



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1980 Volume VI: The Present as History

Black Music: Its Message and Meaning

Curriculum Unit 80.06.04
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The purpose of this unit is to offer students who are in remedial reading programs a familiar medium through which they can develop an appreciation for modern black music from a historical, political and lyrical perspective while at the same time developing vocabulary, listening skills, reading comprehension and writing skills. Emphasis will be placed on the political and the historical surge of the civil rights movement of the 1960's and how this surge directly or indirectly affected black musicians, who in turn affected the black population of America during this period. A major objective will be to integrate some of the more popular songs of the last twenty years with a study of the social and political impact of the black movement on black people. The aim is to teach students to analyze the present as history, to research, analyze, predict and translate the black movement into their own creative and artistic statements, whether musical or literary.

The strategy underlying this unit grew out of my observations about the important role that music played in my students' daily lives. For the Christmas of 1979, it seemed that many black teenagers received a portable music machine, equipped with AM-FM radio, cassette player/recorder, eight-track tape, earphones, microphone, stereo speakers and "genuine leather" carrying straps. The reasons for wanting these sets ranged from "I want my music with me all the time," to "Music is my life and I want it close to me." Black music has always been "big" with black teenagers. Music is even more important to some teenagers than sports. These portable sets range in price from \$49.00 to \$300.00 in major discount stores. Often teenagers will spend more money satisfying their musical appetites than they spend on clothes. This attitude is not surprising. Music has been a part of the black cultural scene dating back to slavery .

Once enslaved and brought to America, the African had to find a way to communicate with other Africans because the hundreds of African tribes represented spoke many different dialects. However, one custom that the slaves held in common was "humming." Someone once said that "a roomful of people cannot speak together, but they can sing together." "Humming tunes without specific lyrics became a shared experience as African instruments made from tree bark, cones, bones, etc., gave way to more Americanized instruments. For the first Afro-Americans, music was a vehicle through which a slave could travel through time substituting fantasy for reality. Some tunes were sad, some happy, some triumphant. There were church songs, work songs, love songs and folk songs. Hildred Roach in her book *Black American Music : Past and Present* objects to Frederick Douglass' characterization of slave music in his autobiography. Recalling his childhood as a slave on a plantation on Maryland's Eastern Shore, Douglass remembered that many of the songs sung by his fellow slaves saddened him. He therefore questioned the widespread belief that slaves sang because they were content. Ms. Roach feels that it was not the music but slavery itself which accounts for the real sorrow that

Douglass must have felt. She feels that music was wrongly accused, for music has the power to induce boundless happiness. By soothing the souls and healing the sick, it could create an aesthetic quality of mind beyond recall. ² She eventually concludes that the power of black music lies in its ability to protest and transcend oppression. ³

Up until now, no definition of what black music is has been attempted. That is not an easy task. It is best to illustrate its nature and the main lines of its development with a few selected works.

During Douglass' lifetime, he may have heard songs like "Wake Up, Jonah," "Nobody Knows de Trouble I've Seen," "When Israel was in Egypt Land (Go Down Moses)," and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." Many blacks see "Go Down Moses," as a call to action. It can be compared briefly to "Yankee Doodle" as far as impact goes. Early collections of Black music contain mostly spirituals, which are undated. Ms. Roach points out that W.E.B. DuBois and Benjamin Brawley in their books, *The Souls of Black Folk* and *The Negro Genius*, established a chronology that roughly dates the appearance of certain slave songs. Among the earliest slave spirituals are the songs "See Fo' and Twenty Elders on Deir Knees," "You May Bury Me in de East," "Nobody Knows," and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot". Such songs as "March On," "Steal Away," "Bright Sparkles," and "I've Been A-Listening All de Night Long" appeared later. Toward the end of the antebellum era, the slave songs "Bright Sparkles," "Dust, Dust, and Ashes," "My Mother Took Her Flight," and "I Hope My Mother Will Be there in That Beautiful World on High" seem to have been widely sung. ⁴

As black music developed in its own forms, blacks became very polished at reproducing white music. After the Civil War it was not uncommon for blacks to be hired for all-white affairs. By the early 1900's, the black professional musician was quite common in the North and large urban areas of the South. With the great migration of blacks to the urban North came better jobs. For the first time in American History as LeRoy Jones states in his book, *Blues People*, blacks became consumers. ⁵ From Harlem to Watts on Friday evenings after getting paid, many blacks would make it to the nearest record shop to buy the latest blues hit. Jones interprets the expanding production of these "race records" as a sign that commercial recording companies had recognized the emergence of a class of black wage earners. ⁶

