

The Impact of Motown (High School)

Rationale

This 50-minute lesson is intended to help students identify the impact that Motown music and its artists had on the 20th century as well as today's popular music culture. The lesson aims at increasing the basic comprehension of social issues of the 1950/60s and the influential role that Motown played in social change.

Inspiration

"We stuck to who we were at Motown, and the world came around."

Berry Gordy Jr.- Founder of Motown Records

Mastery Objectives

- Students will identify and examine social issues of the 1950/60s.
- Students will relate and compare issues and challenges of today's social climate to those of the past.
- Students will explore "The Sound of Young America" label that is synonymous with Motown.

Standards Addressed

National Standards for Music Education

- Grade 9-12, Music Standard 9
 - Students classify by genre or style and by historical period or culture unfamiliar but representative aural examples of music and explain the reasoning behind their classifications
 - Students identify sources of American music genres (e.g., swing, Broadway musical, blues) trace the evolution of those genres, and cite well-known musicians associated with them

National Standards for History

- Era 9 Postwar United States (1945 to early 1970s)
 - Standard 4: The struggle for racial and gender equality and the extension of civil liberties
- Era 10 Contemporary United States (1968 to the present)
 - Economic, social and cultural developments in contemporary United States

Materials

- Whiteboard or a place to write items for everyone to see.
- Attached lyric sheet for “War” as performed by Edwin Starr
 - Audio and/or video of “War” as performed by Edwin Starr
- Attached article “The Social Impact of Motown Music in American Culture” by Christina Pomoni
- Attached Journal Reflection Activity

Procedure

1. Introduction

Ask the students to imagine the 1950s.

- What types of clothes did people wear?
- What kinds of cars people drive? What did they look like?
- What type of music was playing on the radio?
- What was on television?
- What were some of the social issues of the 50s?

Make a list of the general overall themes on one side of a writing space/board.

Now ask the students to answer these same questions for today (a list of compare/contrast).

Make a list of these themes on the other side of the writing space/board.

2. Building Meaning

Inform the students that Motown, founded in 1959, was the first record label that was owned by an African-American. The founder Berry Gordy Jr. established the label to initially promote African-American musicians and songwriters.

Return to the list created at the beginning of the lesson and ask the students:

- What might have been some of the challenges to this way of business in the 1950s given the items that we’ve identified? (Remind the students that racial tensions were at an all time high and that the United States was still struggling with racial equality during the mid-1950s).

Ask the students:

- In a business that attempts to sell product to a wide audience, what might be some obstacles that Motown might have faced?

With the responses to the list of themes of today, ask the students if they can think of any companies today that are largely owned by or targets African-American and/or other minority groups. Some answers might include: FUBU, BET, Telemundo, Univision, etc... Continue this line of questioning by challenging students to determine if there are any similar obstacles facing businesses of this nature in today's social climate.

- Are all obstacles gone? Are the obstacles different today?
- If so, what are they? (Encourage the students to think critically and beyond their own personal experiences)

3. Advanced Thinking

Inform the students that Motown records had numerous hit songs and was labeled as "The Sound of Young America". Ask the students:

- What this might have meant?
- What "Young America" was being referenced here? (Answer: Baby Boomers)

Have the students list 5 changes that happened in American culture during the 1960s. Some areas that might spark ideas: Vietnam Conflict, Martin Luther King Jr., the Moon Landing, J.F. Kennedy, etc...

Have the students discuss what types of music came out of the 1960s. At some point, ask the students if there are any songs of war protest that comes to mind during this period.

Distribute the attached lyrics of "War" as performed by Edwin Starr handout. Listen to a recording of this selection and/or view the selected video at the following YouTube web address: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_d8C4AIFgUg

Ask the students for initial responses to the lyrics and/or video of this song. Ask the students:

- Do you feel that this protest song (and/or video) is effective as a protest song?
- Ask the students how this protest song might have spoken directly to "Young America" of this time? (Consider the draft when guiding responses)

Pass out the attached article "The Social Impact of Motown Music in American Culture" by Christina Pomoni and have the students read this article.

Have students complete the Journal Reflection Activity

War - Edwin Starr

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| <p>War, huh, yeah What is it good for Absolutely nothing Uh-huh</p> <p>Ohhh, war, I despise Because it means destruction Of innocent lives War means tears To thousands of mothers eyes When their sons go to fight And lose their lives</p> <p>I said, war, huh Good God, y'all What is it good for Absolutely nothing Say it again</p> <p>War, whoa, Lord What is it good for Absolutely nothing Listen to me</p> <p>War, it ain't nothing But a heartbreaker War, friend only to the undertaker Ooooh, war It's an enemy to all mankind The point of war blows my mind War has caused unrest Within the younger generation Induction then destruction Who wants to die</p> <p>Aaaaah, war-huh Good God y'all What is it good for ...</p> | <p>Aaaaah, war-huh Good God y'all What is it good for ...</p> <p>War, it ain't nothing but a heartbreaker War, it's got one friend That's the undertaker Ooooh, war, has shattered Many a young man's dreams Made him disabled, bitter and mean Life is much too short and precious To spend fighting wars these days War can't give life It can only take it away</p> <p>War, it ain't nothing but a heartbreaker War, friend only to the undertaker Peace, love and understanding Tell me, is there no place for them today They say we must fight to keep our freedom But Lord knows there's got to be a better way</p> <p>Ooooooh, war, huh Good God y'all What is it good for You tell me Say it, say it, say it, say it</p> <p>War, huh Good God y'all What is it good for Stand up and shout it Nothing</p> <p>YouTube Video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_d8C4AIFgUg</p> |
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The Social Impact of Motown Music in American Culture

