

Music of the Civil Rights Movement

Est. Time: 60-90 minutes

Subjects: General Music, History, Social Studies

Age Range: High School

See the full lesson [here!](#)

★ *TEACHROCK* ★

How did music and singing contribute to the Civil Rights Movement?

In this lesson you will:

- Analyze music of the Civil Rights Movement
- Discover how music and singing contributed to the Civil Rights Movement
- Explore the African American history and culture of the music
- Identify important figures of the movement



Consider or as a partner:

- What do you know about the Civil Rights Movement?
- Do you know any of the songs sung by Civil Rights Movement activists? Do you know the origins of the songs?



FOUNDATION OF THEIR FREEDOM STRUGGLE

Music of the Civil Rights Movement

Watch [this video](#) about the history of the Black Church and its role in the Civil Rights Movement. (*Warning: the video contains accounts of violence and racism.*)

Consider or ask a partner:

- What role did the Black Church play in the Civil Rights Movement?
- What “musical legacy” was the source for many of the songs of the Movement? Who created that musical legacy?
- Did you recognize the song being sung in the video when Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was introduced? If so, what’s the title of the song?

The song in the video you watched is titled, “We Shall Overcome.” Read [this handout](#) about the song.

Consider or ask a partner:

- What are the origins of “We Shall Overcome”?
- What were the songs that Civil Rights activists sang collectively known as?



Listen to [“We Shall Overcome”](#) and read along (or sing along!) with the lyrics in the [handout](#). The singing is led by the Freedom Singers, a music group of student Civil Rights activists.



Consider or ask a partner:

- What instruments are performing the music? What do you hear? What is absent?
- What might be the benefits of singing music without instruments?
- What are some of the themes expressed in the lyrics?
- How does the song make you feel? Why?



Music of the Civil Rights Movement

Watch [this video](#) about what freedom songs like “We Shall Overcome” meant for people in the Civil Rights Movement. (*Warning: the video contains accounts of violence and racism.*)

Consider or ask a partner:

- What did Freedom Songs and singing do for those participating in the movement?
- How were traditional African American spirituals modified to become Freedom Songs?
- Were there any themes you noticed in the songs sung in the video? If so, what were they?

“The power of nonviolent direct action lies in the group... It was the songs we sang together, each protester part of the whole, that embraced and sustained us as a cohesive body.”

-Bruce Hartford, Civil Rights Movement activist

“I began to see the music itself as an important organizing tool to really bring people together—not only to bring them together but also as the organization glue to hold them together. I started to give people the responsibility of thinking about a song that they would want to sing that night and of changing that song, you know, from a gospel song.”

-Sam Block, Civil Rights Movement activist

“Then when we got to the lyrics, I changed them, too. I was thinking about Selma's sheriff, Jim Clark, and so I sang, “Tell Jim Clark, I'm going to let it shine” next I used the head of the State Troopers, Al Lingo, and put him in the next verse.”

-Bettie Mae Fikes, Civil Rights Movement activist

Source: Civil Rights Movement Archive (crmvet.org)

Read these quotes by Civil Rights activists. Advance to the next slide to consider questions.

Consider or ask a partner:

- In what other ways did music play an essential role in the Civil Rights Movement?
- How might singing Freedom Songs be an effective nonviolent tactic?
- Why might it be an important responsibility to choose a song to sing at a civil rights event?
- What might be necessary to consider when choosing new lyrics for a freedom song?

Choose one or more of the following Freedom Songs from the Civil Rights Movement to analyze. During your analysis, you will be discovering the song's origins, identifying lyrical themes, comparing and contrasting the song with other freedom songs, and more.

- “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize”
 - [Materials packet](#)
 - [Audio](#)
- “This Little Light of Mine”
 - [Materials packet](#)
 - [Audio](#)
- “Oh, Freedom”
 - [Materials packet](#)
 - [Video](#)
- “A Change Is Gonna Come”
 - [Material packet](#)
 - [Audio](#)

With a partner, share what you learned or found interesting about one or more of the Freedom Songs you explored. Be sure to include why you think the song was important to the Civil Rights Movement.

Consider or ask a partner:

- How does the song's history in the Civil Rights Movement inform your understanding of the movement?

Read [this handout](#) about the importance of the music of the Civil Rights Movement.

Consider or ask a partner:

- What does Bernice Johnson Reagon suggest music provided to the Civil Rights Movement?
- How might music help someone or some issue “become visible”?
- Is music simply a form of entertainment, or can it have other purposes as well?



SUMMARY

- The music of the Civil Rights Movement has origins in the Black Church
- Songs sung during the movement were often developed from African American Spirituals and were called Freedom Songs
- “We Shall Overcome” is one of the most popular Freedom Songs of the movement
- Singing Freedom Songs provided resilience, hope, and a sense of community to Civil Rights activists
- Civil Rights activists, Folk musicians, and popular music artists performed Freedom Songs

BE CREATIVE

Research and then create an infographic about the use of “We Shall Overcome” as a protest song in the years before and after the Civil Rights Movement.

Research and then create a visual representation of another Freedom Song from the Civil Rights Movement. Your visual representation could be a drawing, graphic, video, or something else. Consider the song’s lyrics and its purpose to the movement when creating your representation.

BE CURIOUS

Discover more about Freedom Songs at the [Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement Archive](#).

Explore more about Civil Rights activists, including those featured in this lesson, at the [SNCC Digital Gateway](#).

Watch a [video of the Freedom Singers performing the freedom song, “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me ‘Round” at the White House in 2010](#).

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