

# Reflecting Ideas and Freedom in Music

by Kelly L. Clark

## Introduction:

This lesson examines how African Americans used music as a creative art form and reflective process to both motivate and encourage the civil rights struggle towards freedom. It discusses how creating and listening to music helps people gather internal strength, work collectively, stay motivated, and make change. The lesson utilizes a constructivist approach to learning and exposes students to critical thinking. Students need to be given time to construct meaning. Teachers must provide the appropriate historical context as well as facilitate class discussion to convey the meaning and importance of the lesson to students.

**Grade:** K-8

## CA State Standards:

History and Social Science 2.5;

Music Grade Two 3.0: Historical and Cultural Context

(Note: This lesson was written for all students, independent of grade or age)

## Essential Question:

What was the role of music in the U.S. civil rights movement or African-American freedom struggle?

## Sub Questions:

1. How did the music of the time motivate and encourage individuals in the U.S. civil rights movement to position themselves as supporters of justice and equality?
2. If music is a way to communicate, express, and disseminate ideas to large groups of people, how did music broadcast the human rights agenda of the U.S. civil rights movement or African-American freedom struggle and maintain the motivation of civil rights activists?

## Unit Parts:

1. Connecting with Music
2. Music as a Creative Impetus for Social Change



## Part One: Connecting with Music

### Materials Needed:

- Computer with internet access and overhead projection for displaying online video-streaming
- Class set of copies of **Handout A: Lyrics of *We Shall Overcome*** (end of lesson)

### Activities/Instructions:

- 1. Opening Activity:** Introduce the unit with a discussion using the following questions: What kinds of music do people listen to, and why? What are some functions of music (e.g., storytelling, poetry, art, political expression)? Ask students to list the different forms of music with which they are already familiar. Write these on the board. Answers can include the following forms: gospel, country, doo-wop, rap, soul, popular, rhythm and blues, blues, jazz, folk, classical, and rock.
- 2.** Play a recording of Joan Baez singing the protest song *We Shall Overcome*. Recordings may be viewed on YouTube. Ask students to take out a single sheet of paper and write down any thoughts, reflections, emotions or reactions that these lyrics may evoke as they listen to the song.
- 3.** Give students copies of **Handout A: Lyrics of *We Shall Overcome***. Take turns as a class reading some of the verses aloud. Discuss the differences between the verses and the chorus (e.g., the verses differ, but the chorus remains the same throughout the song.) Ask students to verbally identify their favorite verse(s) and to briefly explain why.
- 4.** Ask the students to form a circle and join hands. Sing the first verse and chorus together as a class. If the class seems to be comfortable with group singing, continue to sing a few of the other verses that students named as their favorites.
- 5.** Following the group singing, ask students to write down any additional thoughts, insights or reactions that singing the song might have evoked. Ask them to note any changes in their responses between *listening* to the song and actually *singing* the song.



## Part Two: Music as a Creative Impetus for Social Change

### Materials Needed:

- Computer with internet access and overhead projection for displaying online video-streaming
- **Handout B: Excerpt from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream Speech*** (end of lesson)
- **Handout C: Vocabulary Words** (end of lesson) for each student in your class
- Copies of selected photographs from the civil rights movement (photographs to be selected by the teacher at the teacher's discretion).

### Activities/Instructions:

1. Inform students that the song *We Shall Overcome* that they sang yesterday was sung by Joan Baez in 1963 at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in Washington D.C. This was the same political event and rally where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous historic speech, entitled "I have a Dream."
2. Pass around copies of **Handout B: Excerpt from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream Speech*** to the class. Show a video clip of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivering his famous "I Have a Dream" speech (available on YouTube). Note: The full text of Dr. King's speech is available on Stanford's King Institute's website, under the "Speeches" section. In particular, focus on Dr. King's delivery of the portion of his historic speech excerpted in **Handout B**.
3. After showing the clip of Dr. King's iconic speech, ask students to take out another sheet of paper. Instruct students to write down any thoughts, reflections, emotions or reactions that Dr. King's speech may have evoked as they listened to him talk.
4. Next, ask students to read again what they wrote in reaction to *We Shall Overcome*. Then ask students the following questions:
  - Were their reactions to listening to *We Shall Overcome* similar or different to their reactions to Dr. King's speech? How were they similar or different?
  - How do they think the song *We Shall Overcome* helped prepare all the people at the Washington D.C. rally in 1963 to listen and receive Dr. King's message?
5. **Extension Activity:** Ask students to describe some of the differences between contemporary music and the music of the civil rights movement, such as *We Shall Overcome*. Write some of their responses on the blackboard. Ask students to compose the lyrics of their own song, using words from Dr. King's *I Have a Dream* speech. Encourage students to write both verses and the chorus in composing their lyrics.
6. **Extension Activity:** Share with students a series of photographs from the U.S. civil rights movement (at the teacher's discretion). Break students up into small groups. Either hand out a photograph per group or ask each group to select at least one photograph. Give each group a copy of **Handout C: Vocabulary Words**.



(Optional: Ask students to choose a few words on this list and write down personalized (not dictionary) definitions of these words). Instruct students to circle the vocabulary items from Handout C that describe the events and emotions of their selected photograph(s). Then ask students to use the words to compose lyrics that would best express the emotions they have experienced while viewing the selected photograph(s).

**Additional Resources for Teachers and Students:**

Bridges, Ruby. *Through my Eyes*

Levine, Lisa. *Freedom's Children, Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories*

Kasher, Steven. *The Civil Rights Movement, A Photographic History, 1954-68.*

Rappaport, Doreen. *Nobody Gonna Turn me Round: Stories and Songs of the Civil Rights Movement*

### Handout A: Lyrics of *We Shall Overcome*<sup>1</sup>

VERSE ONE:

We shall overcome, we shall overcome  
We shall overcome some day

CHORUS:

Oh, deep in my heart I do believe  
We shall overcome some day.

VERSE TWO:

We'll walk hand in hand, we'll walk hand in hand  
We'll walk hand in hand some day

CHORUS

VERSE THREE:

The truth will make us free, the truth will make us free  
The truth will make us free some day

CHORUS

VERSE FOUR:

The Lord will see us through, the Lord will see us through  
The Lord will see us through some day

CHORUS

VERSE ONE

CHORUS

VERSE FIVE:

We shall live in peace, we shall live in peace  
We shall live in peace some day

CHORUS

VERSE SIX:

We are not afraid, we are not afraid  
We are not afraid some day

CHORUS

VERSE SEVEN:

The whole wide world around, the whole wide world around  
The whole wide world around some day

CHORUS

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/aahtml/exhibit/0919001.html>

**Handout B: Excerpt from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* Speech**

*An excerpt from the keynote address of the March on Washington, D.C. for Civil Rights, 28 August 1963*

Let us not wallow in the valley of despair.

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of "interposition" and "nullification," one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day "every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low; the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."

This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.



## Handout C: Vocabulary Words

### VOCABULARY WORDS

- *artist*
- *bondage*
- *Children's Crusade*
- *community*
- *contentment*
- *culture*
- *discrimination*
- *domestic worker*
- *exploration*
- *facial expression*
- *fear*
- *freedom*
- *Freedom Rides*
- *Freedom Summer*
- *happiness*
- *heritage*
- *humility*
- *indentured servitude*
- *language*
- *music*
- *neighborhood*
- *NVAC: Non Violent Action  
Committee*
- *plantation*
- *public*
- *reformation*
- *revolution*
- *sadness*
- *sharecropper*
- *slavery*
- *SNCC: Student Nonviolent  
Coordinating Committee*
- *tradition*