

Introduction to Music of the Civil Rights Era

Go online to get the associated handouts, standards, and latest version of the lesson plan: <https://www.learningtogive.org/units/music-civil-rights-era-1954-1968/introduction-music-civil-rights-era>

Students will understand why "freedom songs" became such an important motivating force during the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1968. They will also see how important figures in the Civil Rights Movement contributed to the common good.

Duration:

Three Forty-Minute Class Periods

Objectives:

The learners will:

- summarize important ideas and events of the Civil Rights Movement and describe how men such as Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King, Jr. sacrificed for the benefit of the common good.
- recognize famous "freedom songs" representative of the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-68.
- describe the functions of "freedom songs" and the conditions under which these songs were performed.

Materials:

- Freedom songs: *Keep Your Eyes on the Prize*, *This Little Light of Mine*, and *We Shall Overcome*
- Pencil and paper for taking notes

Home Connection:

Ask the students to talk to their parents and grandparents or other adult about the Civil Rights Era. How old were they at the time? Were they actively involved in any part of the movement? What were their thoughts, concerns, fears, etc.? What do they remember about the slave, folk, gospel and "freedom songs" such as *We Shall Overcome* and *Blowin' in the Wind*? Do they remember any songs from this era that they can share? If they were activists during this era, would they be willing to share their experiences with the class? (As a teacher, make sure you speak and/or meet with the presenter before he/she speaks to the class. Make sure all information is appropriate and informative. Make sure you follow-up this visit with a "thank you" from the class.)

Bibliography:

Songs from the Civil Rights Era

- *Don't Mourn...Organize*. Songs of Labor Songwriter Joe Hill. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian/Folkways Records, 1990. Sound recording. ASIN: B000001DHC
- *Freedom Is A Constant Struggle: Songs of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement*. Folk Era Productions Inc., 1994. Audio CD. ASIN: B00000182V
- Phillips, Utah. *Rebel Voices: Songs of the Industrial Workers of the World*. Performed by the members of Entertainment Workers IU 630, IWW. Chicago: Flying Fish, 1987. Sound recording.
- Seeger, Pete. *We Shall Overcome: Complete Carnegie Hall Concert*, June 8, 1963. Sony, 1989. Audio CD. ASIN: B0000026V0
- Seeger, Pete, Si Kahn and Jane Sapp. *Carry It On: Songs of America's Working Class People*. Flying Fish Records, 1992. Audio CD. ASIN: B000000MF2
- *Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement through Its Songs*. Smithsonian/Folkways, 1990. Audio CD, July 13, 1992. ASIN: B000001DHL

The following books will provide interesting information pertaining to the Civil Rights Movement and "freedom songs:"

- Goldman, Peter. *Civil Rights: The Challenge of the Fourteenth Amendment*. New York: Conrad-McCann, Inc., 1970. ISBN: 0698200241
- Kasher, Steven. Forwarded by Myrlie Evers-Williams. *The Civil Rights Movement, A Photographic History, 1954-68*. New York: Abbeville Press, 2000. ISBN: 0789206560
- Steiner, Rudolph and Eileen J. Southern. *Music of Black Americans: A History*, 3rd Edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997. ISBN: 0393971414

The following websites may be good resources:

- "Martin Luther King Day." These are the words of the "I Have a Dream" speech. <http://www.holidays.net/mlk/>
- MLK Web: A Teacher's Guide to Martin Luther King, Jr. on the Web <http://blackhistory.50webs.com/martinlutherking.html>
- Mississippi Writers Page: Medgar Evers. <https://english.olemiss.edu/>
- Official Website of Malcolm X: <http://www.cmgww.com/historic/malcolm/>

Instructions:

1. *Anticipatory Set: Play a recording of the song, "We Shall Overcome," as students are entering the classroom. You may dim the lights to focus students' attention on the thoughtful and sincere meaning of the text. When all students are quiet, seated, and the recording ends, ask if the learners have heard the song and if so, what they know about the song.*
2. Ask students to explain what they know about the Civil Rights Movement from 1954 to 1968. Using various sources, give students information about the movement or have students research the information. (See Bibliographical References.)
3. Discuss the important roles of Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, and Martin Luther King, Jr. (See Bibliographical References.) The points of view of these people were not liked by everyone, even persons within their own communities. Discuss the importance of hearing all voices in a community and respecting their right to be heard.
4. Introduce the term philanthropy to the class. Define it as "the giving of one's time, talent or treasure for the sake of another or for the common good." This has been done throughout history and all over the world. Ask students for examples of giving of time, of talent and of treasure. Can students give examples of philanthropy throughout history and in other places in the world? Discuss the term common good and solicit examples in every day life. Ask the learners if they could consider themselves or someone they know as philanthropists.
5. Discuss how the actions of Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, and Martin Luther King, Jr., who all lost their lives during this era, showed sacrifice. In what ways? Ask students if they believe those persons acted for the benefit of the common good and/or benefit of unknown others during the Civil Rights Movement.
6. Play the following "freedom song" recordings and have students join in singing the words:
 - *Keep Your Eyes on the Prize*
 - *We Shall Overcome*
 - *This Little Light of Mine*

Discuss the words of the songs and let students express their reactions to the lyrics.

7. Explain that many slave songs, gospel songs, folk songs, and labor songs were collected, adapted and taught to young civil rights activists. These songs fostered courage, unity and hope within the Civil Rights Movement.

Assessment:

Allow students to select one of the four songs discussed in this lesson and tie its lyrics in some way to one of the three persons studied in the lesson. This should be done in a written paragraph. In a second paragraph, students should define philanthropy and explain if the historic personage they selected could be considered a philanthropist as having contributed in some way to the common good. Students may name three "freedom songs" and explain, orally or in writing, how "freedom songs" played an important role in the Civil Rights Movement.