

## **Evolution of Civil Rights**

### **The Basics**

#### **Time Required**

3-4 class periods

#### **Subject Areas**

AP US History

The Great Depression and World War II, 1929-1945

Post World War II U.S., 1945-1970

#### **Common Core Standards Addressed:**

Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6-12

#### **Author**

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### **The Lesson**

#### **Introduction**

While the 1920s saw a resurgence of African American culture and jazz became a part of mainstream America, African Americans still had to endure segregation, and a lack of equality and justice. The civil rights movement did not just erupt in the 1950s and 1960s but was a series of struggles through the twentieth century. The NAACP led the movement in the courts, while African American citizens fought the daily struggle to live. The following three lessons will create an overview and set a framework leading to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Lesson one will be about lynching in the U.S. from 1880 to 1930 with the Billie Holiday song “Strange Fruit” discussed, along with Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal Programs and how African Americans were treated. Lesson Two will be during World War II, the Double V Campaign, and A. Phillip Randolph’s threatened March on Washington. “Marching on Freedom’s Road” will be the song utilized in this lesson. Lesson Three is the culminating activity for the Civil Rights movement with the songs “We Shall Overcome” and “People Get Ready.”

#### **Guiding Question**

How has the situation of African Americans change during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century?

#### **Learning Objectives**

Students will:

- Understand the long struggle of African Americans to obtain justice and equality in the United States in the 20th century.
- Analyze song lyrics from different time periods that reflect the feelings and ideas of African Americans.
- Have a better understanding of the Civil Rights movement.

### **Preparation Instructions**

Songs used in this lesson:

“Strange Fruit”

“Freedom Road”

“We Shall Overcome”

“People Get Ready”

### **Lesson Activities**

Song #1 “Strange Fruit”

This lesson will be used towards the end of a discussion of the New Deal’s effect on minorities.

New Deal effect on minorities:

How New Deal agencies dealt with African Americans  
Shift of the African American vote to Democratic Party

Discuss the 1936 Olympic wins by Jackie Owen and Mac Roberson.

After listening to the song and reviewing the lyrics, ask the following questions:

1. What mood is being set by the lyrics?
2. What meaning do the lyrics have?
3. What is the point of view of the song?
4. Where there any event(s) that precipitated the song?
5. What is the perspective of the song?
6. Speculate how this song might change people’s views? Or ideas? Or policies?
7. What makes this song so powerful?

Song #2 “Freedom Road”

Once you have discussed the beginning of World War II and the effects on the home front, ask where does the African American fit in?

Discuss Double V Campaign and Executive Order 8802

Listen to the song, read lyrics

Discuss FDR’s “Four Freedoms” Speech. Ask “Did the U.S. represent the four freedoms?” Where did African Americans stand once Pearl Harbor occurred?

Discuss A. Philip Randolph and his threat of a march on Washington.

Discuss why the march never happened.

Discussion Questions:

1. What mood is being set by the lyrics?
2. What meaning do the lyrics have?
3. What is the point of view of the song?
4. Where there any event(s) that precipitated the song?
5. What is the perspective of the song?
6. Speculate how this song might change people's views? Or ideas? Or policies?
7. In what ways does this song represent other World War II songs of the time?
8. Contrast this song with "Strange Fruit" of 1939.

Related info:

Josh White, a singer most famous for religious songs and folk tunes, here joins with poet Langston Hughes in the song "Freedom Road," in which he attempts to link the war abroad to the struggle for racial justice at home.

Executive Order 8802 ended discrimination in defense industries and the federal government.

Songs #3 & 4 "We Shall Overcome" and "People Get Ready"

Listen to "We Shall Overcome" and discuss.

Listen to "People Get Ready" and discuss.

Discuss current civil rights issues, affirmative action, reverse discrimination etc.

Questions:

1. What mood is being set by the lyrics?
2. What meaning do the lyrics have?
3. What is the point of view of the song?
4. Where there any event(s) that precipitated the song?
5. What is the perspective of the song?
6. Speculate how this song might change people's views? Or ideas? Or policies?
7. In what ways does this song represent other songs of the time?
8. Contrast this song with "Strange Fruit" of 1939.

Related info:

"We Shall Overcome" became the unofficial anthem for the civil rights movement giving strength and support for civil rights workers in all types of situations.

"People Get Ready" was inspired by the March on Washington as an anthem of hope.

**Assessment**

Use the questions for each song to assess the students based upon their response to class discussion or as a written assignment.

**Resources**

## Lyrics

“Strange Fruit” available at

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/strangefruit/film.html>

“Freedom Road” available at

<http://chnm.gmu.edu/episodes/mobilizing-african-americans/>

“We Shall Overcome” available at

<http://www.k-state.edu/english/nelp/american.studies.s98/we.shall.overcome.html>

“People Get Ready” available at

<http://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/p/peoplegetready.shtml>

## General Resources:

California News Reels sells a documentary about Billie Holiday and “Strange Fruit.” The song would become the anthem for anti-lynching campaign

<http://newsreel.org/nav/title.asp?tc=CN0136>

PBS special about the history and lyrics of “Strange Fruit”

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/strangefruit/film.html>

This site offers a collected series of photo postcards of lynching from the 1880s into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<http://withoutsanctuary.org/main.html>

This website tells the story of mobilizing African American for World War II fighting and Langston Hughes lyric’s “I’m marching down freedom’s road.”

<http://chnm.gmu.edu/features/episodes/mobilizingafrica.html>

This website shows a timeline of major civil rights events and links for further information.

<http://www.infoplease.com/spot/civilrightstimeline1.html>

Website dedicated to the civil rights movement.

<http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/civilrights/intro.htm>