

# Part 2: Riot or Rebellion? Asbury Park in the Summer of 1970

Est. Time: 60 minutes

Subjects: History/Social Studies

Range: High School

See the full lesson [here!](#)

★ *TEACHROCK* ★

What factors led up to the Asbury Park Riots in New Jersey in the summer of 1970?

In this lesson you will know:

- The conditions leading up the "Asbury Park Riots" in 1970
- The distinction between a “riot” and a “rebellion”
- The importance of Asbury Park to the history of American Popular music
- The role music can play in bringing people together

NOTE: This is Part 2 of the Asbury Park: Segregation and Integration collection. Find **Part 1: Segregation and the Founding of Asbury Park** [here](#).

“A riot...is the language of the unheard.”

-Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Consider the following quote above. What might have Dr. King meant by a riot being “the language of the unheard”?

Between 1946 and 1957, the Garden State Parkway was developed in New Jersey. This major highway opened up much more of New Jersey to travelers, and by the 1960s, began threatening Asbury Park's status as one of the few resort towns along the New Jersey shoreline. Asbury Park subsequently lost tourist money, which made the economic divisions between the East Side and West Side even worse.



Despite economic troubles, Asbury Park developed a thriving and integrated local music scene that would have a strong impact on the history of American popular music.

Watch [Clip 1, The Upstage](#) to learn more about one of the music venues that helped foster the Asbury Park music scene.



Consider or ask a friend:

- What, according to the video, was the value of The Upstage?
- How might The Upstage have contributed to racial integration? Do you think the integration at The Upstage could have led to a more integrated Asbury Park? Why or why not?
- Despite The Upstage being an integrated space, like many music venues on the East Side, it was owned by a white man. How might this be its own form of segregation?

Despite places of integration such as The Upstage, uprisings related to the economic conditions of the city occurred in Asbury Park in 1970. These events are most commonly referred to as “The Asbury Park Riots.”

Read [Handout - Asbury Park "Riots" Timeline](#) for an outline of the events that occurred during the “riots.”



Consider or ask a friend:

- What was the cause of the Asbury Park “Riots”?
- According to West Side leaders like Rev. Verner R. Matthews and Ermon K. Jones, what were the underlying issues that contributed to the riots?
- How did the police force respond to the riots? Imagine that tourists on the East Side began breaking windows in anger after a concert was suddenly canceled. Do you think police would have responded in the same way? Why or why not?
- Do you think a West Side youth gathering place like The Upstage might have prevented the riots? Why or what not?

“There is nothing more dangerous than to build a society with a large segment of people in that society who feel that they have no stake in it...who feel that they have nothing to lose. These are the people who will riot.”

-Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Review the above quote from Dr. King’s speech at Monmouth University, and consider how it might apply to Asbury Park.

Consider especially the teenagers that unknowingly began the events - might have they felt they had a “stake in society”?

**Dr. King's comments at Monmouth, 1966:**

- 40% of Black families live in substandard housing
- “*De facto*” segregated public schools in U.S. cities are underfunded & inadequate
- 12 - 14% unemployment among Blacks
- “Underemployment” = low wages
- Discrimination & “psychological lynching”

**Demands made by the Black community in Asbury Park, 1970:**

- Urban renewal program
- Expansion of summer jobs program
- Establishment of civilian police review board
- Rent control
- Improvements in infrastructure & recreation

Compare the points Dr. King made in his speech at Monmouth University with the demands black leaders made during the riots. What connections do you see?

“The answer to the race problem cannot be found in Molotov cocktails, bricks and bottles...But on the other hand, we must be as strong in condemning the conditions which people live under every day that cause them to feel so desperate, so frustrated, so bitter, so disappointed, so lacking in attention that they engage in this unfortunate, misguided action. A riot in the final analysis is the language of the unheard.”

-Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Review the quote by Dr. King displayed earlier in the larger context of his speech to Monmouth University.

Consider or ask a friend:

- Could Dr. King’s description be an accurate analysis of the Asbury Park “Riots”? Why or why not?

“Why do I call the events of July 12 to 17 a rebellion rather than a riot? Riots are mindless, aimless, spontaneous outbursts triggered by some immediate event. But rebellions, like those waged by Thomas Jefferson and Nat Turner, are the result of long-simmering hurts with no other ways to redress grievances. Looking at the evidence, this was a rebellion.”

-Junius William

Three years before the events in Asbury Park, the city of Newark, New Jersey erupted due to similar issues of segregation and systemic racism.

Examine the above quote by Junius Williams, a musician, lawyer, and official historian of the city of Newark.

Consider or ask a friend:

- Why does Williams choose to refer to the events in Newark as a “rebellion” rather than a “riot”? What definition does he give for each term?
- To you, what is the difference between a “riot” and a “rebellion”?
- How might the use of the term “riot” elicit a different response than the term “rebellion”?
- How might the use of the term “riot” elicit a different response than the term “rebellion”?
- Despite William’s definition, the events in Newark in 1967 continue to be widely known as the “Newark Riots.” Why might this be?

# SUMMARY

- The Asbury Park “Riots” were the result of decades of policies that enforced segregation and inequality in Asbury Park
- While commonly known as the “Asbury Park Riots,” some have argued the events might better be described as a “rebellion,” given the socio-political factors involved
- Musical venues were a space for integration in a mostly segregated Asbury Park
- Music can play a role in bringing people together

# BE CREATIVE

Watch [Bruce Springsteen - "The Band's Role."](#) In a short essay, summarize Springsteen's comments on the "job" a band plays, and consider what Springsteen might mean when he says music helps create an "us" that is "real."

Read [this handout](#) on the Watts Rebellion, which occurred five years before the Asbury Park riots. Then, write a short paper considering the similarities and differences between the two events.

# BE CURIOUS

- Read the article [“Portrayals of sports riots, current protests sharply differ”](#) and consider in writing the possible political motivations behind defining something as a “riot.”
- Read [this handout on the history of the term “Race Riots”](#) then write a short response summarizing the argument the author is making and whether you feel it is accurate or not.
- Read [this handout](#) on the Watts riots, which occurred in California five years before the Asbury Park riots. Then, write a short paper considering the similarities and differences between the two events.

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