Christina Pomoni

Music echoes social changes and as such it bears the weight of the expression of the people. In the 1950s, in the fear of racial segregation, black communities were still fighting for their right to social freedom. The founding of Motown Records in Detroit in 1959 joined the ardent opposition of the civil rights movement to racial, social, economical and political discrimination and individual, police and mass violence against black people. By assembling an impressive roster of talented artists, Motown managed to break down the social and racial barriers and become the most important independent record label of the early 1960s in the history of pop music.

Racism was extremely present in the lives and careers of American black artists and musicians in the 1950s. However, even before Motown, there had been examples of successful black musicians such as Jackie Wilson, who had topped the Billboard Top 40 chart countless times between 1958 and 1963, and Ruth Brown, who had sold more albums than any other artist in the 1950s with Atlantic Records. But, Motown managed to bring all available talent together, under one record label, and at the same time, to associate its birth and success with the broader socio-political setting of its era.

Echoing the frustration of black people in the turbulent setting of the mid-1950s in the United States, Motown associated music with black civil rights struggle by being the first record label owned by an African-American. Under the leadership of Berry Gordy Jr., who aspired to bridge the gap of racial discrimination by producing music that could appeal to all people, regardless of the color of their skin, Motown became a vehicle of black pride and self-expression. Besides, the broad appeal of Motown integrated the political and cultural aspects of the broader socio-political environment and associated music and the right of black communities to social equality.

Through the creation of a distinctive soul sound with obvious elements of pop influence, Motown produced unique dance music featuring artists such as The Jackson Five, The Supremes, Smokey Robinson, Stevie Wonder,

Marvin Gaye and many others. What became known as The Motown Sound was much more than great music full of energy and emotion. The tambourines that enhanced the back beat; the melodic bass guitar slides that anchored the gospel vocals; the chord and horn sections; all orchestrated in innovative pop production techniques was the way of black community to artistic expression and financial freedom.

Motown's recording of Martin Luther King's 'I have a Dream' speech, delivered on August 28, 1963 in Detroit on 'The Great March for Freedom' is considered the most important contribution of Motown to the civil rights struggle. King declared the March as 'the largest and greatest demonstration for freedom ever held in the United States' and Gordy realized the historical importance of that March before taking its historical place with the American Revolution. That recording was made so that every American child, black or white, could listen to history. Although, until then, Motown was not really involved in political issues, in the altering political climate it released 'Down To Earth' by Stevie Wonder (1966), 'Love Child' by The Supremes (1968), 'War', by Edwin Starr (1969), and 'What's Going On?' by Marvin Gaye (1971), beginning a trend for message songs.

The 1967 Detroit riots led Motown to the production of music that could evoke radical sentiments and drastic action. However, because the city upheavals had rather a class than racial character, which undermined to a certain extent Motown's aspiration of being a vehicle of improvement for the black community, they actually marked the end of an incredible era. The decline of Detroit and the auto industry as a result of the struggle of the poor against the rich was bound up with the decreasing energy of the people who produced the Motown Sound. Marvin Gaye's surprise 'With the world exploding around me, how am I supposed to keep singing love songs?' echoed the reality of an era, full of social problems and contradiction that were evolving with explosive energy.

In reality, Motown created the grounds on which broader cultural integration would follow in the 1970s with the emergence of hip-hop as a massive cultural phenomenon. Through the mixing of astonishing percussion riffs and rhythmic drum breaks of funk and disco elements, hip-hop expressed political speech and opposition to social inequality and discrimination against African-Americans. For many, Motown has emphasized on race relations and community life as a means to create an impact on popular music and social structure.

http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/2155721/the_social_impact_of_motown_music_in.html

Journal Reflection Activity

1. Motown was labeled “The Sound of Young America”. IF you were born between the mid-1970s to the early 2000s, you are considered to be part of the Echo Boom Generation. The term “Echo Boom” identifies that this generation is the second largest in size behind the Baby Boomers. What do the artists of today share in common with those of the Baby Boomers (your parents)?

2. The music of Motown blazed new grounds for African-American artists as well as becoming a voice for the anti-war protest movement of the 1960s. How do you think this may have changed the world we live in today?

3. The artists of Motown during the 1950s had many social issues to navigate. What sorts of social issues do you think would be the most challenging and why?