

## September 15, 1963

### Overview

Sunday, September 15, 1963 brought the world together as they mourned the loss of six young lives as a result of senseless murders. No matter your race or religion; no matter your politics or social status – everyone paused upon hearing that the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was bombed, killing four little girls and providing a whole new perspective on how deeply one can hate. Killed by the blasts that morning were Addie Mae Collins, 14; Denise McNair, 11; Carole Robertson, 14; and Cynthia (Morris) Wesley, 14. While this event received a great deal of attention, as it rightly deserved, there were two young men who were also killed that day, and are oftentimes left out of the tale.

16-year old Johnny Robinson was shot in the back and killed by a police officer during the chaos which ensued after the explosion. 13-year old Virgil Ware was the sixth child to be killed that day; shot in the chest and the cheek while riding on the handle bars of his brother's bicycle.

Following this shocking event, some musicians wrote about it. Music always has been a part of political movements. The civil rights movement was once described as the greatest singing movement in our nation's history. Many of the songs grew out of the rich culture of the black churches in the South and fit different moods and situations: Songs for joy. Songs for sorrow. Songs for determination. Songs for irony. Songs for humor. Songs to get you past the fear. Songs to celebrate.

### Learning Objectives

At the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- recognize and discuss the role of protest songs in the Birmingham movement.
- identify their own social agendas and consider their own songs.

### Warm Up: Music & Your Life:

- How many hours a week do you think you spend listening to music?
- How much time do you spend making music yourself?
- How much time do you spend hearing live music?
- Of the recorded music you listen to, what types of machines and technology do you use to listen to it? How might this compare to how your grandparents listened to music in their youth? (No portable equipment, no CD's etc.) What inventions of the 20th century most affected the listening public?
- If none of these technologies were available to you, how do you think your life would be different?

### Procedures/Activities

Pick one of the following two songs to use for this activity:

- Joan Baez sings 'Birmingham Sunday' from her 1964 Vanguard album 'Joan/5'. This song was written by Richard Fariña.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zITt4lrqU&ab\\_channel=GaryLarson](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zITt4lrqU&ab_channel=GaryLarson)

- John Coltrane composed "Alabama" that appears on his album Live at Birdland (1963).

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXXS7knc\\_Uo&ab\\_channel=studiosoundworks](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXXS7knc_Uo&ab_channel=studiosoundworks)

**Write down your reaction to those songs? What do you think the artist wanted you to FEEL?**

### **Music in Birmingham**

A historical moment that shows how music can help change the world for the better. In the summer of 1963, it appeared that the Civil Rights Movement had stalled in Birmingham, Alabama. Adults there found that their involvement in the movement brought economic threats to their families, and caused them to worry about their ability to pay their bills.

The Rev. James Bevel, one of the founders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), came up with an idea: Let the children march. And, after receiving training in nonviolence, Birmingham's young people did just that. The children of Birmingham sang a new song that summer. It went to the tune of "The Old Gray Mare." The fusion of marching and song was strategic. The Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, speaking to the young people about nonviolence, had said, "It's to be a silent demonstration. No songs, no slogans, no replies to obscenities." Everyone nodded in agreement. "However," Shuttlesworth added, "when you're arrested, sing your hearts out." That's exactly what happened. So when a police officer shouted, "You're all under arrest!" hundreds of voices united in song:

"Ain't a-scared of your jail, 'cause I want my freedom,  
I want my freedom,  
I want my freedom.  
Ain't a-scared of your jail, 'cause I want my freedom,  
I want my freedom now!"

They went on to sing other verses, beginning...

"Ain't a-scared of your dogs, 'cause ...

"Ain't a-scared of your hose, 'cause ..."

Take a moment and write down at least five social issues that deeply concern you. If you are stuck, here are some to consider poverty, joblessness, police violence, the hungry, eating disorders, sexual harassment, bullying, race relations, peace, etc.

**Now, think about how you could write a song to a known tune that helps support that goal. Do you think this sort of tactic would be effective? What would the goal be in writing a simple song with simple lyrics?**