

**Title of Unit:** Spirituals and Freedom Songs: Coded Communication

**Vital theme of the unit:** It took a hundred years for African Americans to gain their freedom. During this century, the people came and went; however, their culture remains, especially the songs of freedom. These were sung during the times of slavery of the nineteenth century on into the Civil Rights Movement of the twentieth century. Definitely, this is evidence that these freedom songs were a large part of their cultural heritage. During the 1960s and 1970s, many of the freedom songs sung by the many civil rights activists were essentially new versions of old slave spirituals. The lyrics expressed the specific needs of the movement and can be heard throughout the world as others sing for freedom and equality.

**Author and contact information:** Traci Freeman  
6-8 Grade History/English Teacher  
Rural Vale School  
395 Daugherty Spring Road  
Tellico Plains, TN 37385  
freemant@monroe.k12.tn.us

**Grade level:** Fifth, but easily modified for upper grades

**Number of lessons in the unit:** Five

**Time needed to complete unit:** Two weeks

**Curriculum standards addressed:** 5.5.spi.3, 5.5.spi.8, 5.6.spi.3,

**Technology used:** Internet

**Unit introduction and overview of instructional plan:**

Students will review a decade of events relating to African Americans gaining freedom. They will use their background information of the Emancipation Proclamation and Reconstruction Era. As they follow the timeline from 1865 to 1965, students will be involved in activities that compare different freedom songs, compare the Reconstruction Era of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to that of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and interview a family member.

## “SPIRITUAL AND FREEDOM SONGS: CODED COMMUNICATION”

*“Then Mrs. Hamer would lead us in a song, so we could lighten ourselves and give ourselves that extra boost of energy. We would sing about anything we felt. We would sing about why we sing. We would sing about the abuses we suffered, like not being allowed to vote. We would sing of sorrow and hope.”* A student of pre-Civil War days or one from the 1950s and 1960s could have said this. For over a century singing was a means of motivation and a message board for generations of oppressed people of color. It was used to send hope, calm sorrows, and heal. African Americans needed an avenue to vent their frustrations from the cruelty that was thrust upon them.

For many decades, African Americans have found comfort in the refuge of song. These songs started in their African mother countries and adapted as spirituals in the New World where lyrics were sung to comfort the soul and soothe the mind. Later in the Civil Rights era of the sixties, these same songs, which comforted their ancestors, became songs of non-violent protests. For example, the song “Oh Freedom” was a song written about freedom in heaven safe from the institution of slavery. In the sixties, that same song became an anthem of the times and experiences of African Americans. The lyrics were adapted to fit the harsh realities of segregation that included shootings, burning and bombing of churches. It was not just the lyrics that moved one’s soul as the words left the heart and filled the air. It was also the melody that moved both the slaves and civil rights activists. For example, this same song “Oh Freedom” was often sung in what is referred to as a “lining-out of hymns” often known as chants whereby new words of each

verse are shouted to the congregation. This method of singing made the song an extension of the singer's heart.

SNCC activist and Freedom Singer, Bernice Johnson Reagon, explains that the songs are "more powerful than spoken conversation." Author Clayborne Carson wrote "*In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960's*." This looks at SNCC's involvement in the movement of the sixties and several accounts are given where these songs played an integral part. Certain happenings and people associated with the oppression were often sung about in the Freedom songs of the 1950s and 1960s, names such as Chief Pritchett in Albany. Some songs were changed and became more of what adults would sing. One can imagine the frustration level that had come to put the names of the people that were causing the most grief to them directly in the lyrics of these precious songs.

When were the songs of protest sung? Were the Negro spirituals from which hundreds of Freedom songs were born only sung on a Sunday morning in a church service that was for the slaves only? Definitely not since congregating in such a manner might not benefit the master's plan of keeping order. During the times when slaves were allowed to congregate to praise their Lord and Savior, the songs had a different purpose, one of spirituality and a longing for a better place in Heaven. However, many times they could be heard as they performed their duties in the fields. They would sing in unison whereby each could feel what the other felt. This was as natural as whistling while one works. Many of the songs had coded messages to provide hope and inspiration. Frederick Douglas's writings revealed that some life after death songs were actually

interpretations of slaves reaching freedom in the North via the Underground Railroad. This famous route was a very popular hidden subject in Negro spirituals of that time.

