

Sing For Freedom - From Spirituals to Civil Rights Anthems: Lesson Plan

You can hear a medley of “freedom songs” on Sean’s album, *This Is Our House*.

Description

This lesson teaches about the connection between plantation-era spirituals and the anthems of the Civil Rights Movement.

Goal

To engage students in group singing as a way to introduce important music and musical connections from the African-American experience.

Objectives

Students will...

- sing African-American spirituals and civil rights songs.
- learn about and practice the African-American musical elements of call & response and rhythmic syncopation, and improvisation.
- put new words into existing songs (in the tradition of the songs being sung).
- learn about the history of the spirituals.
- learn about the history of civil rights songs.
- learn about the connection between the above two.

Background

The spirituals that developed during the years of slavery are generally defined as religious songs. They often were. But they were much more than that. Spirituals were used as a vehicle to express democratic values and community solidarity. They were used to motivate and inspire. They were used to express frustration and protest. And sometimes they were even encoded with specific information to help slaves escape to freedom. The spirituals were a way for slaves to express all of these things without suffering the brutal consequences that would have resulted from the slave masters knowing what the slaves were saying.

One specific example of encoding double meaning into a song is the use of the common Biblical image of crossing over the river of Jordan. This shows up in songs like “Swing Low Sweet Chariot.” While the religious imagery was important, this image also refers to the desire to cross north over the Ohio River, away from the land of slavery, to freedom. Likewise the desire for freedom and salvation that many spirituals speak of was not only in regard to the afterlife but to a better life in this world as well.

It is no surprise that many of these spirituals were revived and reworked to fit the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 60s. Words were sometimes changed to imbue new meaning. For instance, the song “I Woke Up This Morning With My Mind Stayed on Jesus” was changed to “... Stayed on Freedom.” Sometimes words were improvised and new verses were born. One example of this is the verse “we are not afraid” in the song “We Shall Overcome.” This was apparently created on the spot during a very tense moment in civil rights history.

A great website dedicated to the story of the spirituals is: <http://ctl.du.edu/spirituals/Freedom/civil.cfm>

Materials

1. These are songs that were traditionally sung a cappella, so all you really need is a voice to sing and hands to clap.
2. If you don’t already know any of the songs, you can find them here:
<http://ctl.du.edu/spirituals/Freedom/civil.cfm>
3. You will need something to write with and on if you want to write down any new verses that the children create.

Vocabulary

Spiritual: Songs that developed among the slave population on the plantations – generally religious in nature, but often with double meaning relating to the desire for freedom from slavery.

Civil Rights Movement: The social-political movement demanding equal rights for all Americans that began in the 1950s and came into its own in the 1960s.

Call and Response: The musical practice of a leader calling out a line of music (sung or played on an instrument) and others responding.

Improvisation: The practice of making something new up on the spot – in the case of songs, this could mean the music or the lyrics.

Rhythmic Syncopation: The practice of putting rhythmic accents somewhere besides the down-beat.

Back Beat: A simple form of syncopation created by putting the rhythmic accent on beats two and four of a measure.

Procedure

1. Sing or play a recording of “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” or some other familiar spiritual.
2. Explain the history of the spirituals and the double meaning in the lyrics.
3. Explain how many of these songs were then used in the struggle for equality in the civil rights movement.
4. Introduce “Woke Up This Mornin’ With My Mind Stayed On Freedom” or some other spiritual that was changed for use during the Civil Rights Movement. Show the change in lyrics.
5. Sing the song with the students in call and response fashion -i.e. The leader sing’s “I woke up this morning” and everyone sings “stayed on freedom.”
6. Sing the song (or a different song) adding claps on the back-beat.
7. Now add a foot stomp on the down beat (one and three) to go along with the claps on the back beat (two and four).
8. Discuss the element of improvising new words to fit the situation.
9. Have the students make up some new verses – i.e. what else could we do with our minds stayed on freedom?
e.g. “goin’ to school with my mind stayed on freedom” or “runnin’ and playin’...”
10. Do the same thing with another song.

“Woke Up This Mornin’ With My Mind Stayed On Freedom” Lyrics

I woke up this morning with my mind stayed on freedom,
I woke up this morning with my mind stayed on freedom
I woke up this morning with my mind stayed on freedom,
Hal le lu, ha le lu, ha le lu jah!

I'm walking and talking with my mind...

I'm singing and playing with my mind...

Other Songs That Would Work Well In This Lesson:

This Little Light Of Mine
We Shall Overcome
Keep Your Eyes On The Prize
We Shall Not Be Moved
Ain't Gonna Let nobody Turn Me Around