



# BEHIND THE MUSIC

## Behind the Music: Music in America 1972

VH1 Music Studio  
Cable in the Classroom

Lessons for High School Music Classes

Artistic Influence

Lesson 3

[Note to Teachers: This series of lessons covers music that rose to popularity during conflict in the United States over participation in the Vietnam War. Some of the topics may address social change, the sexual revolution, and drug culture. If your curriculum is subject to restrictions on the topic, you should review the videotape before using it in the classroom.]

The decline of the peace movement is addressed in the four lessons accompanying Behind the Music: Music in America 1972. The peace movement arose in the 1960s in response to the Vietnam War, but as U.S. combat troops were being withdrawn, the peace movement lost energy. This program explores the overall cultural transition of the time and its reflection in popular musicians and music turning inward for themes.

### Objective

Students will discuss how musicians' messages can influence society

Students will discuss how musicians might effect change in society through artistic control of their music and message

National Standards 9— Understanding music in relation to history and culture.

## Materials

VHS VCR Player

Television

VH1 Cable in the Classroom program Behind the Music: Music in America 1972

Web-based lesson materials

Teacher-provided recording of either Curtis Mayfield's "Freddie's Dead" or "Superfly," and Stevie Wonder's "Superstition."

Audio-playback equipment

## Procedures

1. Cue Behind the Music: Music in America 1972 video to [17:30] so it will be ready for you to play in step 4.
2. As students enter the classroom, have playing a recording of one of the suggested Curtis Mayfield songs. Then play Stevie Wonder's "Superstition."
3. Ask students if they know the songs and the artists who are singing. Tell students that the artists they have been hearing broke new ground for African American musicians in the recording and movie industry in 1972.
4. Tell students they are going to watch a segment from the program Behind the Music: Music in America 1972 about Curtis Mayfield and Stevie Wonder. Tell students that they will be asked to name the artist who wrote the score to the movie "Superfly." [17:30 through 20:49].
5. Stop program.
6. Ask students if any have heard of or seen the 1972 movie "Superfly." Ask them what musician wrote the film's score. Briefly discuss with them the some significant points of the film, including:

First "blaxploitation" film financed entirely by African Americans. (Blaxploitation is a term coined in the early 1970s to describe Hollywood-sponsored thrillers and action movies, generally with African Americans cast as the main characters.)

Director Gordon Parks hired film crew that was nearly all African American.

Gritty tone distinguished it from Hollywood-sponsored "blaxploitation" films that tried to imitated it.

Main character, a Harlem drug pusher, portrayed as leading an alluring lifestyle of wealth that elicited respect from his neighborhood.
7. Ask students if they recall from the program who wrote the "Superfly" film score. (Curtis Mayfield.)
8. Lead students in a discussion of the message of the "Superfly" score. Refer to the following:

In the narration, Curtis Mayfield speaks of his dismay upon seeing the visuals: "I saw the actual visual and it was almost like a cocaine commercial."

Mayfield “countered with songs that condemned cocaine’s use” and composed the lyrics and music to act as an “angel on the shoulder--one’s conscience.”

Mayfield scored the film so the message in the music was in direct contrast to a drug-dealing lifestyle depicted as attractive.

9. Ask students how Mayfield’s film compositions signified his artistic freedom and ability to reflect unwelcome truth about some aspects of society in music. Do students think hearing the music’s message may have influenced people who were seeing an opposite message on the screen.

10. Ask students what other example of artistic freedom is discussed in the video segment. The following points may be brought into the discussion:

The narration credits Stevie Wonder as being one of the first African American musicians to win complete control over his music. He was one of Motown’s finest artists, for nine years recording number one singles--a majority of which he wrote himself. Most of his albums during the 60s consisted of a few hit singles combined with pleasant filler.

But Wonder was increasingly allowed to record songs that showed his growing social consciousness. And he began writing songs for other Motown artists. With this growing creativity, Wonder was feeling constrained by the strict Motown recording contracts.

When Wonder’s Motown contract expired in 1971, he recorded two albums by himself and used them as a bargaining tool during contract negotiations. Motown granted him total artistic control of his albums and rights to his own songs and the 1972 albums “Music of My Mind” and “Talking Book” (with “Superstition”) were produced.

11. Review with students the words of author Robert Greenfield interviewed in the video segment as he discussed Wonder’s blazing a trail across racial divides.

“I remember Stevie’s band playing it [”Superstition”] in Mobile, Alabama. Every kid in the hall is white and they are going nuts for a black man playing “Superstition.” That’s how social change occurs in America.”

12. Ask students what they think Greenfield meant in his statement about how social change occurs in America. Ask students if they agree with Greenfield.

13. Ask students to think of examples of artistic expression in music, the visual arts, dance, and theater that can lead to a society’s self-examination.

## Extensions

1. Have students research the musical and social contributions and impact of Stevie Wonder or Curtis Mayfield. Have them use the school library and Internet for their information. Then have them report to the class orally their findings that include the artist's musical roots, first recordings, and major musical accomplishments.
2. Have students find the lyrics to one of three songs, "Freddie's Dead," "Superfly," or "Superstition." Have them be prepared to report orally to the class on the message told in the song and if they think it is effective in getting its message across.

This lesson was developed by Dee Spencer, professor of music at San Francisco State University and Willie Hill, president-elect of MENC: The National Association for Music Education and director of the University Fine Arts Center at University of Massachusetts-Amherst in collaboration with



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