

Grade  
Level:  
Adaptable,  
grades 6-12

# Freedom Song

Social Studies, English/Language Arts, Music, US History, Black History, Women's History

*This is a two-day lesson plan that can be expanded/contracted depending on student interest and available instruction time.*

## Learning Objectives:

- To recognize the multiple roles music plays in movements for social change
- To analyze a sound recording and draw inferences regarding its meaning and significance
- To enrich student understanding of underrepresented figures in African American History, Women's History, and US History
- To critically examine the role of white allyship in the movement for Black Freedom
- To conduct independent research about a protest song, including lyrical and contextual analysis, culminating in an essay and a class presentation

## Necessary Materials:

- Fannie Lou Hamer, "[Songs My Mother Taught Me](#)", Smithsonian Folkways, selections available on YouTube
- SNCC Digital Gateway, "[Freedom Singing](#)"
- Bernice Johnson Reagon, "[The Songs are Free](#)"
- Fannie Lou Hamer, "[Go Tell It On the Mountain](#)," Newport Folk Festival, July 26, 1965
- National Archives, "[Analyze a Sound Recording](#)"
- Fannie Lou Hamer, "Woke Up This Morning," Songs My Mother Taught Me, [recording](#), lyrics
- Dahleen Glanton, "[Is There Room for Whites in the Fight for Black Equality?](#)" Chicago Tribune January 11, 2016
- Peter, Paul & Mary, "[Blowin' in the Wind](#)" March on Washington, August 28, 1963, lyrics
- Bob Dylan, "A Pawn in their Game" [recording](#), lyrics
- Pete Seeger, "We Shall Overcome" [recording](#), lyrics
- Journals for each student to reflect

## Background Knowledge:

Depending upon your familiarity with Fannie Lou Hamer, you may wish to consult this brief [Biographical Sketch](#)

[of Fannie Lou Hamer](#) and/or this [Timeline](#) before leading the "Freedom Song" unit.

Excellent book-length biographies have also been written about Hamer, including: Kay Mills' *This Little Light of Mine*, Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, and Maegan Parker Brooks, *A Voice that Could Stir an Army*. For more information about the role of music in the movement, you may also wish to consult the book [Freedom is a Constant Struggle, Songs of the Freedom Movement](#). And for more information about Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, you can visit her [website](#). Finally, to further explore the controversial role of White activists within SNCC, see "[SNCC Staff Meeting at Peg Leg Bates' Club](#)"

## Instruction Steps:

### Day One

#### Anticipatory Set

**Step One:** As students enter the classroom, play a selection of songs by Fannie Lou Hamer. If this is your student's first introduction to Fannie Lou Hamer, you should provide background information about her larger significance in the history of the Black Freedom Movement and American Politics. This information can be gleaned from the Biographical Sketch, Timeline, and/or lengthier biographies listed in the Background Information section above.

**Step Two:** As students settle into the space, ask them to reflect on or journal about a song—any song—that they have identified with emotionally. Invite several students to share their responses.

#### Teacher Input

**Step Three:** After asking a few students to share their reflections, guide the class in a discussion about the power of music, and how it can elicit emotion. Note that

this power was harnessed during the Civil Rights Movement, to connect, inspire, and cope. For more information about the role of music within the movement, see suggestions for Background Knowledge above.

### Group Activity

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**Step Four:** Next, divide the class into small groups of 4–6 students and ask them to read and discuss the “Freedom Singing” article from the SNCC Digital Gateway. Write the following questions on the board for each group to discuss:

- What are some specific examples of how music made a difference in the Civil Rights Movement?
- Why was it important that Freedom Singing be “congregational”?
- Has music ever “calmed or empowered” you?

### Guided Practice

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**Step Five:** After groups have completed their discussion, each group should report out in a full-class setting, with the teacher guiding further discussion—especially in relation to the idea of music imbuing listeners with courage.

