

Freedom Music: From Spirituals to Protest Songs

*“We sing the freedom songs for the same reasons the slaves sang them, because we are still in bondage.”
~Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*

Overview:

This lesson traces the legacy of spirituals, from their origins when sung by those enslaved, to their transformation into “freedom songs” during the Civil Rights Movement, to their echoes in contemporary protests. Focusing on the fight for racial justice, this lesson examines the role that music can play in building unity and determination, and in maintaining a vital connection to the past.

Grades

5-12

Essential Questions

- What is the history of spirituals, and how do they combine Christianity with West African traditions?
- What role did spirituals and other freedom songs play in the Civil Rights movement?
- What role does music play in protests today?
- Who were Mahalia Jackson and Bernice Reagon, and why were they important?
- Why is music such a powerful tool for protest and resistance throughout time?

Materials

- Powerpoint Presentation, available in the Carolina K-12 Database of K-12 Lessons, here: <https://k12database.unc.edu/files/2020/10/FreedomMusicPPT.pdf>
- Videos and equipment to play them for the class (these are also linked throughout the lesson and PPT):
 - Coded Spirituals: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4ykd-oiMEE>
 - Mahalia Jackson: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=odHqG1rA4M8>
 - “The Songs Are Free:” <https://vimeo.com/43608959>
 - Counter protesters: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqpsyYM5ZH8>
 - “Why Did Floyd Have to Die?”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tw8qj-1aNm8>
 - Charlottesville, “This Little Light of Mine”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HsK7gC4noJU>
 - “We Shall Overcome”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-QoIkXz94-Q>

Duration

60-90 minutes

Preparation

There is no specific preparation needed, but if students have already studied the history of race in America – in particular, if they have studied slavery and Jim Crow – then they will be able to make connections more easily.

Procedure

Spirituals in Early America [25-30 minutes]

1. As a warm up, project [SLIDE 2] and ask students to discuss (as a class or in partners) what comes to mind for them when they hear the word “spirituals”... what images and sounds get conjured up? Ask them to talk to the person next to them for a few minutes. Tell them that there are no wrong answers here, because everyone will have different experiences and associations. After a few minutes, ask for students to share what they’ve discussed with the class. If any students have specific, personal connections to

spirituals that they would like to share, this is a great moment to encourage them to do so.

2. Explain that spirituals are a genre of song developed by enslaved people in early America. Spirituals were songs that enslaved people would sing together while working in the fields, while worshipping (often in secret), or at religious ceremonies like funerals. They were a way for enslaved people to communicate with one another even while doing backbreaking labor, and to share hope and encouragement. Spirituals are one of the many examples of the ways enslaved people resisted and preserved through the unjust system in which they were forced. These songs were passed on orally, and their lyrics and tunes could evolve and change over time.
3. As an example, play a [version of the spiritual Steal Away](#). As students listen, ask them to jot down what images come to mind as they listen, as well as what the tone of the song is and how it makes them feel. Afterwards, allow them to share their reactions, discussing any phrases and/or moments from the song that stuck with them. Further ask students to consider what a song like this might mean to an enslaved person, and how it may have impacted them or encouraged their resistance/resilience.
4. Tell students that spirituals also reflect the continuation of West African religious and musical traditions. Specifically, they drew on a West African tradition of the “ring shout,” in which everyone would sing, clap, and dance together in a circle. Unlike in some white Christian churches, where women were not allowed to lead worship, women could lead songs within the ring shout and within the musical tradition of spirituals.
5. Move to [SLIDE 3] and tell students to look at the list on this slide of a handful of titles of spirituals, and ask if any of the names are familiar. Explain that many Spirituals draw on stories from the Christian Bible. Tell them that when we listen to Spirituals, we can hear a difference in the Christianity followed by the slave-masters and the one practiced by some enslaved people; whereas slavemasters emphasized stories about obedience, order, and duty in sermons and Bible lessons, the spirituals that enslaved people sang tended to focus on stories about healing, deliverance, and the power of God to overcome the oppressor. Ask students which of the titles listed here might carry that message of deliverance (e.g. “Steal Away to Jesus” and “Didn’t my Lord Deliver Daniel”). Then ask them which of these titles might focus more on the sorrow and pain of slavery (e.g. “Sometimes I feel like a Motherless Child” and “Nobody knows the Trouble I’ve Seen”).
6. Tell students that the sheet music pictured on this slide is to “Go Down Moses”, and ask a student to read the lyrics aloud. Ask the rest of the class if anyone knows what story this song is referring to. If nobody knows, explain to them that it is about an Old Testament story in which God sends Moses, his prophet, to rescue the Israelites from Egypt, where they were enslaved. Pharaoh is the Egyptian king who does not want to free his slaves. Tell students that many enslaved people identified strongly with Bible stories about the ancient Israelites being saved from slavery by God. Discuss:
 - Sometimes we only think of resistance in terms of violence (i.e., an enslaved person fighting back or a rebellion.) In fact, enslaved people were resisting daily in a myriad of ways. Why was putting this story and others like it into song an ingenious mode of resistance and protest? (Because on the surface enslaved people were simply re-telling a Bible story, slaveholders couldn’t ban it without having their hypocrisy exposed. However, it allowed them to loudly sing “Let my people go!” and to celebrate a story of slaveholders being punished by God.)
7. Move to [SLIDE 4] and ask for a volunteer to read aloud the quote at the top of the slide, from Fredrick Douglass: "A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of 'O Canaan, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan,' something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the North, and the North was our Canaan." Tell students that you are going to listen to a scholar describe the ways in which the Spirituals that enslaved people sang also carried a double meaning, encoding messages about escape from slavery. Click on the [video](#) to watch it (2:30).

