

## Optional, Suggested Lesson Plan

# Exploring Themes of Unity, Solidarity and Social Change in the Song, “We Shall Overcome”

### Background information for Teachers

This lesson is designed to explore the universal human experience of music and its ability to stir strong emotions, engage audiences and unite people to take action through the lens of the famous song, “We Shall Overcome.” This lesson can be taught in conjunction with students’ study of other songs and lyrics as vehicles for social change. Additional connections might include Spirituals, Black Church Music, the study of Dr. Martin Luther King’s legacy of peaceful protests, civil rights injustices – past and present, and/or influential musicians who have lent their voices to speak out against social injustices around them. As a launching point for this exploration, the lesson introduces the renowned song, “We Shall Overcome,” which became the anthem of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s and explores its historical significance today.

<b>Target Level: Grades 4 – 8</b>
<b>Time Allotment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 60 -120 minutes over 1- 4 lessons</li></ul>
<b>Enduring Understandings</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Songs are authentic ways to express ideas close to people’s hearts</li><li>• Songs can offer reassurance and solidarity with others</li></ul>

**Objectives:****Students will be able to:**

- Students will learn the historical context of music in the Civil Rights Movement through the words and music of important historical figures.
- Students will explore questions they might have about music and the Civil Rights period.
- Students will understand the meaning of key terms related to the singing of “We Shall Overcome” as a vehicle for social change: Overcome, Injustice, Civil Rights, Solidarity, Non-Violent Resistance.

**Key Vocabulary:**

- Overcome
- Injustice
- Civil Rights
- Solidarity
- Non-Violent Resistance

**Washington OSPI Music Standards 2017 Performance Standards:**

- **(MU: Pr4.2.5)**
  - a. Demonstrate understanding of the structure and elements of music (such as rhythm, pitch, form, and harmony) in music selected for performance.
  - b. When analyzing selected music, read and perform using standard notation.
  - c. Explain how context (such as social, cultural, and historical) informs performances.
- **MU: Re7.2.4**
  - a. Demonstrate and explain how responses to music are informed by the structure, the use of the elements of music and context (such as social and cultural).

**Lesson Plan Outline**

- Opening - Play a recording of the song, We Shall Overcome.
- Guided Practice - Ask questions about the song. i.e., What did you notice about the song? What were the words? Did you hear a part that repeated? How many verses did you hear?
- Direct Instruction - Choose historical resources to share with students from the suggested list below. Choose individuals from history who were involved in the Civil Rights Movement and provide background information.
- Independent Practice - Student personal reflection. What is going on in our world today that relates to this song?

## Materials

1. Washington Music Educators. (2021, March 30). We Shall Overcome from the WMEA Junior All-State Files. Lynnwood, WA. (Additional lyrics to verses: We'll walk hand in hand; We are not afraid; Truth shall set us free etc.,.)  
<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1MQOngXJCQEz9hswWUWiWtNhm6grkfFfC?usp=sharing>

## Suggested Recordings:

1. 1997 The Freedom Singers. (n.d.). We Shall Overcome, The Freedom Singers, From Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs; 1960 - 1966. Smithsonian Folkways. <https://folkways.si.edu/the-freedom-singers/we-shall-overcome/african-american-music-documentary-struggle-protest/track/smithsonian>
2. The Montgomery Gospel Trio, The Nashville Quartet and Guy Carowan. (1961). We Shall Overcome: Songs of the Freedom Riders and Sit-Ins. Smithsonian Folkways  
<https://folkways.si.edu/we-shall-overcome-songs-of-the-freedom-riders-and-the-sit-ins/african-american-music-american-history-historical-song-struggle-protest/album/smithsonian> .
3. Chicago Freedom Movement 1964. (n.d.). *Mahalia Jackson sings, "We Shall Overcome."*  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYR\\_XLCYX6k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYR_XLCYX6k) .
4. (n.d.). *Joan Biaz Sings "We Shall Overcome" at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in Washington D.C. on August 28, 1963.*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7akuOFp-ET8> .
5. (2020). *The Aeolians Oakwood University Alumni 2020 sing "We Shall Overcome."*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBtmPiCgToI>.
6. (2020, September 4). *We Shall Overcome (SATB) (arr. Shelton Ridge Love) ft. Ruth Crumley-Perry.* YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4spXKc57A8&t=171s> .

## Suggested Articles:

1. We Shall Overcome The Story Behind the Song. (n.d.). *The Kennedy Center.*  
<https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/resources-for-educators/classroom-resources/media-and-interactives/media/music/story-behind-the-song/the-story-behind-the-song/we-shall-overcome/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CWe'll%20Overcome%E2%80%9D%20first,Simmons%2C%20one%20of%20the%20strikers.>
2. Graham, D. A. (2019, May 9). *The Surprising History of "We Shall Overcome."*  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/05/we-shall-overcome/392837/> .

3. Adams, N. (2013, August 28). The Inspiring Force of “We Shall Overcome.” *National Public Radio*. <https://www.npr.org/2013/08/28/216482943/the-inspiring-force-of-we-shall-overcome>.
4. Mazley, E. (2021, January 12). 25 Songs of Social Justice, Freedom, Civil Rights and Hope to Honor Black History Month. *AZCentral*. <https://www.azcentral.com/story/entertainment/music/2021/01/12/best-civil-rights-protest-songs/6602985002/> .

### **Suggested Videos:**

1. Deez, Genie. (2020). *The History of “We Shall Overcome.”* <https://youtu.be/WXDU3n4HTTY>.
2. Public Broadcasting Service. (2020). *The role of music in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DwmOADOVLGA> .
3. (n.d.). *Martin Luther King Jr. Delivers “We Shall Overcome” Speech March 31, 1968 at the National Cathedral in Washington D.C.* <https://wordsmusicandstories.wordpress.com/2019/11/25/we-shall-overcome-by-martin-luther-king-jr/> .

### **Suggested Children’s Books:**

1. Rappaport, D. (2007). *Martin’s Big Words: The Life of Martin Luther King Jr.* Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.
2. Jazunka, K. (2015). *Martin Luther King Jr*; National Geographic Readers.
3. Jazunka, K. (2015). *Rosa Parks*; National Geographic Readers.

### **Voice & Choice: Suggested Student Questions:**

1. What did you notice about the song?
  - a. What were the words?
  - b. Did you hear a part that was repeated?
  - c. How many verses did you hear?
2. What is the historical significance of We Shall Overcome?
  - a. When was it sung?
  - b. What did it sound like?
  - c. What are the lyrics of the verses and what do they mean to you?
  - d. What was something that surprised you about the song?
3. Who were some of the song writers/artists who were involved in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950’s and 1960’s?
  - a. What were names of other songs sung during the Civil Rights Movement and what did they sound like?

4. What is going on in our world today that relates to this song?
  - a. Which of these events are you passionate about?
  
5. What are some of today's song writers or artists who speak out against these events or injustices?
  
6. What is a song, poem or slogan that is personally meaningful to you?
  - a. What emotions does it instill in you? (i.e. hope, courage, resolve, solidarity)

