working with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



Consider or ask a friend:


- What might Mavis Staples mean by the term “freedom songs”?
 - Have you heard this term before?
 - Based on the song you just heard, what might be some of the characteristics of a “freedom song”?
 - When Mavis Staples says that Dr. King said that Chicago was the worst place he visited, worse than Mississippi and Alabama, she is referencing segregation. Why might it have been worse? Do you think things like segregation existed in Chicago? Why or why not?
 - Why do you think she was embarrassed?
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Read the second quote from **this handout**, on how Mavis Staples thinks about music.





Consider or ask a friend:

- What is one song that leaves you feeling better or stronger after hearing it?
 - What is an activity that you can do by yourself that has a positive impact on you?
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SUMMARY

- Mavis Staples career in Gospel, Soul, R&B and Blues traces the arc of African American history in the 20th century
- Both Mavis Staples and The Staple Singers centered their experience in the home state of Mississippi and the city of Chicago where they settled in their songs
- Mavis Staples has sung against injustice for her entire career - from her earliest recordings with the Staple Singers in the 1950s, to the Staple Singers performances in support of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and her most recent record *We Get By* (2019)

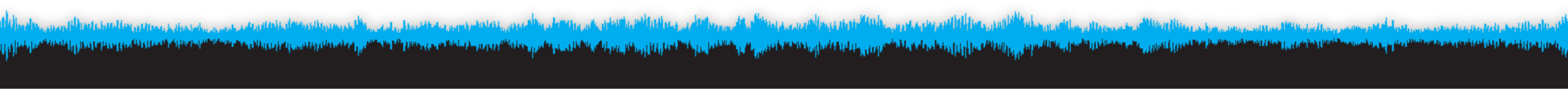


BE CREATIVE

Read the third quote from **this handout**, on the Staple Singers.

What or who is a source of inner strength for you?

Write a letter or make an audio or video recording addressed to a person who is a source of strength or someone associated with something that is a source of strength for you. Share it with that person.




BE CURIOUS

Read [this account](#) of Ida Mae Brandon Gladney's arrival in Chicago from Mississippi in October 1937, during the Great Migration.



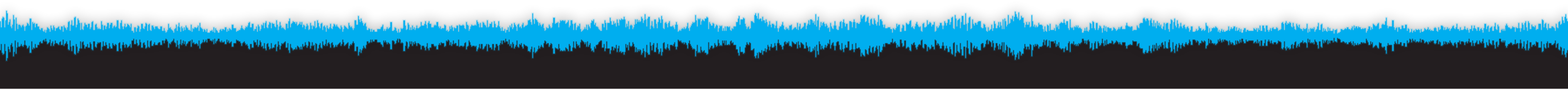


After reading the account, consider or ask a friend:

- What is Ida Mae Brandon Gladney's final destination?
 - How did she travel?
 - How does she describe her first impression of the city of Chicago?
 - How does it compare with what Mavis Staples reports was Dr. King's impression in the 1960s?
 - What might account for the difference in their perspectives and assessments?
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