8. Afterwards, ask students to look at a map of the underground railroad, and point out how many routes of escape go along water, or involve crossing water, as Reverend Thomas just pointed out in the video. Ask students whether what they've just heard makes them think differently about any of the song titles they read on the previous slide. Feel free to switch briefly back to the first slide to review those titles: *Wade in the Water*; *Steal Away Home to Jesus* - songs like this are telegraphing messages of escape.

Freedom Music and the Civil Rights Movement [25 minutes]

9. On [SLIDE 5] explain to students that almost a century after the Civil War, spirituals played a critical part in the Civil Rights Movement. Ask a student to read aloud the quote by MLK Jr. on the slide: "In a sense the freedom songs are the soul of the movement...we sing the freedom songs today for the same reason the slaves sang them, because we too are in bondage and the songs add hope to our determination that 'We shall overcome, Black and white together, We shall overcome someday.'" Ask students what message Dr. King is conveying, then tell them that the "freedom music" he mentions here refers to songs sung at protests, many of which were spirituals or gospel songs.
10. Tell the students that you are about to [watch footage](#) of singer Mahalia Jackson leading a song during a church service, accompanied by Dr. King (2 minutes.) Explain to students that Mahalia Jackson is known as the "Queen of Gospel," and she was a major player in the Civil Rights movement. In the same time period that she was playing Carnegie Hall and singing at the White House, she was also regularly performing at rallies, church services, and speeches alongside MLK. In the image on the right, she is shown singing at the March on Washington, on the same day that MLK delivered his "I have a Dream" speech. She also sang at Dr. King's funeral.

Before you press play on the video, ask students if anybody knows the spiritual "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho," and can explain the story it tells. (The song tells a Bible story in which God helps his chosen people to defeat an enemy who was much stronger and bigger than they were.) Ask students to think, as they're watching this clip, about what effect the music seems to have on the mood in the church.

11. Afterwards, ask students for their reactions:
 - What was the mood in the room? (Energetic, hopeful, excited. It was unified - everyone was clapping and singing together.)
 - Why might the story that this song tells resonate with everyone there? (Because it tells the story of a small group of people overcoming enormous odds, and of God blessing the underdog.)
 - What do you think Dr. King meant when he said that the singing they engaged in showed that they have a movement?
12. On [SLIDE 6], explain to students that part of the power of spirituals is their flexibility. Under slavery, the same spirituals would take on different rhythms, tunes, or lyrics as they were passed down from generation to generation and spread around the South. That flexibility meant that Civil Rights activists could also change them to better suit their protests. Ask students to take a moment to read the two sets of lyrics on the slide, and then ask them to talk with their neighbor about the differences.
13. After about 2 minutes, call the students back together and ask them to report back on their conversation and the difference in the lyrics. They may note (and if not, discuss how) the 1960's version is more empowered - instead of a directive ("*Don't let...*") the singer is claiming that for themselves ("*Ain't gonna let...*"). They may also note that whereas the old Spiritual has an encoded message of escape by staying on "the straight and narrow way" that is masked by its overtly religious tone, the 1960's version is much more explicit: "marching up to freedom land." And, of course, the 1960's version names the obstacle: segregation. Tell students that the way spirituals were designed (they don't have a single composer, they were passed on orally, their lyrics can be changed) made them valuable and flexible vessels for the specific needs of each generation. Freedom songs of the 1960's often involved call and response, simple tunes, and

repetative lyrics, which made them easy for crowds to learn and easy to improvise within.

