

Unit Plan
Civil Rights – Challenging the American Polity

By: Barry Jenkins – Polk County High School

Target Group: Eleventh Grade United States History

Theme: Whether it is the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, the Civil War, the Plessey decision, or Little Rock Central High School, the American people have struggled with bringing fairness to all of its citizenry. Only through the efforts of courageous souls have the disenfranchised come closer to the promise of equality for all. From Douglass to MLK the struggle for social justice has been difficult to achieve. Those fighting for justice have left our history with heroes and have caused the American experience to come closer to fulfilling its vision of a “city upon a hill.” Calling upon the history of the civil rights movement, inspiration will direct citizens to correct current and future social injustices thus leading us to a better future.

Number of lessons/Duration: Five lessons lasting approximately sixty minutes each

Lessons: Day one: Time Line Development
Day two: Strategies of the Movement
Day three: Role of Religion
Day four: Significant Activists
Day five: Difficulty of Change

Covered Standards: 5.1, 6.1

Technology: computer, projector, speakers, CD-ROM

Instructional Plan: Students will be introduced to the concept of American equality through the written words of Thomas Jefferson. This concept will be juxtaposed against the realities of slavery. On day one students will develop a time line of significant historical events that they will label “Civil Rights Movement.” The time line will expose the student to the contradictions within society concerning laws and the enforcement of laws. On day two students will create a chart of the various strategies used throughout the movement thereby teaching the student how different strategies are necessary for different circumstances. On day three students will appreciate how spirituality was a keystone for the movement by comparing Biblical themes to Civil Rights themes. On day four the student will pick a significant activist in the Civil Rights movement and create a brief biography focusing on the impact of the activist. On day five the student will analyze the impact of the Civil Rights movement in such areas as birth rates, death rates, literacy, income, healthcare, and education.

For: Cynthia Fleming, PhD.

UTK History Department

Teaching American History Summer Institute

Civil Rights Study

Essay: Role of Music in the Cause of Civil Rights

By: Barry Jenkins

Polk County High School

2005

The Afro-Americans of the 1960's equated themselves to the Hebrews. They had been removed from their homeland and were searching for, if not a physical Promised Land, at least a figurative one. They also felt that it was their responsibility to save the white man's soul. If they could get him to understand that his actions, as they related to oppression and cruelty to blacks were wrong, they would benefit the whites and themselves. Upon this premise, the Civil Rights cause was born. As a spiritual movement, the cause received its biggest blessing in the African-American churches of the South where it found its voice. That voice was the African-American spiritual hymn. The Civil Rights leaders took the traditional spirituals and changed their lyrics to convey the political agenda of the Civil Rights cause. Conveying these lyrics in a congregational-type singing, familiar to the African-American Christian, they created a non-violent voice for teaching the whites about the cause and for motivating new protestors.

This was not the first time that African Americans had used spirituals to convey political messages. According to Frederick Douglass, a black abolitionist, the spirituals were also used as a means of communication among slaves. He revealed that some songs thought to be about life after death in Heaven, were understood by slaves to signify freedom in the North. These innocent songs spread direction and hope from plantation to plantation by using a secret language. Before the end of slavery in 1865, slaves were allowed to sing those songs that were referred to as "work songs". Some overseers allowed slaves to sing any songs that were not anti-slavery or anti-slave-holder. Therefore, by means of song, right under the slave-holders' noses, slaves could give

directions regarding escaping to the North. The secret messages were fairly simple if the sender and receiver were current-events-savvy. For instance, in these spirituals, the word “home” could mean Heaven, but in the secret language of these slave songs, it was “the Promised Land” in the North. The words “chariot” or “train” were the means of escaping from slavery. Two spirituals known as “The Gospel Train” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” directly refer to the procedures for using the Underground Railroad. The words of “The Gospel Train” are “She is coming/Get onboard/There’s room for many a more”. These lyrics are a direct call to board a “train” in the Underground Railroad. “Swing low, sweet chariot” refers to a method of crossing the Ohio River during the journey north into Canada. In that same song, the lyrical lines of “A band of angels comin’ after me” direct the slaves to wait until the helpers come to assist them in crossing the Ohio river, while “Tell all my friends that I’m comin’ too” means don’t leave without me.’