**Step Six:** To further demonstrate this concept, share the short (4 min, 34 sec clip) of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Freedom Singer Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon’s interview with Bill Moyers. You can note by way of introduction that Reagon was a SNCC Freedom Singer, she went on to become a widely-celebrated scholar, activist, and co-founder of the a cappella group “Sweet Honey in the Rock.” For more on Dr. Reagon, see Background Information above. You can also note that Fannie Lou Hamer sang alongside Dr. Reagon and the SNCC Freedom Singers, most famously on the Atlantic City Boardwalk during the 1964 Democratic National Convention.

**Step Seven:** Last, show students the July 25, 1965 audiovisual recording of Fannie Lou Hamer’s performance at the Newport Folk Festival, “Go Tell it On the Mountain” and distribute the National Archives’ “Analyze a Sound Recording” Worksheet. In addition to taking notes guided by the worksheet, also encourage

students to pay particular attention to Hamer’s performance of the song, the setting, and especially how the song makes them feel. Ask the students if they recognize this song as a Christmas Carol and note the particular ways in which Hamer changes the lyrics to make it relevant to the Civil Rights Movement, all the while harnessing the power of the old Gospel song. (Specifically: Hamer substitutes “Go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ has come” for “Go tell it on the mountain to let my people go.”)

### Closure

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**Step Eight:** Complete the day’s lesson by asking students a big question such as: What roles does music play in social movements? Can they offer contemporary examples (e.g. Kendrick Lamar’s “It’s Gonna Be Alright” and the Black Lives Matter Movement)

### Day Two

### Anticipatory Set

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**Step One:** As students enter the classroom for this second day of the “Freedom Song” unit, play Fannie Lou Hamer’s “Woke Up This Morning” from the Songs My Mother Taught Me album. Distribute or project the

song lyrics and encourage students to sing along and clap together—to experience the full empowering congregational effect.

**Step Two:** Review the previous day’s lesson, noting especially the multiple roles music played within the Civil Rights Movement—uniting and empowering people, offering courage and direction, drawing

upon familiar resources within communities (e.g. Gospel music) to underscore the significance of the present moment and more.

### Independent Reading and Reflection

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**Step Three:** Ask students to read Glanton’s article in the Chicago Tribune, “Is there room for Whites in the fight for Black equality?” and journal their thoughts about this significant question.

### Find Your Voice Highlights

Students are encouraged to find their own voices by experiencing the transformative power of song, reflecting upon the role songs play within movements for social change, and critically examining the role of artist-allies. Further, students should be encouraged to express their views regarding the complex practice of allyship in writing, speech, or through a musical performance.

## Discussion

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**Step Four:** Invite students to share their thoughts about this controversial question with the class. Preface the discussion by noting that the larger issue of allyship raised in the column is a controversial one with no clear “yes” or “no” response. In fact, Fannie Lou Hamer was a staunch supporter of white allies within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. You can mention that she adamantly opposed SNCC’s decision to expel white people. For more about the controversial role of White activists within SNCC, see Background Information above. Encourage students to think about the benefits of White allies, for example, but also the drawbacks and to weigh those aspects in particular situations.

## Teacher Input

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**Step Five:** After students have had time to voice their perspectives, engage the class in a discussion about White allies from the 1960s folk movement and the role they played in expanding the nation’s understanding of the Civil Rights Movement.

## Guided Practice

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**Step Six:** Play the first 3 minutes and 40 seconds of Peter, Paul & Mary discussing their performance of “Blowin’ in the Wind” at the March on Washington, 1963.

**Step Seven:** Distribute the National Archives’ “Analyze a Sound Recording” worksheet and the lyrics. Encourage students to take notes on both sheets and lead students in a discussion of the meaning of the song, the historical setting, and the significance of it being sung by White singers.

