LESSON 1: "SOUL MAN" AND IDENTITY

"Soul Man"

was written by Isaac Hayes and David Porter and performed by Sam & Dave (1967)

Introduction

In this lesson, students will be introduced to the song "Soul Man," which was written by Isaac Hayes and David Porter and originally performed and popularized by Sam & Dave. The upbeat melody and lyrics may be familiar to many students, but they may not know that the song was inspired by a tragic moment in US history: the Detroit Riots of 1967. At a time when the American media often linked the black urban working class to crime and violence, Hayes and Porter celebrated a proud, hard working "Soul Man."

Facing History Theme(s): Identity; Individual and Society

Essential Questions

- How do we shape our own identities?

- How do stereotypes influence the way we see ourselves and others?

- What can individuals and groups do to counter negative images, ideas, and stereotypes?

Guiding Questions

- What sorts of responses can an individual have to injustice? Can making or listening to music be one of these responses? How so?

- Why was it important for Hayes and Porter to define a "soul man" or a "soul brother" in a positive way

Objectives

- Students will use the song's lyrics as a primary text for analysis.

- Students will briefly explore the influence of the media coverage of the1967 Detroit Riots as well as the implications of the Kerner Commission Report, and consider to what extent the song "Soul Man" was a response to the times.

- Students will consider the choices made by the artists responsible for "Soul Man" and reflect on their own connections to the text.

Common Core Anchor Standards for Reading (R), Writing (W), and Speaking and Listening (SL)

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1—Citing Textual Evidence

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.2—Theme/Central Idea

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.3—Plot & Character/Process

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.5—Text Structure

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.6—Point of View/Purpose in a Text(s)
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7—Comparing Different Media
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1—Collaborative Discussion
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.2—Interpreting Information in Diverse Media

Outcomes/Assessment

Students will create a visual representation of the singer, as well as themselves.

Media/Resource List

- Handout 1: "Soul Man" Lyrics
- Handout 2: "Soul Man" Historical Background
- Handout 3 (Image): "Soul Brother in Shop Window" from the 1967 Detroit Riots
- Handout 4: Stickman Template
- Text-Dependent Questions for "Soul Man" (Lyrics and Historical Background), see Appendix.
- Film Clip: "Soul Man" as Performed by the Stax Music Academy
- Film Clip: "Two Societies," from *Eyes on the Prize* volume 4, episode 8 [32:12–40:13]. This video may be borrowed from the Facing History and Ourselves Resource Library.
- Film Clip: "The Origin and Meaning of 'Soul Man'" from *Respect Yourself: The Stax Records Story*. Be sure to preview this clip as some language may not be appropriate for your students.
- Description of Kerner Commission Report

Learning Activities:

Warm-up

1. One way to begin the lesson is by having students think about their own identities and perceptions. What influences the way students see themselves? How do they think others see them? What shapes how they think about others? Encourage students to spend some time writing down some answers to these questions. Alternatively, you can ask students to create an identity chart mapping the many factors that shape who we are as individuals and as members of groups.

2. Ask students to share their ideas with partners, small groups, or the whole class. If working in smaller groups, remind students that they have choices about sharing these personal details with the whole class.

Analyzing the Lyrics

3. Some teachers prefer that students respond to the lyrics before they've learned about the song's background. After that, teachers fill in some detail, permitting students to offer quite different reactions to the song.

4. Distribute copies of the lyrics to "Soul Man" (Handout 1) for students to follow as they watch the film clip.

5. As they watch, students may annotate the lyrics by marking any lines that they connect with. At the conclusion of the song, have students share memorable lines first with a partner, then with the whole class. Are there words and phrases that students do not understand? Confusion will probably fade as students learn more about the context in which the song was written.

6. Engage in a close reading of the lyrics. You may choose to have students respond to those questions—individually, in pairs, or in small groups. (In the appendix we have provided a series of text-dependent questions to guide readers and assess basic comprehension).

7. Discuss the point of view of the song. Who is the narrator? Describe his character. Who is he addressing?

8. Work with the class to create an identity chart for the narrator of the song. You may find it useful to refer to an example from the Facing History and Ourselves website. Using textual evidence, including lyrics, have students consider words and phrases that describe the narrator. We will return to the chart at the end of the next section to add more detail.

Historical Context/Deeper Understandings

9. Share with your students some information about the era when the song was written, using the Historical Background resource (Handout 2) and the photograph (Handout 3). Have them answer the text-dependent questions for Lesson 1. To understand the song in its time, it is important to understand that "Soul Man" was written during the civil rights movement when tensions over injustice too often found expression in large-scale rioting and violence.

