GET ON THE BUS
Music & the Movement

Grades 7 – 12

Objective To examine the roll of music in social movements

Materials Access to internet for research, paper/pencil or presentation software to share work

Background

Music is an important part of 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 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, Vivian teaches Thalia and James the song, If You Miss Me From 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
   Ask students to reflect on how music was integrated in 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
   As a class, view Freedom Riders: The Music from American Experience. Before 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/.
3.) Investigate & Present
After researching the music of the Freedom Rides, challenge students to investigate and present a socially conscious song of their choosing. Students should 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 class playlist of “Music with Meaning”.

Here are some possibilities

**Music of the Civil Rights Era**
- Sweet Honey & the Rock
- Mahalia Jackson
- Harry Belafonte
- Marvin Gaye
- Joan Baez

**Artists focused on social change (different eras, different issues)**
- Woody Guthrie
- Nina Simone
- Public Enemy*
- Bruce Springsteen
- Tracy Chapman
- Pete Seeger
- Lila Downs
- Arrested Development
- U2
- The Roots

**Contemporary Artists who have released songs focused on a social issue**
- Beyoncé (*Formation*, among others)
- Macklemore & Ryan Lewis with Mary Lambert (*Same Love*)
- Taylor Swift (*You Need to Calm Down*)
- The 1975 (*The 1975* featuring Greta Thunberg)
- Lin-Manuel Miranda’s Hamilton Mix Tape with K’naan, Snow tha Product, Riz MC, and Residente (*Immigrants)*
- Marina (*To Be Human*)
- Childish Gambino (*This Is America)*

Additional Online Resources:
[Music in the Civil Rights Movement](http://pbs.org) (PBS)
[The Roots covering “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around”](http://example.com)
[Civil Rights Songs](http://community.scholarship) (community scholarship)
*Mature language or content noted with astrix*