## Collaborative Work

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**Step Eight:** If you have time in the session, students can work in small groups to repeat the process of viewing performances, analyzing lyrics, and drawing inferences about the songs’ contextual significance for Bob Dylan’s “Only A Pawn in Their Game” and Pete Seeger’s “We Shall Overcome.”

## Closure

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**Step Nine:** Invite groups to share back with the large group about their small group discussions.

**Step Ten:** Conclude this unit by reviewing the variety of functions music serves for advancing the cause of social

change and ask students to grapple with big questions: Why is White allyship problematic? How can it be helpful? How can people seeking to ally themselves with groups and causes to which they do not belong do so in ways that minimize harm and promote the cause they identify with?

## Assignment

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**Step Eleven:** Provide students with a list of 1960s protest/freedom songs from a variety of artists (see recommendations below). Ask students to select one for advanced research and present their finding to the class. Presentations should include a summary/analysis of the song’s lyrics and their meaning, any famous performances, key historical events that either inspired the song or were happening around the time of its release, its impact on society, and any personal reflections the student developed through their research.

## Freedom Songs

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- Eyes on the Prize by *Sweet Honey in the Rock*
- For What It’s Worth by *Buffalo Springfield*
- A Change is Gonna Come by *Sam Cooke*
- If I Had a Hammer by *Pete Seeger*
- The Times They Are A-Changin’ by *Bob Dylan*
- We Shall Not Be Moved by *Mavis Staples*
- Everyday People by *Sly and the Family Stone*
- Oxford Town by *Bob Dylan*
- Ohio by *Crosby, Stills & Nash*
- Here’s to The State of Mississippi by *Phil Ochs*
- Chimes of Freedom by *Bob Dylan*
- Mississippi Goddam by *Nina Simone*
- Strange Fruit by *Billie Holiday*

**Assessment of Student Learning:** Student learning is assessed at multiple points during the “Freedom Songs” unit. First, student engagement with the material can be determined by their participation in large class and small group discussions. Second, students will be engaging in individual journal reflections, lyrical, and contextual analyses throughout the lesson. Third, students will conduct original research and present their findings to the class.

## Lesson Plan Author: R.J. Morgan

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R.J. Morgan currently serves as executive director of the Mississippi Scholastic Press Association and teaches writing and reporting courses at the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss). He earned his undergraduate and master's degrees at Mississippi State University and previously taught history and journalism at Starkville High School, where he received honors including STAR Teacher, Third Congressional District Teacher of the Year, the Paul Cuicchi Innovative Educator Award, and the MSPA High School Journalism Adviser of the Year (three times). His media experience includes freelance writing for The Associated Press, Sporting News magazine, The Oxford Eagle, The Commercial Dispatch, The Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal and The Memphis Commercial Appeal. Morgan is the recipient of the 2018 Elizabeth Dickey Distinguished Service Award from the Southern Interscholastic Press Association, has earned Certified Journalism Educator status from the Journalism Education Association, and is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in K-12 education leadership. He is also researching the impact of the 1963 Delta Folk Jubilee on the civil rights movement in Greenwood, Miss., for a future book.





## Freedom Song

### “Woke Up This Morning” Lyrics

Led by Fannie Lou Hamer

Woke up this morning with my mind

Stayed on freedom

Woke up this morning with my mind

Stayed on freedom

Woke up this morning with my mind

Stayed on freedom

Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelujah.

I'm walking and talking with my mind

stayed on freedom

I'm walking and talking with my mind

stayed on freedom

I'm walking and talking with my mind

stayed on freedom

Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelujah.

I'm singing and praying with my mind

Stayed on freedom

Yeah, I'm singing and praying with my mind

Stayed on freedom

Singing and praying with my mind

Stayed on freedom

Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelujah.

Come on and walk, walk

Come on and walk, walk

Come on and walk, walk

With your mind on freedom

Come on walk, walk

Come on walk, walk

Come on walk, walk

Come on walk, walk

Oh, oh, oh

Come on and talk, talk

Come on and talk, talk.