10. To provide additional background, watch the excerpt from Eyes on the Prize and *Respect Yourself: The Stax Records Story*. It describes the racial tensions during the sixties in America and the Detroit Riots of 1967. The second clip entitled "The Origin and Meaning of 'Soul Man'" from *Respect Yourself: The Stax Records Story* focuses on "Soul Man" and the different artists who contributed to it. Before watching this second clip, ask your students to listen carefully to the different inspirations and interpretations of "Soul Man" in the excerpt. *Educator's note: Although it is not the focus of this lesson, the entire hour-long Eyes on the Prize episode, entitled "Two Societies," provides useful insights into the riots that scarred a number of US cities in the mid-1960s.*

11. Now that students know more about the song and the period when it was written, have them begin to form an interpretation of the song's message in writing. Consider both the content of the song and its audience. Whom were the artists addressing? What message did they want to convey? You might have students discuss their thoughts in small groups. To assess their responses, consider how students use evidence from the lyrics, film clips, and the background text.

12. As you review the students' interpretations of the song, you may want to consider the following questions: How did the background knowledge influence their understanding of the narrator? What did the songwriters think a "soul man" was? Consider the choices made by Isaac Hayes and David Porter. What were the different ways that they could have responded to the news from Detroit? How did they choose to respond? How did those choices shape the way people responded to the song?

13. Ask students to return to the identity chart they created for the song's narrator. Are there any changes they want to make, now that they've learned a bit about the men who wrote the song and the events that inspired them?

Outcomes

14. Some educators find that students presented with a figure like our stickman template (Handout 4) promptly sketch a portrait of a character known only from words. See what they make of the song's narrator. Does he get a big heart to represent the lyric "good lovin'"? Dirty shoes to represent the lyric "dusty road"? Some may enjoy creating a collage with words and images from magazines or the Internet. As students present their work, ask how "Soul Man" countered negative images of black men.

15. Do students believe the song has a timeless message? Does the music still resonate with them? Which images still feel relevant today? Which feel dated? If they were to write a song with a similar purpose today, what words, images, and ideas would they include? Compare the way that different forms of media can counter stereotypes. For example, what can a song do that cannot be done with a newspaper article or a documentary film?

16. To conclude, you may wish to return to the essential questions at the beginning of the lesson and discuss them based on what we have learned. In particular, have students consider how to react when they feel they are being stereotyped or judged unfairly. What kinds of responses can help break down barriers? What kinds of responses seem to further misunderstandings?

Written by Isaac Hayes and David Porter

Comin' to you on a dusty road
Good lovin', I got a truck load
And when you get it, you got something
So don't worry, 'cause I'm coming

I'm a soul man, I'm a soul man
I'm a soul man, I'm a soul man, I've got it all

Got what I got the hard way
And I'll make it better each and every day
So honey, don't you fret
'Cause you ain't seen nothing yet

I'm a soul man, I'm a soul man, play it, Steve
I'm a soul man, I'm a soul man

I was brought up on a side street, listen now
I learned how to love before I could eat
I was educated at Woodstock[13]
When I start lovin', oh, I can't stop

I'm a soul man, I'm a soul man
I'm a soul man, I'm a soul man

Well, grab the rope and I'll pull you in
Give you hope and be your only boyfriend
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

I'm talkin' about a soul man
I'm a soul man, and you're a soul man
I'm a soul man, oh no, soul man
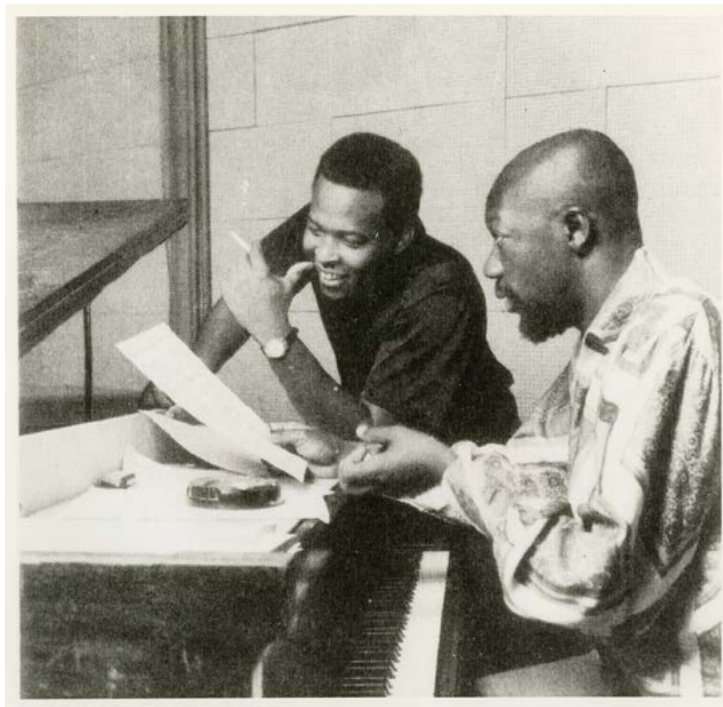I'm a soul man, and you're a soul man

