

LESSON 4: MUSIC AND SOCIAL CHANGE

"IF YOU'RE READY (COME GO WITH ME)" was written by Raymond Jackson, Carl Hampton, and Homer Banks, and performed by the Staple Singers (1973).

Introduction

In this final lesson, students will begin to contemplate the role of music as an agent of social change. A gospel act that crossed over into mainstream soul music, the Staple Singers always conveyed a message in their music. After they study "If You're Ready (Come Go with Me)," students will be asked how music can inspire social change.

Facing History Themes: Legacy; Choosing to Participate

Essential Questions

- How does music impact the way people think and act?
- How can music encourage people to participate in their community, their nation, and the world?
- What role can music play in a movement for social change?

Guiding Questions

- What type of society were the Staple Singers envisioning?
- How did the Staple Singers view the purpose of their music?
- Are there contemporary examples of music ameliorating a social issue?

Objectives

- Students will use the song's lyrics as a primary text for analysis.
- Students will understand the historical significance of the 1972 Wattstax music festival.
- Students will understand how protest music (aka message music) can work.
- Students will write their own lyrics about a social issue.

Common Core Anchor Standards for Reading (R), Writing (W), and Speaking and Listening (SL)

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1](#)—Citing Textual Evidence
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.2](#)—Theme/Central Idea
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.3](#)—Plot & Character/Process
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4](#)—Word Meaning
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.5](#)—Text Structure
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7](#)—Comparing Different Media

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1](#)—Collaborative Discussion
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.2](#)—Interpreting Information in Diverse Media

Outcomes/Assessment

Students will create a campaign for change about an issue that is personally relevant.

Media/Resource List

- [Handout 1](#): “If You’re Ready (Come Go with Me)” Lyrics
- [Handout 2](#): The Staple Singers (Historical Background)
- Text-Dependent Questions (Lyrics and Historical Background for the Staple Singers), see Appendix.
- Film Clip: “[If You’re Ready \(Come Go with Me\)](#),” as Performed by the Stax Music Academy
- Film Clip: “[The Staple Singers](#)” from *Respect Yourself: The Stax Records Story*.
- Film Clip: “[“The Zenith of Soul Music,’ Wattstax, August 1972”](#) from *Respect Yourself: The Stax Records Story*.

Learning Activities

Warm-up

You can begin by having students identify a song that is personally meaningful to them. You may choose to model this by sharing a song that is meaningful to you. Explain why the song resonates with you, using details from the music, the lyrics, and the era when it was written. As students share their choices, encourage them to also explain why the music they selected is meaningful, asking them to focus on the lyrics. Have them analyze the song's message either orally or in writing.

Analyzing the Lyrics

1. Distribute the lyrics for “If You’re Ready (Come Go with Me)” ([Handout 1](#)). Ask students to answer the [text-dependent questions for Lesson 4](#) individually, in pairs, or in small groups.
2. Watch the film clip “[If You’re Ready \(Come Go with Me\)](#),” and ask students what the song’s message is. Describe the roles that both the lyrics and the music play in communicating the message.
3. Discuss the differences between conveying a message through a song and through other forms of media such as a speech or a movie. Stax owner Jim Stewart said, “Music can bring people together, emotionally as well as socially. You begin to see inside of each other’s minds and understand where we came from.” What is it about music that helps to build community among seemingly different groups?

Historical Context/Deeper Understandings

4. Distribute the Historical Background handout ([Handout 2](#)) about the Staple Singers. Watch the film clip “[The Staple Singers](#).” This introduces the Staple Singers, who became known for their message music. Begin thinking about the potential of music to inspire social change by watching the “[‘The Zenith of Soul Music,’ Wattstax, August 1972](#)” film clip which documents the 1972 music festival of that name. Based on evidence in the reading and the film excerpt, what messages were artists and organizers trying to communicate at Wattstax? What did they want to demonstrate to the nation and the world? How did they hope to demonstrate it? Based on what you have seen and read, evaluate the success of the event? What did Wattstax accomplish?

Outcomes

5. To move from the past to the present, have students name examples of today’s music that reflects social issues. What message does the music attempt to communicate? Support your opinion with evidence from the song. Who is the intended audience? How well did the artists communicate their messages?
6. Ask students to identify issues that are meaningful to them by brainstorming with partners or in small groups. Examples might include bullying, discrimination, neighborhood safety, drug use, and threats to the environment. Once students have selected a topic, have them write lyrics for a song about it. It may help if you ask students to consider their audience. What kind of language and imagery might appeal to different sorts of listeners?