Negro spirituals came in all sizes, shapes, and styles: map and signal songs. A forthcoming event, such as an escape, was sung about in signal songs. In a map song, such as "Follow the Drinking Gourd," the gourd resembled the Big Dipper, which was linked to the North Star, an important compass point for those looking for an escape route. Harriet Tubman, the Railroad's conductor, was the Moses for those looking to the North Star as they headed in that direction. In the spiritual "Moses," slaves felt inspiration as they sang about the danger surrounding the Underground Railroad: the approaching horsemen on a chase (the catch), the risk of being caught, the meeting place in the graveyard (double meaning of dropping off point and death/burial), and even the condemnation from family members. Biblical characters as Moses can be found in Negro spirituals because they were significant inspirational models. "Joshua Fit (Fought) the Battle of Jericho" carries the overall message of this culture -- freedom of slavery's bondage through song. The prescription for them to get through this ordeal was to sing their ways to freedom. In this song, they compare their singing, singing and singing to Joshua's blowing, blowing, and blowing of horns while he marched around the walls of Jericho. The walls came down after the seventh trip around. The chains of slavery did not unlock after some lucky seven "something," but the lyrics, melody, and rhythm combined were eventually heard and slavery was no more.

Enter into the twentieth century. The year is 1965, and African Americans are still singing for full equality. This time they are singing freedom songs; however, the spirituals from before were also freedom songs. The plight of bondage for African

Americans did not end with Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1865. The bondage was not physical such as chains, but might as well have been in their eyes for they still did not have the equality they wanted a hundred years before. So, they did what their ancestors taught them to do -- they sang! This time the media was there to capture their journeys and experiences for an international audience. Not that they did not have capable leaders before, but this time they had influential, inspirational individuals, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., to step up to the plate, take risks, and lead them openly. The legal atmosphere was different in this go-around. He was their Harriet Tubman, the conductor. No longer did they have to sing in fields, and even though their songs had a coded message; they sang for all to hear.

Mass meetings occurred almost nightly in churches around the South. Albany, Georgia, held its first mass meeting in November 1961. There were speeches by leaders who needed to get the message of the movement's progress and plans to the people. Before, during, and after hearing the messages, inspiration, courage, and determination were established from the freedom songs. Bernice Johnson Reagon describes this as a bonding of community spirit.

*Newsweek* magazine stated that during the height of the movement, "Music gave people a new courage and a new sense of unity." These songs also affected mainstream music. What was it about these songs that caused the popular music of the day to be affected? They came about during a time of civil unrest due to the civil rights agenda itself and because of opposition to an unpopular Vietnam War.

What was different about these freedom songs and the songs of freedom from one hundred years before? Many of them were the same songs. Bernice Johnson Reagon,

author of a booklet that accompanies the recording *“Voices of the Civil Right Movement: Black American Freedom Songs 1960-1966”* explains that the words and music were pretty traditional, but as one can imagine, the song had a new flavor due to the time of it being sung. Clayborne Carson gives an account of when “We Are Climbin’ Jacob’s Ladder” began being sung softly and gained strength during a voter registration meeting in rural Georgia. The sheriff broke up the singing for a moment then the singers began humming “We Shall Overcome.” The hums turned into words. This type of occurrence happened all over, in many situations, and was part of the civil rights activists’ objective to remain non-violent against their oppressors.

