

# LESSON 2: BREAKING THE RACIAL BARRIERS

## "GREEN ONIONS"

was written and performed by Booker T. and the MGs (1962).

### Introduction

In this lesson, students will be introduced to Booker T. and the MGs, who were both an independent act and the Stax house band, session musicians who worked in the recording studio with many of the label's stars. Despite performing in an era when much of the South, including Memphis, was segregated, Booker T. and the MGs was a racially integrated band. Students will learn how the group members' passion for music overcame the societal pressures seeking to force them apart.

**Facing History Theme:** Membership (We and They)

### Essential Questions

- What does it mean to belong to a group? How does a person know when he or she belongs?
- How does group membership shape the way we see the world and the way the world sees us?
- What are the conditions that make integration possible, and what gets in the way?

### Guiding Questions

- What societal pressures did the members of Booker T. and the MGs have to confront?
- What were some specific challenges the band faced?
- How did the band persevere despite the racial tensions of the time?

### Objectives

- Students will consider the importance of group collaboration.
- Students will understand the significance of an integrated group during the civil rights era.
- Students will understand Gordon Allport's conditions for intergroup cooperation.
- Students will write from another perspective in order to relate to others.

### 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.4](#)—Word Meaning
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.6](#)—Point of View/Purpose in a Text(s)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1](#)—Collaborative Discussion
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.2](#)—Interpreting Information in Diverse Media
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.3](#)—Writing Narratives

## Outcomes/Assessment

Students will write from the perspective of one of the group's members, using the RAFT (Role, Audience, Format, Topic) strategy.

## Media/Resource List

- [Handout 1](#): “Green Onions” Historical Background
- [Handout 2](#): Gordon Allport’s Contact Hypothesis
- Text-Dependent Questions for “Green Onions” (Historical Background), see Appendix.
- Film Clip: “[Green Onions](#),” as performed by the Stax Music Academy
- Film Clip: “[Musicians Booker T. and the MGs](#)” from *Respect Yourself: The Stax Records Story*.

## Learning Activities

### Warm-up

To begin a lesson on the power of group membership, particularly the power to define who may belong, ask students to think about a time when they or someone they know participated in a group despite the expectations of or pressures from peers, parents, or society. What challenges did the situation present? What were the benefits? We recommend taking time to reflect on those questions in a journal before opening up to a discussion. You might consider a [think-pair-share](#) strategy.

### Analyzing the Music

1. Watch the film clip of "[Green Onions](#)," as performed by the Stax Music Academy. Ask students their initial reactions. What does it remind you of? What stands out?
2. Ask students to identify as many instruments as possible, by both sound and sight. How do the different instruments in the song play off each other? Listen for both solos and times when everyone is playing together. What effect would isolating just one instrument have on the song? What would this song sound like it were performed by just one person? Would it be the same song?

### Historical Context

3. After students have had a chance to focus on the music, deepen the discussion by showing the film clip "[Musicians Booker T. and the MGs](#)." In this clip students will be introduced to the band. Have the students listen to discussions of what held them together. What words do they use to describe their relationships? How do they talk about race and what it meant to be an integrated group in a time of segregation? What, if anything, is surprising?
4. To give students a deeper understanding of the context in which the band wrote "Green Onions," distribute the Historical Background handout ([Handout 1](#)). You may find it helpful to use the [chunking strategy](#) with this particular resource. If you feel your class needs more guidance, you might ask students to answer the [text-dependent questions for Lesson 2](#).
5. Psychologist Gordon Allport studied prejudice and how to resist it. One of his most important ideas, the contact hypothesis, suggests that bringing people from different groups together can help reduce prejudice if certain conditions are met. Present those conditions to your students ([Handout 2](#)). Which of these conditions was met when Booker T. and the MGs got together? Which issues may have presented challenges? Consider other efforts launched at that time that aimed to bring groups together (e.g., school integration, integration of the armed forces). Which of Allport's conditions was met in those situations?

### Outcomes

6. After listening to the band describe what it meant to be an integrated group in a time of segregation, tease out the conditions that helped the band form a successful collaboration. Does that list of conditions look like Allport's? What are the important features of a successful group? What is necessary to make all members feel they belong? Have you ever felt like you were making a positive contribution to a group? Have you ever felt that positive collaboration was impossible? What got in the way? How did you respond? How do you wish you'd responded?
7. Inform students that Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis not far from the Stax Records studios. Out of respect, Stax closed for several days, but tensions were still high when the artists returned to work. Ask students to reread then summarize the paragraphs in which

Steve Cropper describes being harassed outside of the Stax studios. Consider having students use the RAFT (Role, Audience, Format, Topic) strategy, writing from the perspective of Cropper or another band member. They might consider what could have been done before, during, or after one of the tense moments to defuse the situation. Ask students to share their writing with one another.

