

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Gospel music is a genre of religious music originally performed by Southern African-Americans. As the son of a Baptist minister, Sam Cooke spent his childhood and adolescence singing with various gospel groups. Gospel music is generally sung with simple instrumentation (only a piano or guitar), relying on vocal harmony to enrich an arrangement. Of course, the voice of one lead singer would stand out and address audiences directly. Words and rhythms were often repeated (in call and response style) because that made it easier to memorize many songs. 1960s pop music, on the other hand, employed a wide array of instruments (guitar, bass, drums, piano, and strings) to backup a vocalist. The lyrics of pop music (often love songs) were also vastly different from gospel lyrics (praising Jesus). Sam Cooke was influenced by both genres, and employs them in different measures throughout his recordings.

1. Listen to the introduction of “A Change is Gonna Come” by itself: What instruments do you hear? How would you describe the melody and harmony? If you had to write the words for a song to follow that introduction, what would those words be about?
2. After listening to the whole song, what elements are distinctly gospel-sounding? What elements are distinctly pop-sounding? (Think of instruments, form, vocal technique, tempo, and rhythm.)
3. Why might Sam Cooke want to place lyrics about his hope for racial equality in music that sounds religious? (Especially considering the line, “It’s been a long time living, but I’m afraid to die/ cuz I don’t know what’s up there beyond the sky”)

ACTIVITY: *Pop meets gospel – Sam Cooke’s style*

This activity is designed to help students understand the formal, instrumental, lyrical, and vocal conventions at play in Sam Cooke’s music.

1. Because gospel music originated in the sermons of Pentecostal preachers, listen to the sermon “Except I Shall See in His Hands the Print of the Nails” by Rev. C.L. Franklin (father of Aretha Franklin). Particularly focus on the segment beginning at 8:53.
2. After listening to the sermon, listen to the following songs paying attention specifically to a) vocal timbre b) vocal ornamentation c) instrumentation d) form and e) lyrical content.

“Calvary” (1950) by The Spirit of Memphis Quartet

“His Eye Is on the Sparrow” (1956) by Mahalia Jackson

“Were You There” (1956) by Sam Cooke and The Soul Stirrers

Imagine that you are:

1. A pop record label executive auditioning these three acts. Which group would you sign and why?
 2. A pastor or preacher. Which group do you want to sing in your church and why?
 3. An African-American listener in the 1960s. Which group is your favorite and why?
 4. A white listener in the 1960s. Which group is your favorite and why?
3. Listen to Sam Cooke’s first crossover hit single “You Send Me” (1957) and compare/contrast it with the gospel recordings. What is similar? What is different?
4. Divide the class into eight groups and assign each group a cover of “A Change Is Gonna Come” by one of the following artists:

Aretha Franklin
Otis Redding
Beyonce
Seal
Adam Lambert
Tina Turner
R. Kelley
Lauryn Hill

Each group should listen to their cover and report back to the class with a brief description of what elements are gospel-influenced and what are pop-influenced.