

Student Activism and Music during the Civil Rights Movement



Est. Time: 60-120 minutes

Subjects: History, Social Studies

Age Range: High School

See the full lesson [here!](#)

TEACHROCK

How did activism by Black students challenge Jim Crow segregation during the Civil Rights Movement, and what unique role did music play as an organizing tool?

In this lesson you will:

- Analyze historic moments of student activism during the Civil Rights Movement
- Discover how music can be used as an organizing tool
- Explore the unique role of music in student-led school activism
- Identify important figures, events, and student organizations of the Civil Rights Movement

Consider or ask a partner:

- What do you know about student activism during the Civil Rights Movement?
- Do you know how music was used as an organizing tool for student activism protests?



Watch [this video](#) and take notes about the history of the school segregation legal case, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. (Warning: the video contains accounts racism.)

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka

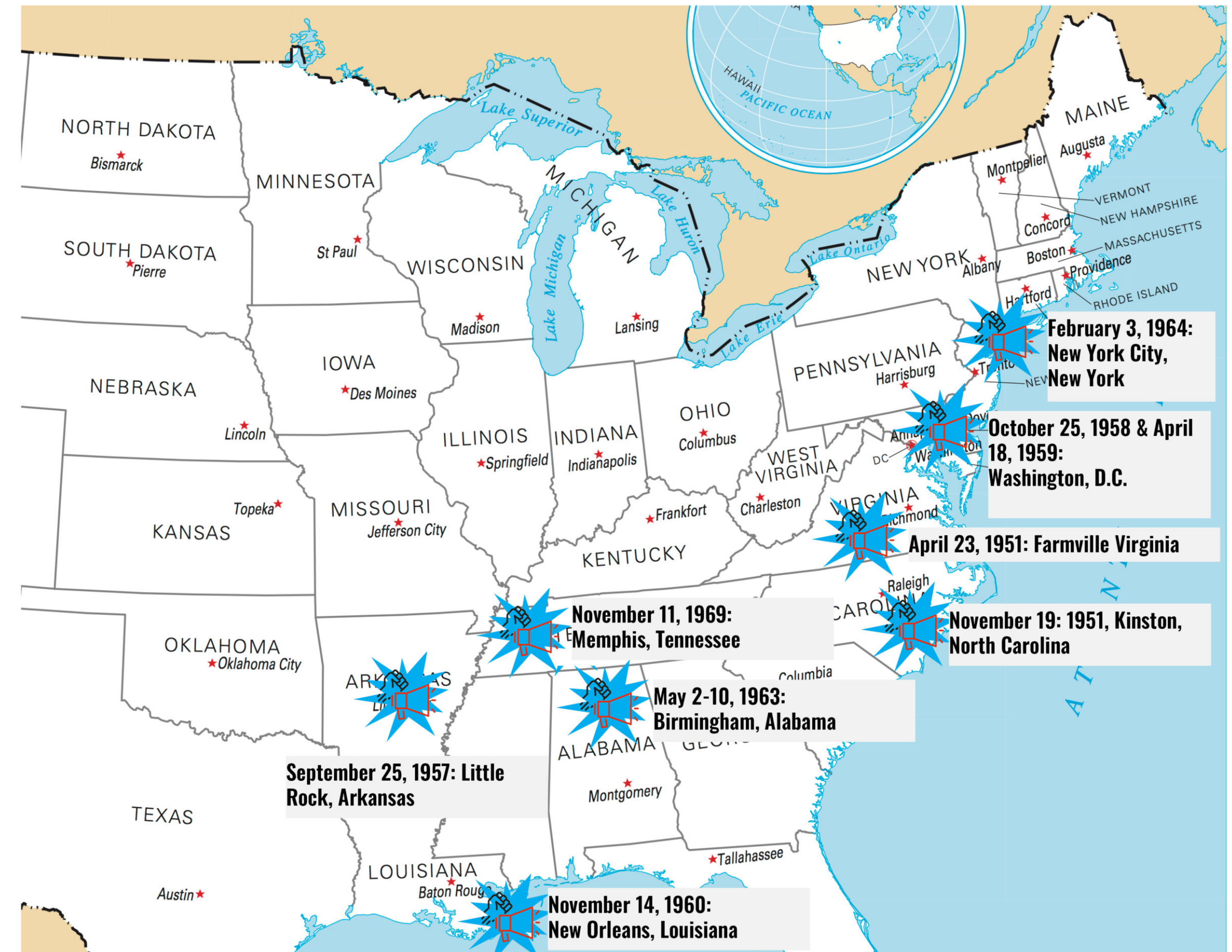
Consider or ask a partner:

- Why were schools segregated?
- What branch of the U.S. government “outlawed” segregation and what year did it happen?
- How did students contribute to *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*? How might students have contributed to the Civil Rights Movement in general?

View this map showing where student activists organized and protested school segregation?

Consider or ask a partner:

- What is causing students to take action?
- What might the location of these events suggest about school segregation?
- What might the timespan of these events suggest about school segregation?
- How might students have heard about protests so they knew to attend?