Ain't no harm to keep your mind

Stayed on freedom

Oh, there ain't no harm to keep your mind

Stayed on freedom

There ain't no harm to keep your mind

Stayed on freedom

Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelujah.



## Freedom Song

### **“Blowin’ in the Wind” Lyrics**

Performed by Peter, Paul & Mary

Written by Bob Dylan

How many roads must a man walk down

Before they can call him a man?

How many seas must a white dove sail

Before she sleeps in the sand?

How many times must the cannonballs fly

Before they’re forever banned?

The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind

The answer is blowin’ in the wind

How many years can a mountain exist

Before it is washed to the sea?

How many years can some people exist

Before they’re allowed to be free?

How many times can a man turn his head

And pretend that he just doesn’t see?

The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind

The answer is blowin’ in the wind

How many times must a man look up

Before he can see the sky?

How many ears must one man have

Before he can hear people cry?

How many deaths will it take ‘til he knows

That too many people have died?

The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind

The answer is blowin’ in the wind

The answer is blowin’ in the wind



## Freedom Song

### “Only a Pawn in Their Game” Lyrics

Written & Performed by Bob Dylan

A bullet from the back of a bush  
Took Medgar Evers' blood  
A finger fired the trigger to his name  
A handle hid out in the dark  
A hand set the spark  
Two eyes took the aim  
Behind a man's brain  
But he can't be blamed  
He's only a pawn in their game

A South politician preaches to the poor white man  
“You got more than the blacks, don't complain  
You're better than them, you been born with white skin,  
” they explain  
And the Negro's name  
Is used, it is plain  
For the politician's gain  
As he rises to fame  
And the poor white remains  
On the caboose of the train  
But it ain't him to blame  
He's only a pawn in their game

The deputy sheriffs, the soldiers, the governors get paid  
And the marshals and cops get the same  
But the poor white man's used in the hands of them all  
like a tool  
He's taught in his school  
From the start by the rule  
That the laws are with him  
To protect his white skin  
To keep up his hate  
So he never thinks straight

'Bout the shape that he's in  
But it ain't him to blame  
He's only a pawn in their game

From the poverty shacks, he looks from the cracks  
to the tracks  
And the hoofbeats pound in his brain  
And he's taught how to walk in a pack  
Shoot in the back  
With his fist in a clinch  
To hang and to lynch  
To hide 'neath the hood  
To kill with no pain  
Like a dog on a chain  
He ain't got no name  
But it ain't him to blame  
He's only a pawn in their game

Today, Medgar Evers was buried from the  
bullet he caught  
They lowered him down as a king  
But when the shadowy sun sets on the one  
That fired the gun  
He'll see by his grave  
On the stone that remains  
Carved next to his name  
His epitaph plain  
Only a pawn in their game



## Freedom Song

### “We Shall Overcome” Lyrics

Performed by Pete Seeger

We shall overcome,  
We shall overcome,  
We shall overcome, some day.

Oh, deep in my heart,  
I do believe  
We shall overcome, some day.

We'll walk hand in hand,  
We'll walk hand in hand,  
We'll walk hand in hand, some day.

Oh, deep in my heart,  
I do believe  
We shall overcome, some day.

Black and white together  
Black and white together  
Black and white together, now

Oh, deep in my heart,  
I do believe  
We shall overcome, some day.

We are not alone,  
We are not alone,  
We are not alone, TODAY

Oh, deep in my heart,  
I do believe  
We shall overcome, some day.

The truth shall make us free  
The truth shall make us free  
The truth shall make us free, some day.

Oh, deep in my heart,  
I do believe  
We shall overcome, some day.

We are not afraid,  
We are not afraid,  
We are not afraid, TODAY

We shall overcome,  
We shall overcome,  
We shall overcome, some day.

Oh, deep in my heart,  
I do believe  
We shall overcome, some day.