A few of the songs of the 1950s and 1960s shared the same title as their mother song from the slave era. These are great examples for taking something that worked in the past as a means for comfort and reworking them to do the same for a new era. Some examples are “Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on Jesus”... (slave spiritual) to “Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on freedom”... (civil rights freedom song); “Don’t you let nobody turn you roun’”... (slave) to “Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me roun’”... (civil rights); “Over my head, I see Jesus in the air”... (slave) to “Over my head, I see freedom in the air”... (civil rights), and “Keep you had on the plow, hold on”... (slave) to “Keep you eyes on the prize, hold on”... (civil rights). Singing songs that their ancestors sang gave them all the more reason to sing them the way they did.

These coded pieces of communications for these two time periods are not only an important part of African American culture but are just as important to American culture. Both impacts were profound during their time periods, not to mention American history itself. These protest songs have been sung for many various reasons since the Voting

Rights Act of 1965. In 1989, striking miners at the Pittston Coal Company sang “We Shall Overcome.” The most recent in American history is on September 23, 2001, at the memorial service for those who perished in the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. Its affect is still the same; one of hope, calm sorrows, and heal. Times have changed, but the message is still the same -- freedom and equality for all.

## Bibliography

Carson, Clayborne. *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960's*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.

Carson's book looks deeply into the student activist group, SNCC, and its involvement in the civil rights movement. While both marching and meeting, students participated in the use of song for inspiration for themselves, but also as a means to get their message out in a non-violent way. Carson gives accounts of several times when these were used.

"*Freedom and Protest Songs of the United States.*" Silver Burdett *Making Music*. Pearson Education, Inc., <http://www.sbgmusic.com/html/teacher/reference/historical/civilrights.html>. Accessed 8/25/2005.

This is an historical account of how freedom and protest songs of the United States evolved, who the key composers and artists were, and how these great works have been used in other countries to bring the message of freedom and equality.

"*Sweet Chariot: The Story of the Spirituals:*" *Freedom and Equality*. <http://ctl.du.edu/spirituals/Freedom/values.cfm/>. Accessed 9/3/2005.

This website is useful in analyzing not only the time periods of slavery and the sixties but also the music itself. It explains how the lyrics were adapted to the time periods in which they were sung.

*Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs 1960-1966*. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1997.

This is a double CD of forty-three tracks that acknowledge sounds and some of the sights from the Civil Right Movement time period. Bernice Johnson Reagon, one of the Albany student activist, writes in a booklet that accompanies the CD about each of the songs, when they were used in the movement, and for what purposes.

**Unit:** Spirituals and Freedom Songs: Coded Communication

**Lesson One Title:** “It All Adds Up to Freedom”

**Grade Level:** Fifth, but easily modified for upper grades

**Essential Question related to Vital Theme:** Why did it take one hundred years for African Americans to be set free? What events occurred in this process that made their freedom finally a reality one hundred later?

**Lesson Time:** One – three fifty-minute class periods

**Curriculum Standards Addressed:** 5.5.spi.3

**Technology used and how:** Internet for research, textbooks, and sources found in Library

**Materials:** Adding machine tape computer, paper, books, colored pencils, markers and/or crayons, “The Struggle for Civil Rights: A Timeline” on <http://cyberlearning-world.com/nhhs/project/time2htm> (optional), journal

**Activity description(s) and overview of instructional strategies:**

1. Instruct students to research for a timeline on the Internet or in a book. They might also want to combine the sources for a complete sequence of events. Use the website listed above to help and fill in the decades with other information.
2. Using adding machine tape, students will develop a timeline that paraphrases important events. Each decade is to be depicted beginning with 1860 –1870. They need to note the key players and themes of the dates.
3. Encourage students to make their timeline colorful and to draw pictures that get the audiences attention. NOTE: These do not need to be detailed, just sketches.
4. As students progress through the process, comment to each decade and ask questions along the way to 1960 – 1970.

**Supporting Assignments/Homework:** Have students use the first of the class on each day to reflect on something they learned from construction their timelines. They might want to comment on a question they have about the time period.