"The DJs worked with civil rights activists to secretly spread the word about rallies or workshops they were having. [DJ Shelley "The Playboy"] Stewart says they'd sometimes signal kids by playing a certain song — one that might sound out of place in a playlist of 1960s funk stars, like Big Joe Turner's 1954 tune "Shake, Rattle and Roll."

- npr.org

Read this quote about music as an organizing tool during the Civil Rights Movement.

Black radio DJs contributed to the Civil Rights Movement by featuring Civil Rights leaders on their programs, surreptitiously promoting Civil Rights rallies over the air, and covertly playing music that signaled activists to take action.

Now, consider the questions on the next slide.

Consider or ask a partner:

- Why might a song be a good tool for organizing people into action?
- How might the title of a song or themes expressed in the lyrics of a song be important when organizing people to take action?

Choose one (or more if time allows) of the following protest events from the Civil Rights Movement to analyze. During your analysis, you will read an overview of the event, read a song title and a brief excerpt of the lyrics, and view record covers of the song's performers. You will then complete the [Station Activity Guide](#) and choose a song that you feel best matches with the Civil Rights student activism event you analyzed.

- Station 1: Student activism in Farmville, Virginia in 1951

[Materials Packet](#)

- Station 2: Student activism in Kinston, North Carolina in 1951

[Materials Packet](#)

- Station 3: Student activism in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963

[Materials Packet](#)

- Station 4: Student activism in New York, New York in 1964

[Materials Packet](#)

Now, explore student organizations during the Civil Rights Movement and how music served as an organizing tool.

Consider or ask a partner:

- Do you think racial segregation was happening in places beyond schools at this time? What sorts of places?
- Do you think students protested at these other places? How might have they protested?

Watch [this video](#) about the “Sit-In” Movement during the Civil Rights Movement. (*Warning: the video contains accounts of violence and racism.*)

Consider or ask a partner:

- Who started the sit-in movement? Where did it begin?
- How did a sit-in take place? What was the purpose of a sit-in?
- What new student organization helped the sit-in movement?



Read [this handout](#) about the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Consider or ask a partner:

- How did the SNCC interact with the SCLC and Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.?
- Why might the SNCC have taken their independent approach?
- What veteran civil rights organizer and SCLC official encouraged the founding of the SNCC?



Watch [this video](#) about Civil Rights Movement leader, Ella Baker.

Consider or ask a partner:

- For what reason is Ella Baker “reverentially known as the Mother of the Civil Rights Movement”?
- What advice did she give members of the SNCC when they visited rural areas promoting Civil Rights?
- What did she encourage young people in the Civil Rights Movement to do?



These are SNCC buttons that members of the organization and others could wear.

Consider or ask a partner:

- How might the SNCC buttons represent the aspirations of the Civil Rights Movement?
- Do you recognize the “We Shall Overcome” text? If so, what is it? (*Hint: “We Shall Overcome” was an important song in the Civil Rights Movement, was often sung at movement events, and has been referred to as the anthem of the movement.*)



Listen to [this recording](#) of “We Shall Overcome” led by the Freedom Singers, a music group of student Civil Rights activists. Read [this handout](#) about the Freedom Singers.

Consider or ask a partner:

- Of what movement was Freedom Singers leader Cordell Reagon a “veteran”? What played an important role in that movement?
- In what ways did the Freedom Singers represent how students led during the Civil Rights Movement and how music was an organizing tool?



SUMMARY

- Organizing and protesting by Black students during the Civil Rights Movement helped desegregate public schools and other public places
- Music served as an organizing tool for students in many ways, including how it was broadcast on the radio
- One of the ways Black DJs supported the Civil Rights Movement was by playing a song on the radio that secretly signaled students to get ready for a protest
- The SNCC was the most prominent Civil Rights Movement student organization
- The Freedom Singers performed concerts around the U.S. to inform audiences about the Civil Rights Movement and to raise funds for the organization

BE CREATIVE

Create an infographic about Barbara Rose Johns Powell. The following links can be used as resources:

- [Americans Who Tell The Truth](#)
- [Robert Russa Moton Museum](#)
- [Virginia Changemakers](#)

Create an infographic about the [Freedom Singers](#).

Create a student activism playlist.

BE CURIOUS

Listen to [Alabama Public Radio's "Civil Rights Radio" program](#) to discover more about the role of Black DJs during the Civil Rights Movement.

Read about the [Teens Take Charge student activism event](#) at a New York City school in 2019 to identify how school segregation endures.

Watch this [Voices of the Civil Rights Movement's video](#) to discover more about the Children's Crusade in Birmingham, AL in May 1963. (Warning: the video contains images of violence and accounts of racism.)

CONNECT

Share it with us! Either you or an adult in your life can share your work with TeachRock on **Instagram** or **Facebook**, email to **info@teachrock.org**, tweet it to **@TeachRock**, or make an Instagram post and tag us **@teachrock.org**



★ *TEACHROCK* ★
•ORG

Visit us at teachrock.org for hundreds of other free arts-rich resources for every age range and classroom.

Please check back to teachrock.org/studentedition frequently as we will update the material weekly!