

Runaway Slaves

Contributed by Gail Price, Orange High School, Pepper Pike, OH

Rationale

The Underground Railroad was a significant part of American History. It served as a lifeline to hundreds of slaves who risked their lives to escape the horrors of bondage. Through readings of primary sources and listening to music, students will gain a better understanding of how slaves pursued their “freedom” by stealing away to “Follow The Drinking Gourd” to the north and to freedom.

Objectives

During the lesson, students will:

1. listen to the slave spiritual “Follow the Drinking Gourd” and analyze the lyrics.
2. listen to the song “Freedom” by Richie Havens and evaluate what freedoms they cannot bear to live without.
3. determine at what point they would risk everything, like the runaway slaves, for freedom.
4. compare and contrast the lives of slaves in the middle 1800’s to the live of people who are struggling for freedom today.
5. utilize their own choices of popular music to describe struggles for freedom today.

Audience

Suggested for middle school American History students.

Time Frame

The lesson should take two 40-50 minutes class periods.

Materials

TV/VCR and copy of the PBS video *The Freedom Station* (produced by Scott Hilton, Davis and Cheryl Magill, 1988, Ohio Educational Broadcasting Network Commission, WVIZ). CD/tape player and music/lyrics to selected songs.

Procedures

The following lesson would be part of a unit on slavery that would include readings, videos and music. Students can also be reading historical fiction in English class to enhance their knowledge of the Underground Railroad.

1. Play the song “Follow The Drinking Gourd” to explain how the “passengers” of the underground railroad used the stars to navigate their way north. Allow students time to discuss the lyrics and imagine how slaves felt.

2. Play Richie Havens' "Freedom" as an example of people's desire to be free. Let students read the lyrics as the song plays.
3. Put students in small groups and have them rank the freedoms they feel were most important to runaway slaves. Then have them list what freedoms they consider most important to them today. What is the same and what is different? Share them with the class.
4. For homework students are to find music that describes either slavery, struggles for freedom or the African American experience today.
5. [Day 2] Have students share their music along with their reasons for choosing the selection. After each selection, there can be class discussion on whether the music describes the subject being studied.
6. Show the video *The Freedom Station*, an excellent example of how young teens, both black and white, experienced the slaves' escapes.

Evaluation/Assessment

At the end of the lesson, have students write an essay comparing and contrasting the experiences of runaway slaves to the experiences of people who don't have "freedom" today. How is it the same and how is it different? Give examples to defend their positions. Assessment should be made on how well students support their arguments.

Selected Recordings

"Follow The Drinking Gourd" slave spiritual, Richie Havens, *Songs of the Civil War* (Columbia, 1991) from the PBS Special, Ken Burns' Civil War

"Freedom" performed by Richie Havens, *The Best of Richie Havens-Resume* (Rhino, 1993) - same lyrics as "Motherless Child" traditional spiritual

Students will also provide recordings.

Enrichment/Additional Resources

1. Investigate if there were any underground railroads in your area. Information can be found at your local historical museum.
2. Use the worldwide web to find out more about the underground railroad. Web sites can be located at: <http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground/>

Source: The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (<http://www.rockhall.com/teacher/sti-lesson-19/>)