

Get on the Bus

Music & the Movement



Grades K – 5

Objective To examine the role of music in social movements; to learn, adapt and sing an original version of *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around*

Materials Access to internet for online research
Paper and a writing utensil

Background

Music is an important part of the play *Get on the Bus*, just as it was crucial to the Civil Rights Movement itself. Music helps tell the story and frame the historical moment, but it also represents one of the tools in the activist's tool box. Popular music can communicate ideas across large populations, to create awareness or specify a position. Songs, like marches, chants and signs, are participatory expressions of a cause. Activists can sing them to onlookers, adversaries, and each other. Songs can rally participants in a social movement, or console them when challenges arise.

In *Get on the Bus*, the characters sing in a couple different instances. The songs in the play are actual songs from the Civil Rights Movement, sung acapella, just as the original Freedom Riders sang on the buses and when they were jailed. Vivian and Carl sing *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around*, with lyrics shared by original Freedom Rider, Ernest "Rip" Patton, Jr. Earlier in the play, Vivian leads them all in the song, *If You Miss Me at the Back of the Bus*, a song that challenged the Jim Crow laws of the South. Another popular song among the Freedom Riders was *Hallelujah, I'm a Travelling*. Many of these songs use the melodies of spirituals and gospel songs with new lyrics to reflect the cause.

The songs of the Civil Rights Movement are participatory music, which works well developmentally with young learners since participatory, hands on (voices on) modalities resonate especially well with this age group. When exploring this musical repertoire, never let your musical expertise (or perceived lack thereof) get in the way. Parents and classroom teachers without musical experience can invite the class to sing along to audio or video recordings (links below) or collaborate with music specialists to help students delve into the music.

Lesson Procedure

1.) Reflect

Ask students how music added to story and feeling of the play *Get on the Bus*.

- When and why did characters sing?
- What was the feel of the music in those moments?
- What about the instrumental music – how was it used in the production?

2.) Research

For older students, view Freedom Riders: The Music from **American Experience** up through 2:18. After viewing, ask students to consider how music was used by the original Freedom Riders. Who sang it? When? Why?

Access the clip at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HuZQkl09Jho> or <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/freedom-riders-music/>.

Next, share with students the important role of music in helping people keep their spirits up and share their message as they worked for a change. The Roots covering “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around” is a great visual juxtaposition of contemporary musicians singing a Civil Rights song with footage from the original movement.

3.) Sing

Using video or audio recordings, sing by ear along with some of the following Civil Rights era songs. Most have sing-a-long versions online.

- Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around
- We Shall Overcome
- This Little Light of Mine
- Eyes On The Prize
- Hallelujah, I’m a Travelling
- If You Miss Me at the Back of the Bus

4.) Create your own Song

Just as activists of the Civil Rights Movement applied topical lyrics to existing melodies, work with your group to identify causes they are passionate about and create your own lyrics based on those issues. It could be about “big” social issues or classroom community issues like sharing, anti-bullying, and so on. Consider starting with a basic song structure:

*Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around
Turn me around, turn me around
Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around
Keep on a-walkin', keep on a-talkin'
Marching on to Freedom's Land*

Experiment with first/third line substitutions with this structure:

- *Ain't gonna let _____ turn me around*
- *Ain't gonna let no _____ turn me around*

Vary the final line to fit your topic, such as:

Gonna build a brand new world

- *Marching on to _____*
- *Walking on to _____*
- *Working for _____*
- *Building up _____*

Additional Online Resources:

Lesson on the history of [This Little Light of Mine](#) from Smithsonian Folkways

[Recordings of Freedom Songs](#) from Smithsonian Folkways

[Music of the Civil Rights Movement](#) (free audio and lesson plans from TeachRock)

[Music in the Civil Rights Movement](#) (Article from PBS)

[The Roots covering "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around"](#)

[Civil Rights Songs](#) (community scholarship)

Tips for at home application:

1. Utilize a video chat app or video conference platform to do this lesson with others and/or write your own song with friends. If you share your song on social media, don't forget to tag Tacoma Arts Live!