## HANDOUT 1 “Green Onions” Historical Background



### Booker T. and the MGs

Courtesy of Dunn Family

The first hit of their own that Booker T. and the MGs recorded was “Green Onions.” The curious title came, according to guitarist Steve Cropper, from the band’s desire to name the song after “something that was as funky as possible.” The band played on the double meaning of the word funky, as both a song with a strong rhythm and as something that smelled badly. Indeed, as anyone who has heard “Green Onions” knows, it is built around a fantastic groove, and yes, the vegetable green onions, from which the song was given its name, can have a really strong odor.

More than just a funky soul band, Booker T. and the MGs was the background band for many classic Stax recordings and they were an integrated group at a time when opposition to desegregation kindled violent conflicts throughout the South. Stax co-owner Al Bell described the unique business environment at Stax that made it possible for a white man to play with three black men in the South during the 60s:

I was amazed to sit in the same room with this white guy [Stax co-owner Jim Stewart] who had been a country fiddle player. . . . We had separate water fountains in Memphis and throughout the South. And if we wanted to go to a restaurant, we had to go to the back door—but to sit in that office with this white man, sharing the same telephone, sharing the same thoughts, and being treated like an equal human being—was really a phenomenon during that period of time. The spirit that came from Jim and his sister Estelle Axton allowed all of us, black and white, to come off the streets, where you had segregation and the

negative attitude, and come into the doors of Stax, where you had freedom, you had harmony, you had people working together. It grew into what became really an oasis for all of us.<sup>20</sup>

This was especially significant in the racially segregated city of Memphis. When thirteen black 1st-graders were allowed to attend formerly all-white schools—nearly a decade after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling that said public schools must integrate—many white families took their children out of those schools. In 1968, black sanitation workers went on strike because they endured worse working conditions than their white counterparts.

Steinberg described the contrast between the Stax studios and the outside world: “We integrated Stax and didn’t think no more about it than the man on the moon. We couldn’t go and play on the same bandstand together in Memphis! But we’d get together inside the studio and do everything we want to.”<sup>21</sup>

When bassist Donald “Duck” Dunn replaced Steinberg in 1965, notes Rob Bowman in *Soulsville, U.S.A.*, “they became literally half-white and half-black.” He explains, “While such collaborations were not uncommon in the studio, they were still relatively rare for a publicly performing band, and hence, ultimately political.”<sup>22</sup>

While on tour, band members were not always allowed to dine together or stay at the same hotel. In *Respect Yourself: Stax Records and the Soul Explosion*, author and documentary director Robert Gordon describes an incident that took place at an Alabama truck stop:

When the four were told to go outside to the rear window to place their order, they left instead; Duck lingered, and went back in alone. He ordered forty hamburgers, staying at the counter to see them go on the grill, to see the buns laid out and dressed, and even the bags come out to hold the order. But when the counter help looked up to deliver the food and settle the bill, Duck had vanished, the MGs on their way to a place where they could all eat together.<sup>23</sup>

Solidarity came first for the band, whether that meant accepting routine inconveniences or unexpected danger. In 1965, the group performed in Los Angeles as part of the Stax Revue and lingered for a recording gig. This was when riots broke out in the predominantly black Los Angeles neighborhood of Watts. According to the Civil Rights Digital Library, this event was the “largest and costliest urban rebellion of the civil rights era.”<sup>24</sup>

The violence erupted when a black driver was arrested by a white California Highway Patrolman, causing tensions to flare between angry onlookers and law enforcement officials. Six days of rioting laid waste to whole neighborhoods, claiming the lives of thirty-four people, causing more than \$40 million in damages, and leading to more than one thousand injuries and nearly four thousand arrests. As people and businesses were targeted with violence, fear seized those caught in the vicinity of rioters.<sup>25</sup>

It was in the minutes after Booker T. Jones wound up a recording session with Al Jackson and Steve Cropper that he first heard about the violence—and found himself in a peculiar position. He had telephoned his sister for a ride, only to be told she couldn’t pick him up. He soon learned the reason why.