HANDOUT 1 “If You’re Ready (Come Go with Me)” Lyrics



Written by Raymond Jackson, Carl Hampton, and Homer Banks

If you're ready
If you're ready now
If you're ready, yeah
Come on, go with me

No hatred
(Come, go with me)
Will be tolerated
(Come, go with me)

Peace and love
(Come, go with me)
Will grow between the races
(Come, go with me)

Love is the only transportation
To where there's total communication
If you
(Come, go with me)
Get ready now
(Come, go with me)

Feel you're able?
(Come, go with me)
Take me by my hand, y'all
(Come, go with me)

No disaster
(Come, go with me)
Will ever enter there
(Come, go with me)

No war
(Come, go with me)
Uh-uh, will ever be declared
(Come, go with me)

No economical exploitation
No political domination

If you
(Come, go with me)
Get ready now, yeah
(Come, go with me)

Think you're able?
(Come, go with me)
Come on, go with me
(Come, go with me)

[Unknown], genocide
(Come, go with me)
Lord, better get ready now
(Come, go with me)

Troublemaker
(Come, go with me)
You, you better get ready now
(Come, go with me)

Liar
(Come, go with me)
Oh, I'm waitin' on ya
(Come, go with me)

Backstabber now
(Come, go with me)
Come and go with me
(Come, go with me)

Don't bother me
(Come, go with me)
Quit your system troublin', yeah
(Come, go with me)

Yeah, [Unknown] and terrorists
(Come, go with me)
Yeah, come on, y'all, come on, y'all
(Come, go with me)

Yeah, if you wanna be free here, all right
(Come, go with me)
Come on, go with me
(Come, go with me)

(Come, go with me)
Come on, go with me
(Come, go with me)

See, I'm just movin' on
(Come, go with me)
Yeah, I'm just movin' on
(Come, go with me)

Groovin' on
(Come, go with me)
I can't help it but move on
(Come, go with me)

(Come, go with me)
I got to move, y'all
(Come, go with me)

Lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group. Reproduced with permission.



HANDOUT 2 The Staple Singers Historical Background



The Staple Singers achieved their popularity during the height of the civil rights movement.

Courtesy of Stax Museum of American Soul Music

Music has long been used by movements seeking social change. In the fifties and sixties, this was particularly true, as successful black and white musicians openly addressed the

issues of the day. During the sixties, popular white singers such as Bob Dylan and Joan Baez lent both their names and their musical talents to the civil rights movement. In fact, music long assisted those working to win civil rights for African Americans. Freedom songs, often adapted from the music of the black church, played an essential role bolstering courage, inspiring participation, and fostering a sense of community. Andrew Young, former executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, remembered how music helped build bridges between civil rights workers and members of the communities they hoped to organize:

They often brought in singing groups to movement friendly churches as a first step in their efforts. . . . They knew how little chance they stood of gaining people's trust if they presented themselves as straight out organizers: people were too afraid to respond to that approach. So they organized gospel groups and hit the road.⁴⁰

The Staple Singers belonged to that tradition. Beginning as a gospel group, they became soul superstars at the height of the civil rights movement. As Rob Bowman notes in *Soulsville, U.S.A.*, "They attempted to broaden their audience by augmenting their religious repertoire with 'message' songs."⁴¹ Musically and politically, the Staple Singers fit right in at Stax Records, that model of racial

harmony in a time of societal upheaval. Co-owner Jim Stewart argued, “If we've done nothing more, we've shown the world that people of different colors, origins, and convictions can be as one, working together towards the same goal. Because we've learned how to live and work together at Stax Records, we've reaped many material benefits. But, most of all, we've acquired peace of mind. When hate and resentment break out all over the nation, we pull our blinds and display a sign that reads ‘Look What We've Done—TOGETHER.’”⁴²

Co-owner Al Bell went further: “Dr. King was preaching what we were about inside Stax, where you judge a person by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin. And looking forward to the day when, as he said, his little black child and the little white child could walk down the streets together, hand in hand. Well, we were living that inside of Stax Records.”⁴³

The “‘protest’ material against a ‘folk rock’-oriented beat” that the Staples Singers performed also owed much to King.⁴⁴ According to lead singer Mavis Staples,