In the Civil Rights movement, the base of spiritual songs familiar in slave days was expanded to include popular Afro-American music forms and singing techniques of the 1960’s. From this combination, activist song leaders made a new music which spread the word of the cause. The force and intent of the Civil Rights movement was nourished by call-and-response songs. The leader in this type song could call out spiritual lyrics and insert new words or phrases as needed to spread the newest political word. The participants would respond with an approval or they would expand upon the leader’s lyric. Impromptu lyrics, composed during demonstrations, identified issues and people at whom the demonstrations were directed.

In his book, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, James Forman, gives praise to Bernice Johnson Reagan for the political and motivational meaning in her songs. He says, “You have been able to forge new words to meet changing conditions. . . . Your songs today of Africa fit the transition in which we find ourselves. . . . I have struggled alone and with many others as your voice echoed in my mind and drove me beyond what seemed the last ounce of energy, down the path of liberation and toward the new day for humanity. . . . Sing on! We have heard you. We shall never forget! We fight too! Sing on, Bernice. Sing on!”

Just as music was used for communication and inspiration among slaves, the civil rights leaders intended to use them in the same way. Civil Rights leaders and participants modified lyrics as they traveled from place to place. The participants in the 1963 march on Washington and the 1965 fifty-mile long march from Selma to Montgomery had plenty of time to create new lyrics since many of them landed in jail for forty days. For example, the words of the spiritual “Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho (and the walls came tumbling down)” were changed into “Marching ‘round Selma”.

Marching ‘round Selma like Jericho,

Jericho, Jericho

Marching ‘round Selma like Jericho

For segregation wall must fall

Look at people answering

To the Freedom Fighters call

Black, Brown and White American say

Segregation must fall

Good evening freedom’s fighters

Tell me where you're bound

Tell me where you're marching

"From Selma to Montgomery town"

The most well-known song of the Civil Rights era, "We Shall Overcome", comes from Charles Tindley's 1900 gospel "I'll Overcome Some Day." First transformed during a strike by workers of the Negro Food and Tobacco Union in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1945, the song became a theme song at union gatherings across the country. At an old, southern church in Nashville, it became a symbol for the Civil Rights Movement on April 19, 1960, just outside the courthouse in downtown Nashville, according to Guy Carawan, a teacher at the Highlander Folk School.³ More than 3,000 people who had marched to the courthouse to support the leaders of the student sit-ins sang the song that day. They were in Nashville to confront Mayor Ben West on the courthouse steps regarding the desegregation of the city's lunch counter restaurants. Since then, the song has attained the status of an international anthem for civil rights. It is impossible to imagine the civil rights movement without "We Shall Overcome".

Many other songs were altered to convey the new message of Civil Rights. Here are a few examples:⁴

Original Slave Spiritual	Civil Rights Movement Freedom Song
Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on Jesus . . .	Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on freedom . . .
Don't you let nobody turn you roun' . . .	Ain't gonna let nobody turn me roun' . . .
Go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ was born. . . .	Go tell it on the mountain to let my people go. . . .

I shall not, I shall not be moved . . .	We shall not, we shall not be moved . . .
Keep your hand on the plow, hold on. . . .	Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on . . .
Over my head, I see Jesus in the air . . .	Over my head, I see freedom in the air . . .
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine . . .	This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine . . .
Been in the storm so long . . .	Been in the storm so long . . .
Oh freedom . . .	Oh freedom . . .

Not all spiritual lyrics needed to be changed to convey their multiple meanings. Two such examples are, “Rock me, Lord” which asks for peace and stability by use of its original spiritual lyrics, “Rock me, Lord in the bosom of Abraham” while “Stand By Me” asks for assistance with the Civil Rights cause and the physical and emotional demands related to it.

Even the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. used coded songs to convey his protest messages. Carren Moham, Assistant Professor of Voice at Illinois Wesleyan University describes the song choices of the foremost Civil Rights leader as being designed to get people “emotionally and spiritually charged, but never in a destructive way.”⁵

Watching old news clips of the sit-ins, marches and rallies of the sixties, one is drawn to the rhythms and words of the music. Even if it is only a perceived difference; those events would not have been the same without the music.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

"Music of the Civil Rights Movement" to feature activists, freedom songs at main library on Jan. 18, 2003. Media Announcement

<http://www.library.nashville.org/Newsevents/Press%20Releases/musicofcivilrights.htm>

Moham, Carren "Music's Role Integral to Civil Rights Movement"

<http://www.collegenews.org/x2130.xml>

Forman, James. *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1972.