14. Move to [\[SLIDE 7\]](#) and tell the students that they are going to watch a short clip that focuses on Bernice Johnson Reagon, who is a composer, a cultural historian, and activist. She was one of the founding members of The Freedom Singers, a musical group of college students involved in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee who travelled the country singing spirituals and protest songs at meetings, rallies, marches, and musical festivals. Tell them they'll hear a little about the group, as well as about Reagon's philosophy about the power of music to spark change. Ask them to watch the footage at the beginning carefully as they will hear "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round" being sung. Play the 4:30 video [here](#).
15. Afterwards, ask students to discuss the clips shown and Reagon's philosophy about what makes music such a powerful tool of protest:
 - In what contexts did you see people singing? Where were they, and what was happening? (If students don't bring it up, direct their attention to the video clip of students singing together as they are loaded into a police van; the police can control protesters' bodies, but they cannot control their voices.) This is a good moment to point out that both Mahalia Jackson and Bernice Reagon are examples of how music offered leadership opportunities for women.
 - Why was Reagon expelled from college?
 - How does Reagon feel about taking risks?
 - What does she mean when she said "sound is a way to extend the territory you can effect?" How does she explain the power of communal singing ("establishing the air")?

Freedom Music Today [15-20 minutes]

16. Move to [\[SLIDE 8\]](#) and tell students that there are many ways in which the spirit of protest and the legacy of spirituals has infused American music, from jazz to the blues to R&B and rap. Tell them that there also remains a strong role that various kinds of freedom songs play at protests today. Tell them you're going to look at four examples of how music is being used as a tool of protest in America today. Tell students that this first video is from after the 2016 mass shooting at a gay nightclub in Orlando. Ask them if anyone knows what the Westboro Baptist Church is. If not, explain to them that WBC is a hate group that targets the LGBTQ community, and that its members were in Orlando picketing the victims' funerals. Explain that they're about to see a video of a counter-protest. [Show the video](#) (:20), and ask for students to reflect on it. Ask them: What kind of a song are counter-protesters singing? (A classic hymn, "Amazing Grace"). Why is their singing such a powerful act of resistance? (It is staking a claim to a different kind of Christianity, one of love instead of hate). Remind students of what Bernice Reagon said about how you can use your voice to extend your territory – this is an example of protesters trying to drown out the hateful chanting of the WBC, and trying to reclaim the auditory "territory" of this funeral.
17. On [\[SLIDE 9\]](#) tell students this next video is from 2020 in Miami, and it was a protest against police brutality. [Show the video](#) (1:30), and then ask students what stands out to them about this clip. If nobody mentions it, remind them that the call and response format, as well as the slight lyrical shift in each verse (it goes from "why did George Floyd have to die" to "why'd Breonna have to die?" and so on), are very similar to the freedom songs of the 1960s. It makes the song easy for a crowd to learn, and easily adaptable to new situations. Ask them what the tone of this specific song is. (Angry, accusing, determined).
18. Move to [\[SLIDE 10\]](#) and explain that you'll be watching a clip from counter-protests at a white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, VA in 2017. As students will see, the singing is led by clergy. [Play the clip](#) (2:30), and then ask for student responses. Students will probably recognize the song, "This Little Light of Mine," but they might not know that it was used as a protest song frequently during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's. As in the Orlando clip from 2016, protesters here are using music to take back territory that white supremacists are trying to claim. If students comment on the filmer's comment to the white supremacists – "You guys sing?" – use it as an opportunity to point out that most people on both sides in this

confrontation likely know the words to this song. As we saw already with the use of “Amazing Grace,” protesters are claiming a different kind of Christianity from the white supremacists by using a song that both sides know.

19. On [SLIDE 11] tell students that you have just one more video to watch, of a protest in Minneapolis after George Floyd’s murder. [Show the clip](#) (1:50), and ask students for their reflections. Tell students that this is a freedom song that was used frequently during the Civil Rights movement in the 1960’s. It is call and response, and as they saw, the leader repeated the chorus to give people a chance to learn it. Ask students why they think this song is still relevant over 50 years after it was first used in protests.
20. Project [SLIDE 12] and remind the class of Dr. King’s words: **“We sing the freedom songs for the same reasons the slaves sang them, because we are still in bondage.”**

Optional Homework Assignment

21. As a homework assignment, tell students to consider an issue, cause or campaign that deeply matters to them (i.e., Black Lives Matter, voting, climate change, etc.) and to imagine that they are an activist trying to get people involved in and caring about your same cause. Tell students to imagine that they are planning a rally and to think about what songs might be good to play as people assemble, and/or to have people sing together and “claim the air/space.” Tell students that their homework is to create a playlist of 5 or more songs you would be most likely to pick, and why?
22. Tell students the songs they choose can be any genre of music. They can be songs that have a special significance, religious songs, songs from today’s lesson, songs that are uplifting or empowering for whatever reason... nothing is off the table. For each song in the playlist, students should write a 3-5 sentence explanation about why it would help to fuel interest and participation in the issue you care about. What about the lyrics and music will work well? How do you think it will make people at your rally feel? Does anything about it remind you of the Spirituals or Freedom Songs you learned about today?
23. On the due date, teachers may want to allow students to share their work in small groups, and potentially even play some of the songs from their list. (Teachers should discuss with students ahead of time what the parameters of language are, however. Since many songs may contain profanity or racial slurs, it is important the expectations are clearly shared.)