Many of the blues songs were love songs or dance songs. But at the emergence of the Black Renaissance, musicians began to use their music to reflect upon their living conditions. However many blacks chose to use a sweeter less devastating version of the blues songs which translated into "jazz." Superficially, Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington became household words, but America was not actually responding to the message of the blues. Literally, the blues is named for the mood it describes. Blacks were not first-class citizens. There were many inequalities in American life. Even well-educated blacks had trouble in society. Often the black musician who would play in a white nightclub could not be served as a customer, or would have to sleep across town in the "Negro" quarters. During the late 1940's emerged one performer in particular who seemed to have been the link between the "lighter" jazz and the "heavier" blues. As singer and guitarist, his blues repertoire was wide. ⁷ This man was and is the "King of Blues," Mr. B.B. King. There were others also, Lonnie Johnson, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, and Bobby Blue Bland just to name a few. For many blacks, King stood out from the others. In an interview in *Sepia Magazine*, B.B. King told Craig Reid that his songs often allude to his life in the South. King insists that songs like "The Thrill Is Gone" or "Live at the Cook County Jail" contain many layers of meaning. On the surface they describe one absent lover or a personal misfortune. But King urges his audience to interpret the blues' account of individual suffering as an expression of a more general, social discontent. ⁸ Reid observes that, despite the popularity of King's lyrics, many blues fans do not appreciate the deeper historical themes of King's music. ⁹

Another musical trend appeared during the late 1950's. It was named "Rhythm and Blues." The music sounded a little like the blues, but the lyrics were on happier terms. This music was called "soul" music because it was sung by blacks and identified by blacks as a common force found in black culture. It was a unique sound that also drew heavily from the gospel sound. Ruth Brown, Ray Charles, Brook Benton, Sam Cooke, Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, Little Richard sang songs like "Send me some Loving," "Hit the Road, Jack," "Think Twice," "I Found my Thrill," and, the biggest hit of all, "Mabellene." All indications pointed to these artists as being the masters of this new sound. But ironically, the white record companies managed at this point to find whites who sounded black. Their new sound was called "Rock and Roll." In Elvis Presley and other musicians with styles similar to his, Americans were able to see "white" and hear "black." Presley was always quick to point out that his idols had been Chuck Berry and Little Richard. Yet it was Presley who made the millions. Although black musicians were not bitter it was stark reality that the black music market would be affected by singers such as Presley.

By the middle of the 1960's, black singers began to come out and say what they felt. With their sound "borrowed" and the competition stiff for the almighty dollar, black singers had to speak out. Civil Rights in America were a top issue of this decade. Black singers joined this revolution or it could be said they helped to create it. There were no longer implications that double standards existed in America; it was said point blank. Not only was this protest mirrored in the streets of Harlem, Detroit, Dallas, Little Rock, but also in the music world. LeRoi Jones in his book *Black Music* felt that black artists could have been even more specific in their social protestations.¹⁰ However each of the artists mentioned had a profound affect on the self-image of many blacks during the sixties. For example, Brown's record "Don't Be a Drop-Out," encouraged young people to stay in school and to get an education. He went further when he recorded "Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud." Brown shouted out to America that he was proud to be black. His music was unyielding, the lyrics were repetitive. The message was clear. Blacks had to assert their own belief in themselves. The impact of the song was far-reaching and hard-hitting. Perhaps this record was the strongest statement from the musical world to American blacks. People listened. It became a national chant in the black communities across the country. Later Brown recorded "Open Up the Door." The message was that people needed opportunities to be productive, not just handouts from the state or federal governments. If doors were opened for blacks, then blacks would be able to better their own positions as equal citizens. These songs from James Brown helped to build character in many black youths at this time. His songs made people think seriously about their common plights.