**Assessment:** Use the timeline and journal reflections for assessment.

**Unit:** Spirituals and Freedom Songs: Coded Communication

**Lesson Two Title:** Lyrics of the “Peculiar Institution” after 1800

**Grade Level:** Fifth, but easily modified for upper grades

**Essential Question related to Vital Theme:** What underlying messages were found in the lyrics of the 1800’s and 1960’s relating to freedom for the blacks?

**Lesson Time:** One – two fifty-minute class periods

**Curriculum Standards Addressed:** 5.5.spi.3, 5.5.spi.7, 5.6.spi.3

**Technology used and how:** Internet for research, textbooks, and sources found in Library

**Materials:** Adding machine tape computer, paper, books, colored pencils, markers and/or crayons, “The Struggle for Civil Rights: A Timeline” on <http://cyberlearning-world.com/nhhs/project/time2htm> (optional), journal

**Activity description(s) and overview of instructional strategies:**

1. Instruct students to research for a timeline on the Internet or in a book. They might also want to combine the sources for a complete sequence of events. Use the website listed above to help and fill in the decades with other information.
2. Using adding machine tape, students will develop a timeline that paraphrases important events. Each decade is to be depicted beginning with 1860 –1870. They need to note the key players and themes of the dates.
3. Encourage students to make their timeline colorful and to draw pictures that get the audiences attention. NOTE: These do not need to be detailed, just sketches.
4. As students progress through the process, comment to each decade and ask questions along the way to 1960 – 1970.

**Supporting Assignments/Homework:** Have students use the first of the class on each day to reflect on something they learned from construction their timelines. They might want to comment on a question they have about the time period.

**Assessment:** Use the timeline and journal reflections for assessment.

**Unit:** Spirituals and Freedom Songs: Coded Communication

**Lesson Three Title:** A Comparison of the Two Reconstruction Periods

**Grade Level:** Fifth, but easily modified for upper grades

**Essential Question related to Vital Theme:** What are the similarities and differences of what some might consider to be the two Reconstruction periods? These are the periods after African Americans were given their rights. The first began with the Emancipation Proclamation, and the second was after the Voting Rights Act in 1965. What were the challenges faced by African Americans after each? What was the atmosphere like after each?

**Lesson Time:** One – two fifty-minute class periods

**Curriculum Standards Addressed:** 5.5.spi.8, 5.6.spi.3

**Technology used and how:** Internet, textbooks, and sources found in library for research and overhead projector for student presentations

**Materials:** Computer, textbooks, library books, student-made or copy of a Venn diagram, overhead transparencies, overhead markers

**Activity description(s) and overview of instructional strategies:**

1. Students will work with a partner or two and take a time period either after the Civil War or Civil Rights Act to find information. One Venn diagram will be given to each group.
2. Have students research and study the information relating to the essential question.
3. Students bring their research to the table to compare and contrast. They will discuss and decide this information to put on their chart. Analyze the similarities and differences between the two time periods and paraphrase the information on their charts.
4. Students copy information over to overhead transparencies using the different colored markers for a better visual presentation.
5. Each group will present their findings to the class.
6. On the board, construct a large Venn diagram for a master of the whole class's findings.
7. Discuss in detail their findings.

**Supporting Assignments/Homework:** Have students reflect in their journals their feelings of the assignment. What did they think about it taking so long for freedom to finally be achieved? How would they have felt? What questions and/or concerns do they have about the situation?

**Assessment:** Have students write a five-paragraph comparative/contrast essay of the two reconstruction periods based on their findings in groups and classroom discussion.

**Unit:** Spirituals and Freedom Songs: Coded Communication

**Lesson Four Title:** Lyrics of the “Peculiar Institution” after 1800

**Grade Level:** Fifth, but easily modified for upper grades

**Essential Question related to Vital Theme:** What was the role of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Civil Rights Movement? What is the connection between jazz and the African American struggle for freedom? What is the comparison of the style of jazz with the call and response style of singing (particularly the freedom songs)? What are the role jazz music played in the 1930’s and the role of freedom songs in the 1960’s?