"Soul Man" Historical Background

"Soul Man," written by creative duo Isaac Hayes and David Porter, soared into the popular music charts even as it expressed, at a difficult time, the pride of many black Americans. The song appeared at a crucial moment in the civil rights struggle. City after city was beset by rioting: New York and Philadelphia in 1964, Los Angeles in 1965, and Detroit in 1967—the year the song was written, recorded, and released.

All four cities had large black ghettos, but of the four it was Detroit, with a population 40% black, whose elected officials had long been criticized for failing to deal with increasing racial tensions. But many successful blacks lived in slums because landlords and realtors in other parts of the city shunned them and economic changes in factories contributed to high unemployment leaving many feeling unsettled. For Detroit's black citizens, militancy held a growing appeal. At the same time, a predominantly white police force had a reputation for racist violence. These factors came to a head in July 1967, when a police tactical squad entered a club serving alcohol after hours known as a "blind pig." The event was a reception for black Vietnam War veterans, and when officers tried to make arrests, they met resistance. The confrontation escalated, and residents of neighboring streets began to riot, setting fire to stores known for their discriminatory practices and soon to white owned businesses as a whole.[14]

Isaac Hayes and David Porter work together at Stax Records.
Courtesy of API Photography

According to the PBS documentary *Eyes on the Prize*, "Estimates for the number of injured was as high as six hundred people, four thousand residents had been arrested, five thousand people were homeless, and 682 buildings were damaged. Property loss from fires ran over $45 million."[15]

In the film *Eyes on the Prize*, Ron Scott, a citizen of Detroit, explained what he believed led to the violence: "Inside of most black people, there was a time bomb. There was a pot that was about to overflow, and there was rage that was about to come out. And the rebellion just provided an opportunity for that. I mean, why else would people get upset about the cops raiding the blind pig? They'd done that numerous times before. But people just got tired. People just got tired of it. And it just exploded."[16]

After the riots, President Lyndon Johnson appointed the Kerner Commission to investigate the root causes of the riots. In their report, the authors explained, "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal. What white Americans have never fully understood—but

what the Negro can never forget—is that . . . white institutions created [the ghetto], white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it." The commission recommended that federal funds be allocated to economic empowerment, but the rising cost of the Vietnam War rendered that a political impossibility.[17]

Washington had offered a diagnosis but would struggle to administer a cure. A pair of songwriters took a different approach. Hayes described the inspiration for "Soul Man": "I remember in Detroit, I saw the news flash where they were burning [the neighborhoods]. Where the buildings weren't burnt, people would write 'soul' on the buildings. The big thing was 'soul brother.' So I said, 'Why not do something called "Soul Man" and kind of tell a story about one's struggle to rise above his present conditions.' It's almost a tune [where it's] kind of like boasting I'm a soul man—a pride thing. 'Soul Man' came out of that whole black identification."[18]

In the aftermath of the riots Hayes and Porter made a deliberate decision to counter negative images of black men by focusing on an ordinary person trying to create a better life for himself. The song was a break through hit. "Soul Man" went on to become one of the most popular Stax songs of all time, reaching number two on the Billboard Hot 100 in the fall of 1967 and number one on the Billboard R&B chart for seven weeks in a row in October and November of 1967. It won the GRAMMY® Award for Best Rhythm & Blues Group Performance, Vocal or Instrumental. In *Soulsville, U.S.A.*, Rob Bowman writes, "'Soul Man' was an important record, keying in to the then-newly emergent black consciousness that was perhaps best summed up by the phrase 'black is beautiful.' In 1967 the song became an anthem for black America."[19]

African American store owners protecting their store in the aftermath of the Detroit riots of 1967. Credit: Lee Balterman/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images