Perhaps the most prolific artist during the late sixties was Curtis Mayfield. He was a singer with the Impressions. One of their songs was "Keep on Pushing." So many leaders emerged during the Civil Rights movement that many blacks became confused about "whom to follow." This record was a needed word of encouragement to not give up or in. The lyrics urged the black population to continue onward, not to stop although everything did not look rosy, if they continued as a people together they would reach their goals. Mayfield was a composer, singer and producer of music. His songs spun meaningful messages that lasted through to the decade of the seventies. Whether as a member of the group or on his own as a single artist, blacks were affected by the songs he wrote/recorded. As an Impression he sang, "We're a Winner" in praise of black brotherhood and "People get Ready," a prediction that goals had been met in some areas. As a single artist, he wrote, sang and produced "We're Moving on Up," "We're the People Who are Darker than Blue," and "Miss Black America."

Later as the seventies progressed, groups like Earth, Wind and Fire and the Commodores were successfully involved in a cross-over market. Their sounds appealed to both black and white markets. Their audiences were always well-integrated. This was due in some part to the increasingly mechanical advancement in the use of

synthetic musical instrumentalization that accounted for all kinds of sounds, sharp, shrill, loud, vibrating and which gave impetus to the “disco” sound of the late seventies. This was not a black sound but a sort of “combined” soft rock and Rhythm & Blues sounds.

Today in 1980, there has been a resurgence of the R&B sound. Such black entertainers as Teddy Pendergrass and Stephanie Mills are riding high on the charts. Even the groups that were once popular in the sixties such as the Temptations, the Spinners and the Manhattans have enjoyed the spotlight again. What is ahead for black music? The possibilities are unlimited. As long as young black Americans stay involved with the music of their generation and look back upon past black musical achievements in order to create new patterns for the future, black music will survive. The McFadden and Whitehead song, “Ain’t No Stoppin’ Us Now” captures the assertion and optimism of their generation. ¹¹

Notes

1. Hildred Roach, *Black American Music* (New York: Crescendo, 1976), p. 5.
2. *Ibid.* , p.6.
3. *Ibid.* , p.6.
4. *Ibid.* , p.27.
5. LeRoi Jones, *Blues People* (New York: Morrow, 1963) p.101.
6. *Ibid.*, p.99.
7. “B.B. King and Lucille: Best of the Blues,” *Sepia Magazine* , February, 1980 by Craig Reid (Forth Worth: Sepia Publishing Co., 1980) p.32.
8. *Ibid.* , p.34.
9. *Ibid.* , p.32.
10. LeRoi Jones, *Black Music* (New York: Morrow, 1970), p.208.
11. John Whitehead-Gene McFadden-Jerry Cohen, “Ain’t No Stoppin’ Us Now.” CBS Records/CBS, Inc. (New York:, 1979).

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Ferris, William. *Blues from the Delta* . New York: Doubleday, 1979.

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STUDENT REFERENCES:

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LESSON PLANS

TEACHER'S PURPOSE:

1. To provide student an opportunity to learn about the black musical experience in America.
2. To guide student to the discovery of the contributions of blacks in various fields of music.

3. To help student discard any myths or fears that black contributions to the American music scene have been few or insignificant.

OBJECTIVES FOR STUDENTS

Student's will be able to:

1. Cite the contributions made by certain blacks to music.
2. Critically place these contributions in their respective places within the universal spectrum of contributions to American music.
3. Form opinions on the basis of materials read.
4. Evaluate information and ideas and apply them to other situations whether musical or not.

AREAS OF CONCENTRATION

The music of the 1960's including Gospel, Blues, Jazz and Rhythm and Blues

TEACHER REFERENCES

Blues People by LeRoi Jones

Black Music by LeRoi Jones

Black American Music by Hilda Roach

The Spirituals and the Blues by James Cone

Blues from the Delta by William Ferris

STUDENT TEXTS

The Sound of Soul by Phyl Garland

Famous Negro Music Makers by Langston Hughes

The Story of the Blues by Paul Oliver

DAILY PLANNING

Readings can be assigned ahead of time even if readings are to be done in classroom. Vocabulary work must be done on a daily basis. It is suggested that reports or essays be done in ink and in cursive.

AUDIO AND VISUAL AIDS

Cassette and Video programs compiled by Institute fellow will be available soon.

SPECIAL EVENTS

Suggestions arrange lecture from representative of a reputable record company. Assembly programs featuring local artists can be planned. Trip to recording studio could be a possibility if money is granted from school.

EVALUATION PROCEDURE

Pretest (optional)

Post test

Questionnaire or critical review by students at end of unit.

LESSON ONE

Gospel Music of the 1960's

Assigned Reading : Pages 39-41 "Influence of the Spirituals" from *Black American Music* by Hilda Roach. Zerox copies are suggested.

