

Get on the Bus

Music & the Movement



Grades 6 – 12

Objective To examine the role of music in social movements

Materials Access to internet for research
Paper and a writing utensil
Presentation software to share work (optional)

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, Earnest "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 instrumental music in the production reflects the youth culture of the time. The early 1960s saw the growth of Soul and Rhythm & Blues with the emergence of Motown in Detroit and the development of the signature Memphis sound. In addition to some of the great vocalists, organ and guitar based instrumental music was emblematic of a new sound for a new generation.

Lesson Procedure

1.) Reflect

How is music integrated into 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

View [Freedom Riders: The Music](#) from **American Experience**. Before viewing, ask students to watch for ways that 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, look at a more recent version of a Civil Rights Era song. [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.

Additional Research 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)

3.) Investigate and Present

After researching the music of the Freedom Rides, challenge yourself (or your group, if you are doing this activity with others at home or via video chat) to investigate and present a socially conscious song of their choosing. Explore and then present:

- The artist who performs the song
- The issue the song addresses
- The argument made in the song
- The release date and reception of the song

★ ***As a culmination, make a playlist of “Music with Meaning.”*** ★

Noted Musicians of the Civil Rights Era

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|--------------------------|-------------------|---------------|
| ➤ Sweet Honey & the Rock | ➤ Mahalia Jackson | ➤ Marvin Gaye |
| | ➤ Harry Belafonte | ➤ Joan Baez |

Artists focused on social change (different eras, different issues)

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|---------------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| ➤ Woody Guthrie | ➤ Tracy Chapman | ➤ Arrested Development |
| ➤ Nina Simone | ➤ Pete Seeger | ➤ U2 |
| ➤ Public Enemy* | ➤ Lila Downs | ➤ The Roots |
| ➤ Bruce Springsteen | ➤ Tupac Shakur* | |

Contemporary Artists who have released songs focused on a social issue

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|--|--|
| ➤ Beyoncé (<i>Formation</i> , among others) | ➤ Lin-Manuel Miranda’s Hamilton Mix Tape with K’naan, Snow Tha Product, Riz MC, and Residente (<i>Immigrants</i>)* |
| ➤ Macklemore & Ryan Lewis with Mary Lambert (<i>Same Love</i>) | ➤ Marina (<i>To Be Human</i>) |
| ➤ Taylor Swift (<i>You Need to Calm Down</i>) | ➤ Childish Gambino (<i>This Is America</i>)* |
| ➤ The 1975 (<i>The 1975</i> featuring Greta Thunberg) | |

Mature language or content noted with an asterisk

Tips for at home application:

1. Utilize a video chat app or video conference platform to do this lesson with others and/or share your playlist with friends.