So I walk outside the studio and there are National Guardsmen on the corner. It happened so quickly and it was so devastating. We ended up feeling very protective [of Cropper and the other white guys at the session]. I remember the feeling of having to get these guys out of there with us somehow.<sup>26</sup>

While they were able to leave safely, three years later another wave of inner-city violence shook Stax severely. After Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, tensions in the predominantly

black neighborhood surrounding Stax heated up. The riots that followed included arson attacks on a number of white-owned businesses, but neither the Stax studios nor the Satellite Record Shop was touched. The toll from King's murder took a different form:

"It had a tremendous impact," attests Jim Stewart:

It kind of put a wedge, or at least opened up that suspicious element, [within] the company. Although we tried to bond together and continue to work together, from that point on it changed considerably. There wasn't that happy feeling of creating together. There was something missing. You couldn't quite put your finger on it, but you knew things had changed and there's no way you could go back. Everybody started withdrawing, pulling back from that openness and close relationship that we felt we had. . . . While we were in the studio I don't think that was ever affected, but once we were through, everybody went their separate ways. There wasn't that mixing and melting together like we had before.<sup>27</sup>

"It heightened internally the racial sensitivity amongst those of us at Stax," affirmed Al Bell. "Up to that point in time I don't think we focused in on that much. Dr. King's death had a tremendous impact at Stax. We were there in the middle of the black community and here we were an integrated organization existing in a city where integration was an issue. Dr. King's death caused [some] African-American people in the community to react negatively toward the white people that worked for Stax Records. Immediately after [King's] death we had to protect some of the white people who worked at Stax."<sup>28</sup>

"There were pressures outside the studio," confirmed Cropper, "in terms of gang-related situations in the neighborhood. Feelings were heating up. People were being influenced by what they were seeing in the news and reading in the paper. They had made the decision that they were gonna stand up to this and crusade behind it. I think just the fact that the public thought that Stax was a solely white-owned company had a lot to do with the feelings in the neighborhood."<sup>29</sup>

The company building stood right across the street from Jones's Big D grocery store, where many Stax employees parked their cars. After the riots, Cropper and "Duck" Dunn found that they were being routinely hassled by a couple of street-corner toughs. "They got on me one day," related Cropper, "and accused me of slapping this little kid who used to run errands for me. It never happened. They made the stupid story up just trying to harass me and get money out of me. They all of a sudden made it a black and white thing, and we had been everybody's friend there for years. They stuck a knife in my back and made all kinds of threats. Somehow I talked them out of it."<sup>30</sup>

Saxophonist Floyd Newman, a regular session player with the MGs, shrugged off talk of tensions invading the studio. He explained that the anger so many saw in the neighborhood and across the country "didn't destroy us. It didn't separate us. We were together. We could take care of that [because] nobody stressed about, wasn't [anybody] thinkin' about [any] black, white, green, purple. None of that. We just had a fantastic relationship working at Stax. Musicians, we were together."<sup>31</sup> The band continued to play together until 1970, when Booker T. left the band.

## HANDOUT 2 Gordon Allport's Contact Hypothesis

In criminology, psychology, and sociology, the contact hypothesis has been described as one of the best ways to improve relations among groups that are experiencing conflict. Gordon W. Allport is often credited with the development of the contact hypothesis, also known as Intergroup Contact Theory. The premise of Allport's theory states that under appropriate conditions interpersonal contact is one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice between majority and minority group members. If one has the opportunity to communicate with others, they are able to understand and appreciate different points of views involving their way of life. As a result of new appreciation and understanding, prejudice should diminish. Issues of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination are commonly occurring issues between rival groups. Allport's proposal was that properly managed contact between the groups should reduce these problems and lead to better interactions.

Contact fails to cure conflict when contact situations create anxiety for those who take part. Contact situations need to be long enough to allow this anxiety to decrease and for the members of the conflicting groups to feel comfortable with one another. Additionally if the members of the two groups use this contact situation to trade insults, argue with each other, resort to physical violence, and discriminate against each other, then contact should not be expected to reduce conflict between groups. To obtain beneficial effects, the situation must include positive contact. Some of the criteria are as follows:

- **Equal status.** Both groups must engage equally in the relationship. Members of the group should have similar backgrounds, qualities, and characteristics. Differences in academic backgrounds, wealth, skill, or experiences should be minimized if these qualities will influence perceptions of prestige and rank in the group.
- **Common goals.** Both groups must work on a problem/task and share this as a common goal, sometimes called a superordinate goal, a goal that can only be attained if the members of two or more groups work together by pooling their efforts and resources.
- **Intergroup cooperation.** Both groups must work together for their common goals without competition. Groups need to work together in the pursuit of common goals.
- **Support of authorities, law, or customs.** Both groups must acknowledge some authority that supports the contact and interactions between the groups. The contact should encourage friendly, helpful, egalitarian attitudes and condemn ingroup-outgroup comparisons.
- **Personal interaction.** The contact situation needs to involve informal, personal interaction with outgroup members. Members of the conflicting groups need to mingle with one another. Without this criterion they learn very little about each other and cross-group friendships do not occur.<sup>32</sup>