The songwriters knew we were doing protest songs. We had made a transition back there in the sixties with Dr. King. We visited Dr. King's church in Montgomery before the movement actually got started. When we heard Dr. King preach, we went back to the motel and had a meeting. Pops [Mavis's father, who played guitar and shared lead vocal duties with his youngest daughter] said, “Now if he can preach it, we can sing it. That could be our way of helping towards this movement.” We put a beat behind the song. We were mainly focusing on the young adults to hear what we were doing. You know if they hear a beat, that would make them listen to the words. So we started singing protest songs. All those guys were writing what we actually wanted them to write. Pops would tell them to just read the headlines and whatever they saw in the morning paper that needed to be heard or known about, [they would] write us a song from that.⁴⁵

Inspired by “Pops” Staples, songwriters Raymond Jackson, Carl Hampton, and Homer Banks penned “If You're Ready (Come Go with Me)” in 1973. Similar in sound to the group's 1972 hit “I'll Take You There,” the song lists specific obstacles to justice. Recorded after the death of Martin Luther King Jr., both songs build on the “dream” King articulated throughout his career.

Seven years after the Watts Riots, Stax executives outlined a grand concert that would bridge music and activism.

[The Initial plan] was to feature three acts performing in Will Rogers Park at the Watts Summer Festival site. Over time, this developed into an all-day concert to be staged at the Los Angeles Coliseum on the final day of the Watts Summer Festival featuring virtually every current Stax artist. The artists would give their performances free of charge, Schlitz beer would sponsor the event and thereby offset some of the production costs, and Stax would pick up all other incurred costs. Admission was held to a one-dollar, tax-deductible contribution per person so that virtually anyone in the community could afford to buy a ticket. Even so, several thousand tickets were distributed absolutely free of charge.⁴⁶

Some scholars suggest that Wattstax reflected the newfound emphasis on black empowerment, moving beyond legal recognition of equality to a focus on self-determination. A company press release outlines the goals of the festival:

Any strong record label could do something like this to support their community. We hope that WATTSTAX '72 will be a model for other companies to put forth similar events. This sort of all-star benefit is not so humanitarian as to be entirely without profit. And, it's a rare opportunity that lets you do something corporately valuable without being guilty of exploitation.

Sure, Stax could have just given the Watts Festival \$100,000. But, this way we have a prototype for something that can be done by many other record companies in many other cities, and it involves the community rather than being a handout. A successful all-star concert like this also focuses pride in a community image.⁴⁷



The Staple Singers perform at the Wattstax music festival.

Courtesy of the Stax Museum of American Soul Music

The Staple Singers were just one of many Stax artists that participated.

Singer Carla Thomas remembered

being in Los Angeles during the Watts Riots and said she was “happy to be back and be a part of the rebuilding, instead of tearing something down.” Saxophonist Floyd Newman noted that what started as just “another gig” for Stax musicians became a “worldwide thing.”⁴⁸ One writer declared, “The event marked the first all Black entertainment event of its size and scope ever to be completely Black controlled!”⁴⁹ In the end more than 112,000 people attended, making it the second largest gathering of African-Americans in the United States at the time, second only to the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Equality.⁵¹

On the national stage, Stax and its founders were recognized by California senator Alan Cranston in a commendation read in the Senate chamber on Friday, October 13, 1972.

Mr. President, a major American business has made a notable contribution to the people supporting it, a contribution worthy of recognition.

The Stax Organization, a leading black business in America, and the dedication of its leaders to the basic principles of American citizenship deserve our commendation.

Primarily involved in the production and distribution of musical records, for which they have been known as the “Memphis Sound,” the Stax Organization, headed by a dynamic man named Al Bell, recognizes that its success depends upon the public. With this in mind, Al Bell and his associates recently began a program of giving back to the people some of the benefits the company has received from them.

A most significant example of this kind of corporate responsibility was displayed on August 20, 1972, in Los Angeles when Stax, a Memphis-based company, organized “Wattstax '72,” a massive 6-hour musical spectacular that brought some 100,000 black citizens together at the Los Angeles Coliseum. The entire event was a gift from Stax to the community. . . .

The entire proceeds from the event have been distributed to the Watts summer festival, to enable them to carry out a yearlong program of community support, the sickle cell anemia program, the Martin Luther King Hospital, and the Watts Labor Community Action Committee.

I commend the Stax Organization and those associated with them in this project. They are, indeed, inspirational examples of good citizenship to all Americans of every race, creed, and national origin.¹²