Branch, Taylor. *Parting the Waters*. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo: Simon and Schuster Inc., 1988.

"Freedom Songs of the Civil Rights Movement: Slave Spirituals Revived"

<http://ctl.du.edu/spirituals/Freedom/civil.cfm>

Lesson Plan

Unit: Civil Rights

Title: Time-Line Development

Course: Eleventh Grade United States History

Duration: Sixty minutes

Standards: 5.1, 6.1

Resource: Boorstin, Daniel. *A History of the United States*. Massachusetts: Prentice Hall, 2002.

Strategies:

- 1: Portions of the Declaration of Independence (primary source) will be read aloud emphasizing the clause “all men are created equal.”
- 2: Using a classroom projector, show images of the effects of black slavery
- 3: Ask vital question: How is it possible for there to be a fight for freedom when it does not cover all the citizenry?
- 4: Guide classroom discussion toward Thomas Jefferson’s dilemma of knowing that slavery was evil, but immediate emancipation would cause its own problems (five minute maximum).
- 5: Inform students that the Civil Rights Movement was/is an alteration of society in how blacks were/are treated and that changes in law, social norms, and perceptions have been ongoing with significant events after 1865.
- 6: On chalkboard, illustrate how to construct a time-line
- 7: Students will construct a Civil Rights Movement time-line using their textbooks.

Assessment: Time-lines will be scored based upon dates corresponding with events and inclusion of all significant events illustrated within the textbook

Lesson Plan

Unit: Civil Rights

Title: Strategies of the Movement

Course: Eleventh Grade United States History

Duration: Sixty minutes

Standards: 5.1, 6.1

Resource: Boorstin, Daniel. *A History of the United States*. Massachusetts: Prentice Hall, 2002.

Strategies:

- 1: Inform students that efforts of Civil Rights activists varied from the raid on Harper's Ferry (extreme violence) to sit-ins at Woolworth's.
- 2: Using a classroom projector show images of sit-ins
- 3: Guide classroom discussion over the concept of the power of the pen and how some activists chose to write with the intention of changing
- 4: Have students create a chart illustrating the strategies used by activists, identifying activist with strategy, identifying strategy with immediate prior circumstances, and identifying strategy with intended social change

Assessment: Charts will be scored based upon five strategies listed and each category completed

Lesson Plan

Unit: Civil Rights

Title: Role of Religion

Course: Eleventh Grade United States History

Duration: Sixty minutes

Standards: 5.1, 6.1

Resource: Orfield, Gary. *Civil Rights in a New Era: Religion, Race, and Justice in a Changing America*. New York: Century Foundation Press, 2000.

Strategies:

- 1: Play "Voices in American History" - CD-ROM excerpts of Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King
- 2: Read aloud the lyrics of "We shall overcome" and periodically ask: "Is this speaking about blacks being treated unjustly or Christians living in a world of sin?"
- 3: Students will take notes from lecture that covers: (a) blacks seen as modern day Hebrews, black ministers in the movement, moral justification of the Civil Rights Movement

Assessment: Student notebooks will be collected at the end of the term and checked for the inclusion of today's notes

Lesson Plan

Unit: Civil Rights

Title: Significant Activists

Course: Eleventh Grade United States History

Duration: Sixty minutes

Standards: 5.1, 6.1

Resource: World Book Encyclopedia

Strategies:

- 1: Give a list of Civil Rights activists and have students pick one
- 2: Students will read encyclopedia entry of activist
- 3: Students will create a brief, two page, biography of activist with emphasis on their civil rights experience
- 4: As time permits have as many students read aloud their biography

Assessment: Biographies will be scored using a rubric

Lesson Plan

Unit: Civil Rights

Title: Difficulty of Change

Course: Eleventh Grade United States History

Duration: Sixty minutes

Standards: 5.1, 6.1

Resource: <http://www.loc.gov>

Strategies:

- 1: Take class to computer lab (students should have prior knowledge of lab rules)
- 2: Using a classroom projector, illustrate how to create a spreadsheet document
- 3: Have students collect data from website on the topics of: birth rates, death rates, literacy rates, income, healthcare, and education for white, black, and Hispanic populations
- 4: Have students create a spreadsheet using collected data
- 5: Have students summarize their findings by writing one paragraph under the spreadsheet

Assessment: Spreadsheets will be collected and scored using a rubric