**Lesson Time:** One – three class periods

**Curriculum Standards Addressed:** 5.5.spi.3 and music objectives

**Technology used and how:** CD player,

**Materials:** Optional CD’s: *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs, 1960 – 1966* by Bernice Reagon (Smithsonian, 1997), *Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement Through Its Songs* by Guy Carawan (Smithsonian, 1990), PBS series “Jazz,” a film by Ken Burns, various jazz recordings supplied by the Music teacher such as “Take the “A” Train,” by Duke Ellington and his Orchestra; “God Bless the Child” by Billie Holiday; recording of Dr. King’s speech *I Have A Dream* (found at [www.standord.edu/group/King/](http://www.standord.edu/group/King/)), music textbooks, journals

**Activity description(s) and overview of instructional strategies:**

1. To set the stage for this lesson, have students view the PBS series “Jazz,” a film by Ken Burns.
2. Provide students with background information about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Engage them in a discussion of the civil rights movement, the Freedom songs, and Dr. King’s leadership role in the era.
3. Play brief excerpts of classical or symphonic music of your choice and one of the suggested jazz selections. Have students compare and contrast musical elements such as: tone color, form or structure of the music, performing medium (instruments and voice or strictly instrumental), rhythm, apparent size of ensemble, etc. Ask students to discuss why the jazz piece represents a freer musical expression than that of the classical example (discussion of improvisation). Lead students in exploring the concept of freedom in jazz music with freedom for people. What limits to freedom did the Jim Crow laws provide?
4. Lead students in singing freedom songs or spirituals that use call and response (found in current music texts or other resources). Point out the call and response phenomenon. Have students listen to Duke Ellington’s “Take the “A” Train and discover the call and response between group of instruments.

5. Discuss with students the Depression period of the late 1920's and early 1930's, the era covered in the episode "Jazz." Discuss with the students the role that jazz played in lifting the spirits of people both African American and white – during that era. How similar was the role of the freedom songs in the 1960's? Did blacks and whites sing them together or did just blacks sing them? What was the genesis of many of these songs (traditional spirituals that were adapted to fit the movement)? Which song formed the conclusion of Dr. King's famous speech *I Have A Dream*? What Freedom song was considered the theme song of the Civil Rights Movement?
6. Play the song, "God Bless The Child," found on the "Jazz" CD (or a recording from your music library), and ask students to focus on the lyrics. Discuss how these lyrics depict the feelings of people during Depression days
7. **Supporting Assignments/Homework:** Have students answer the following questions in their journals: Are these lyrics appropriate for all or for just some people in today's economy? Does the popular music of today reflect the social, political, and economic tenor of the time? Ask students to suggest examples of popular music that reflect the time in which they live.

**Assessment:** Read journal entries and prepare a quiz over lesson.

**Unit:** Spirituals and Freedom Songs: Coded Communication

**Lesson Five Title:** The “Second Reconstruction” and Its Advancement of Civil Rights

**Grade Level:** Fifth, but easily modified for upper grades

**Essential Question related to Vital Theme:** Why did it take the Civil Rights Movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to finally free African Americans?

**Lesson Time:** One – two fifty-minute class periods

**Curriculum Standards Addressed:** 5.5.spi.8

**Technology used and how:** Internet for research

**Materials:** Copy of Emancipation Proclamation found on-line or in a textbook, computer

**Activity description(s) and overview of instructional strategies:**

Review the main points of the Reconstruction Era. Have students dissect the Emancipation Proclamation and list why they believe Lincoln meant regarding African Americans. Next, have them examine civil rights legislation passed during the Reconstruction Era. To what extent did Reconstruction lay the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950 and 60’s? Have them describe legislation of this era.

**Supporting Assignments/Homework:** Have students take their findings and get with another student to compare notes. Students will display their ideas and findings on a piece of poster board to be displayed and discussed by the class.

**Assessment:** Using a general rubric found in various places such as the Internet, textbook assessment handbooks, etc., assess students’ posters and give both the same grade. Also, have students use a rubric to grade each other’s participation.