Audio materials : Albums previously recorded on cassettes: Mahalia Jackson, *Newport 1958* . and *By Your Favorite Artists* : Reverend James Cleveland and Shirley Caesar

Vocabulary Words : spirituals, Reconstruction, pioneer, Emancipation Proclamation, choral, solo, symphony, piano, orchestra, paraphrase 1) definitions, phonetical pronunciation 2) Use in good sentences, 3) spell correctly

Procedure : Try to begin lessons by assigning vocabulary words. Pronounce words with students. Pass out assigned reading to be done in class. Discuss article.

Outside reading: *Famous Negro Music Makers* by Langston Hughes, pages 141-146. Biography of Mahalia Jackson, Gospel Singer.

Ask class to discuss Mahalia's public and personal life, as related to her decision to sing the gospel. Play the tapes for the class. Compare Jackson's style to that of J. Cleveland and S. Caesar. Put titles of selections just played on chalk board. Ask students to give reasons as to the selection and significance of the titles by the artists.

Suggested activity : Have students write a one to two page essay on why they think gospel songs and spirituals have influenced the black community from slavery to the present.

LESSON TWO

Jazz and Blues of the 1960's

Assigned Reading : Pages 73-85, "Struttin' that Thing" and pages 157-168, "Blues and Trouble," from the book by Paul Oliver, *The Story of the Blues* . (Xerox copies if possible)

Audio materials : Albums previously recorded on cassettes, Billie Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues* , Ramsey Lewis, *The " In " Crowd* , B.B. King, *Live at the Regal* .

Vocabulary Words : jazz, migrants, tenements, cabaret, anonymous, trumpet, trombone, copyright, contemporary, syncopation: 1) definitions, phonetical pronunciation, 2) use in good sentences, 3) spell words correctly.

Procedure : Begin lesson by assigning vocabulary words if possible. Discuss the reading lesson. Listen to Billie Holiday's record. Compare her voice to Mahalia Jackson's. If you can mention the movie released during the 1970's starring Diana Ross who portrayed Billie. Discuss the ups and downs of the 1940's and 50's. Listen to B.B. King's record. Then listen to the instrumentals by Ramsey Lewis. Ask students for a preference. What political activity in the 1960's made the blues popular again?

Outside reading: Pages 161-172 of *Famous Negro Music Makers* by Langston Hughes.

Activity : Divide class into four or more groups. Assign the reading of the play by Langston Hughes, "Tambourines to Glory," found in his book, *Five Plays* available at the Institute. Allow each group to assign parts for at least one scene. Point out the musical selections found in this play. If students are not able to sing the lyrics then have them read them aloud as they read the play aloud. Do the lyrics have any special significance to the plot of the play? Are there any other songs that could be substituted for these if it were necessary?

LESSON THREE

Rhythm and Blues of the 1960's

Assigned reading : Assign pages 3-35, "Soul Music: An Old Sound of New Significance," from *The Sound of Soul* by Phyl Garland.

Audio-visual materials : Albums of records previously recorded on cassettes. James Brown (single recordings) *Say it Loud I'm Black and I'm Proud, Don't Be a Drop-Out , Open Up the Door* ; The Impressions, *Sixteen Greatest Hits* ; Curtis Mayfield, *Curtis*. Cassette video show utilizing major hits of the sixties with scenes from New Haven neighborhoods, (to be available by January from Institute).

Vocabulary Words : improvise, cultural, industry, market, significance, psychedelic, duo, trio, technique, phenomena: 1) definitions, 2) phonetical pronunciation, 3) use in good sentences 4) spell correctly

Procedure : Try to begin lesson by assigning vocabulary words. Discuss reading assignment. Ask students to listen to records and try to write down lyrics of at least one complete group. Discuss political activity of Black community on national level in the 1960's. Look and listen to cassette-slide show. Discuss pictures and music.

Assign reports : Write a one to two page essay on each singer. James Brown and Curtis Mayfield

Activity : Scrapbook—Talk with parents about their favorite artists and recordings of the seventies. Collect pictures and information on Rhythm and Blues singers.

Songbook—Write your own original songs. Lyrics and if possible, the music. For each song that you compose write a pre-statement as to why you choose or created this song in particular.

Report—The song “We Shall Overcome,” became the “theme” song for the civil rights movement. Research this song. Can you remember its original version?

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