



## **VH1 Legends**

**Sam Cooke**  
**VH1 Music Studio**  
**Cable in the Classroom**

**Lesson for Music Classes, Grades 7-12**  
**Lesson 2**

Note to Teachers: The content of the videotape may be found, in many communities, to be inappropriate for classroom use because of references, consistent with the era portrayed, to sexual, political, and violent lyrics and acts. You are strongly encouraged to review this program before presenting it to your students.

## **Objective**

- Students will discuss the gospel music style.
- Students will discuss the reasons and controversy regarding Sam Cooke's transition from gospel to pop.
- Students will discuss and compare elements of music common to different styles and genres.

National Standards:

6. Listening to, analyzing, and describing music.
7. Evaluating music and music performances.
9. Understanding music in relation to history and culture.

## **Materials**

- VHS VCR Player
- Television
- VH1 Legends: Sam Cooke program
- Web-based lesson materials
- Teacher selected recordings of traditional gospel solo artists (i.e. Mahalia Jackson, Clara Ward) and Sam Cooke with the Highway QCs or the Soul Stirrers (ex. see segment 1 of program, "Jesus Gave Me Water")

Prior Knowledge:

- Students are familiar with the concepts of harmony, melody, rhythm, syncopation, and improvisation.

## Procedures

1. Play teacher selected recording of an all male gospel group as students enter the classroom (See “Materials” above for suggestions.) When students are seated, ask them to identify the style of music they have just heard. Begin the class with an overview of gospel music and the style of quartet singing. To offer a comparison of gospel styles, the teacher may select a recording of a traditional gospel solo artist and one by Sam Cooke singing with one of the quartets. Use the following as needed:

Gospel music, in general, played an important role during the Civil Rights Movement. Many of the songs used in protests and marches were taken from spirituals and gospel music. Gospel music came on the scene around 1930 with Thomas A. Dorsey, former blues pianist, who was proclaimed as the “Father of Gospel.” Quartet singing is one of the oldest types of music. These groups were usually made up of male singers, who used traditional harmonies and the natural resources of hand-clapping, foot-tapping, hip-slapping body percussive rhythms. The groups became popular and traveled extensively, paving the way for other gospel groups of all genres. Sam Cooke got his start singing with two groups such as these, the Highway QC’s and the Soul Stirrers, after moving to Chicago, Illinois. His excellent and unique vocal production and style met with the approval of musicians and music lovers around the world.

Refer also to the following past lesson plans for additional information about spirituals and gospel music: Say It Loud! A Celebration of Black Music in America, specifically “Can I Get a Witness” Lessons two and three VH1 Legends: Aretha Franklin, Lesson one

2. Show VH1 Legends: Sam Cooke, Segment 2, the transition from gospel to pop.

3. Lead students in a discussion of the difficulties artists faced when deciding to “switch” from gospel to pop music. Why might they have made those decisions? Why were Sam Cooke and his peers who also made the transition criticized so severely by the religious community (his roots were established in the religious community, churches thought of him as a sell-out, etc.)? Are there any contemporary artists who have made a similar transition, or work in two or more musical genres (i.e. many country artists), and are they met with the same opposition? Use the following as needed to supplement the discussion:

Many well-known gospel artists who got their start in the church made a transition to R&B and popular music. These artists often felt that there were more economic advantages to working in popular music, and that more opportunities would be available to them. Some of these artists include Aretha Franklin, Lou Rawls, Whitney Houston, Donny Hathaway, Jennifer Holliday, Ray Charles, and of course, Sam Cooke, and others. However, the effect of the gospel style they began with seems to remain with them throughout their career, and the gospel “flavor” is evident in their music. Artists who made this transition from gospel to pop were considered “cross-over” artists. They were often criticized by the church and religious world, and encountered a great deal of musical controversy. Gospel music is deeply rooted in the African characteristics that filter throughout all of the other forms of music of African descent, such as the blues, ragtime, jazz, etc. These characteristics are cross rhythms, syncopation, improvisation (the basic ingredient in gospel, as in jazz), and call and response. One

hears these elements in gospel, whether traditional or contemporary.

4. Remind students of comments made by Aretha Franklin during the program. She, too, was one who made a transition to pop and R&B. Lead students in a discussion of her background and musical style. How did Sam Cooke help to pave the way for other artists such as Aretha Franklin to “cross-over”?

NOTE: Teachers may wish to refer to the lesson series “VH1 Legends: Aretha Franklin” ( <http://www.vh1musicstudio.com/supplies/aretha/aretha-1.html>) for additional lesson material and information.

5. Lead students in a discussion of the musical elements found in gospel music that are also found in R&B and pop (improvisation, syncopation, instrumentation, rhythmic and harmonic textures, etc.). How might these similarities have made the transition from one vocal style to another an easy one to make? Referring to step 3, have students briefly discuss why the contemporary cross-over artists they named earlier do or do not make smooth transitions.

6. Have students briefly comment on Sam Cooke’s stage presence, persona, and performance style (charismatic, energetic, good looking, sophisticated, etc.). How did these innate skills attribute to his easy transition from one musical genre to another?

7. Show VH1 Legends: Sam Cooke, Segment that features “A Change Is Gonna Come.”

8. Ask students to speculate on Sam Cooke’s frame of mind at the time that he wrote “A Change Is Gonna Come.” What was going on socially and politically at the time? What personal events were affecting him? Why might he have written this song? (This will be a review if students have participated in Lesson 1.)

9. Draw students’ attention to the suggestion that Cooke returned to his gospel roots for “A Change Is Gonna Come.” Why did the gospel sound become more evident in this song? Could this have been intentional on his part? Does the gospel style better convey the emotions he was trying to express? Ask students if the intent of the song would have been conveyed as well through another musical style.

#### National Standards for Music Education

1. Singing, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music.
2. Performing on instruments, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music.
3. Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments.
4. Composing and arranging music within specified guidelines.
5. Reading and notating music.
6. Listening to, analyzing, and describing music.
7. Evaluating music and music performances.
8. Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts.
9. Understanding music in relation to history and culture.

These standards-based materials are provided through a partnership with MENC: The National Association for Music Education. This lesson plan was created by MENC member Dr. Joan R. Hillsman, Ph.D, Professor of Music, Bowie State University, Bowie, MD.



VH1, in partnership with Cable in the Classroom, collaborated with MENC: The National Association for Music Education to develop this series of lessons.