



# Rivers of Rhythm: Eyes on the Prize

**Audience Level:** 8th — 12th Grades

**Genre/Content Overview:** Geography, U.S. History Language Arts, Listening and Speaking

## Learning Objectives:

- Students will compare versions of the Eyes on the Prize song.
- Students will analyze source materials about the Jim Crow south and the nature of the oppression of segregation and violence towards Black people.
- Students will draw conclusions about the role of music in the Civil Rights Movement.

## Summary Description:

One cannot overstate the significance and ubiquity of work in the life of a slave. It was everywhere, all the time, dreadful and cruel. So logically, this would be reflected in their music. When they worked, they sang. And once intoned, the songs “worked” for them.

One could easily look at the song *Keep Your Hand On The Plow, Hold On* and say that its theme lies in the above mentioned verse from the Bible. In part, that is true. This certainly is a familiar verse employed by the slave master in a moment of theological acrobatics determined to correlate spiritual fitness to slave labor. However, the slave was just as acrobatic in his theology. He sang about the divine jailbreak of Paul and Silas instigated by God himself who was summoned by a SHOUT...just as good a point of departure.

So when Alice Wine re-purposed this folk hymn during the Civil Rights Movement, it was welcomed immediately and raised by the community to anthemic status. To turn a song that is clearly entrenched in a narrative of forced labor into one of freedom and liberation indeed makes a great statement. This song in its very construction is an honoring of the determination, industry, and resilience of the enslaved African and their creative children.

## Key Questions:

1. What is the role of music in the struggle for civil rights?
2. How does the meaning of the song change as it is influenced by artists over time?

## Key Concepts:

Jim Crow South

Civil Rights

Melody

Freedom Songs

Genre

Folk

Blues

Gospel/Religious/Spirituals/Hymns

Sampling - taking a common melody or something old and putting it in a new version

### Set of Tasks:

- Understanding the Music: Have students listen to *Keep Your Hand On The Plow, Hold On* and the *Keep Your Eyes On the Prize*. Discuss similarities and differences with the students.
- Contextualizing the music genre and song: Have students look up related artists using [riversofrhythm.org](http://riversofrhythm.org) to search for Alan Lomax and describe the origins of American Folk music. Then use [riversofrhythm.org](http://riversofrhythm.org) to search Mahalia Jackson to describe her connection to music genres and to *Eyes On The Prize*.
- Contextualizing the Music and the Need for Social Change: use the Library of Congress resources to analyze two images and two text-based sources with the document analysis.
- Using what you learn: Ask students to draw conclusions about the role of music in the Civil Rights Movement using inferences from the songs and evidence from the primary source materials to support conclusions.

### Resources and Materials:

[riversofrhythm.org](http://riversofrhythm.org)  
[www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize)

### Artists:

Mavis Staples  
Sweet Honey in the Rock  
Mahalia Jackson  
Dem Singers  
McNary High School

### Possible Extension Activities:

- a. Have students sample (re-purpose a common song) for a unique Freedom Song.
- b. Deeper document analysis: Students could write a narrative, build a graphic organizer or develop a presentation for the class based on the sources they analyzed.

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