

Where Blooming Flowers Meet the Sky

The Soul of Change



Grades 6 – 12

Objective To examine the role of music in social movements

Materials Access to internet for research, paper/pencil, digital presentation platforms (PowerPoint, Prezi, Canva, etc.)

Background

Music is an important part of *Where Blooming Flowers Meet the Sky*, 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 toolbox. 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 *Where Blooming Flowers Meet the Sky*, we meet the iconic “High Priestess of Soul,” Nina Simone. A musical powerhouse at the keyboard and at the microphone, Simone had originally intended to pursue classical piano. Denied admission, she came to perform in clubs as both a pianist and singer. Living the day-to-day realities of the Civil Rights era, her music expanded from the usual repertoire of love songs to hard-hitting critiques of injustice and rallying cries for Black dignity.

Ms. Simone asserted that “Every song that I sing is important, that it communicates something to someone. It is not just a song. It’s something that says something to someone...Something that communicates and gets into the soul of people.”

Music continues to be a potent agent for communicating social messages. This lesson offers activities both on Nina Simone and on socially conscious music-making overall.

Lesson Procedure

- 1.) **Reflect** (If students have already seen the performance. If not, go to Step 2)
Ask students to reflect on how music was integrated in *Where Blooming Flowers Meet the Sky*.
 - When and why did characters sing?
 - What was the feel of the music in those moments?
 - What do we learn about Nina Simone and what questions remain?

2.) Research

As a class, view Simone's statement on "the artist's duty." Access her interview at <https://youtu.be/99V0mMNf5fo?si=ogHaKYyAqiEeRGK4> and/or use the text below:

"An artist's duty, as far as I'm concerned, is to reflect the times. I think that is true of painters, sculptors, poets, musicians. As far as I'm concerned, it's their choice—but I choose to reflect the times and the situations in which I find myself. That, to me, is my duty. At this crucial time in our lives when everything is so desperate, when every day is a matter of survival, I don't think you can help but be involved.

Young people – black and white – know this, that is why they are so involved in politics. We will shape and mould this country, or it will not be moulded and shaped at all anymore. How can you be an artist and not reflect the times? That, for me, is the definition of an artist."

In groups, have students investigate the following short articles and clips on Nina Simone's musical and social legacy. Each group should be prepared to summarize the highlights of the actions, experiences, or big ideas from each source.

- Nina Simone explains the song, "The King of Love is Dead" written for the assassination of Dr. King: https://youtu.be/PQFhQ7_7BA4?si=WjyRPlanBEfjKqh1&t=175
- Contemporary review of Nina Simone's LP *Nuff Said*. <https://www.wrti.org/arts-desk/2021-01-18/jazz-album-of-the-week-nuff-said-nina-simones-emotionally-layered-requiem-for-mlk>
- Nina Simone's reinvention upon rejection from a classical music conservatory <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/how-nina-simone-reinvented-herself-after-a-rejection-from-classical-music-conservatory/16781/>
- Lyric video to Simone's protest song, "Mississippi, Goddam" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LGgAVlel32Q> or lyric text [here](#)

Come back together as a large group and invite each group to contribute to a larger understanding of who Nina Simone was and what impact she made artistically and socially.

3.) Contemporary Relevance: Investigate & Present

After researching the career of Nina Simone, 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

Presentations should include multimedia via platforms such as PowerPoint, Canva, Prezi, etc.

As a culmination, make a class playlist of "Music with Meaning" using Spotify, YouTube, etc. to list all the songs researched by students.

Following are some suggested artists/songs:

Music of the Civil Rights Era

- Nina Simone
- Sweet Honey & the Rock
- Mahalia Jackson
- Harry Belafonte
- Marvin Gaye
- Joan Baez

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

- Woody Guthrie
- Public Enemy*
- Bruce Springsteen
- Tracy Chapman
- Pete Seeger
- Dolly Parton
- Lila Downs
- Arrested Development
- Calle 13
- U2
- The Roots

Contemporary artists who have released songs focused on a social issues

- 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*)*
- Common/John Legend (*Glory*)

Additional Online Resources:

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

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

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

Compilations of pop songs with social messages:

<https://popcrush.com/pop-songs-social-messages/>

<https://www.amnesty.org.au/10-songs-for-social-change/>

<https://www.berklee.edu/news/berklee-now/twelve-songs-became-anthems-cultural-change>

Mature language or content noted with asterisk