



Sound of Blackness: Guest Artists for the 2015 WITNESS Young People's Concert

Introduction

The guest artists for the 2015 WITNESS Young People's Concert is the Minnesota-based ensemble, Sounds of Blackness. The activities in this lesson will introduce students to the ensemble and their music. Students will read a biography, view a PowerPoint, and listen to a piece from the WITNESS Companion CD. This introduction to the WITNESS guest artists will help students understand

the theme and focus of the 2015 WITNESS Young People's Concert, and hearing the music will ignite their interest in hearing the live performance.

If this is your first WITNESS lesson, provide folders for each student to collect handouts, materials, and their own work related to the WITNESS Concert.

**Lesson Plan:**
Meet the Artists**Learning Goal**

Students will select and arrange eight facts related to Sounds of Blackness into a Biography Wheel to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding about the ensemble, their vision and purpose.

Materials

- Copies of the Sounds of Blackness biography, p. 84
- “Bio Wheel” graphic organizer, p. 87
- “Meet the Sounds of Blackness” PowerPoint from WITNESS Companion CD
- Folders for saving handouts and student work

Process

1. Decide if you will use the printed biography, the PowerPoint, or both.
2. Tell students that they will soon attend the 2015 WITNESS Concert and provide information about the event (see “What You Can Expect at the WITNESS Young People’s Concert,” p. 15). In addition to the VocalEssence Chorus, the guest artists are the members of Sounds of Blackness. The Varsity Choir from South High School in Minneapolis will also appear. Then focus attention on Sounds of Blackness.
 - Ask students to speculate about the ensemble’s name, Sounds of Blackness. What might that tell them about the group and its music?
3. Read the biography (p. 84) and/or view and read the PowerPoint text out loud. Then ask “What did the reading and/or PowerPoint tell you about the group?” Allow time for responses and speculations.
4. Walk students through the “Bio Wheel” activity using the graphic organizer. They can work alone, as partners, or do it at home. BUT provide time in class for students to share their work and note similarities and differences in what they’ve written. Post the Bio Wheels or have students place them in their folders.

Lesson Plan: Listen and Respond to Music by Sounds of Blackness

Learning Goal

Students will respond to the music by describing what they hear, locating **call and response** passages, and interpreting the message/meaning of the song.

Materials

- *Hold On (Change is Comin')*, track #7 from the WITNESS Companion CD
- Song text, copies or electronic display
- Writing materials for note taking

Great Videos of Sounds of Blackness

In December, 2013, *The Current*, an MPR FM radio station, named the group Artist of the Month. In addition to the announcement and an article on *The Current* website, they included “Five Essential Videos” made by Sounds of Blackness. **The best part...there are NO ADS or commercial announcements!** You can view *Hold On (Change is Comin')* and four others at: <http://blog.thecurrent.org/2013/12/artist-of-the-month-sounds-of-blackness/>.

Introduction

This lesson continues the introduction to Sounds of Blackness as students listen and view a video of the group as they perform one of their favorites, *Hold On (Change is Comin')*.



Process

1. Students have read about and viewed images of Sounds of Blackness. This short lesson will introduce them to their particular musical sound. **EXPLORE** the music by asking students to jot down what they notice about the music as it plays. Listen to the first 1 min. and 33 sec. of *Hold On (Change is Comin')*.
2. Listen again, then ask students to **DESCRIBE** what they heard. They might comment on both the musical characteristics such as the voices, instruments, rhythm patterns, tempo, style, etc. and on the lyrics of the song. If their comments are about how the music feels (for example, it is happy music), ask them to expand on their comment with this question: “What specifically did you hear that made you say that?”
3. Remind them of what **call and response** sounds like in music. Then **FIND** the **call and response** patterns in the song and indicate each with a ‘thumbs up’ sign. (For example, the echoing text on “hold on, change is comin’.”)
4. **READ/LISTEN/RESPOND** to the whole piece: Display the text as you listen. Encourage them to sing the “la-la” **call and response** section.

ANALYZE: Ask for interpretations about the message of the song; what is its meaning?



APPLY: How would they describe the group's musical style to someone else? (Note: The piece is a Rhythm & Blues (R&B) style piece. For more on R&B, go to the student handout on p. 117).

Assessment Suggestions

The Bio Wheel is a formative assessment which provides evidence of ability to gather and integrate information about the ensemble and its background. The song discussions provide evidence of responding, analyzing, and interpreting music skills.

Minnesota State Standards Connections

English Language Arts: Reading

Key Ideas and Details 6-12

Standard 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

English Language Arts: Writing

Text Types and Purposes

Standard 8: Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources... and integrate the information...

Arts: Music

Strand IV: Artistic Process: Respond or Critique

Standard 1: Respond to or critique a variety of creations and performances using the artistic foundations.

Hold On (Change is Comin')

Yesterday, a man said to me,
He said how can you smile when your
world is crumbling down?
I said, here's my secret.
When I wanna cry, I take a look around
And I see that I'm getting by.

REFRAIN

And I hold on...Hold On,
A-change is comin'...Change is comin'
Hold on...Hold on
Don't you worry...Don't worry 'bout a thing.
Hold on...Hold on
You can make it...You can make it.
Hold on...Hold on
Everything...Everything will be alright.

Some people like to worry.
Some people like hide.
Some people like to run away
From the pain inside.
Now it's your business.
Do whatever you wanna do.
But if it don't work out,
Here's what you oughta do.
When the troubles of life weigh you down,
just lift your head.
Yea, yea, yea
When the love you seek is hard to find,
Don't give up, just keep strong, keep their faith and...

REFRAIN



Lesson Plan: Listen and Respond to Music by Sounds of Blackness (continued)

The WITNESS Connection - Ginger Commodore

Many students have met and worked with WITNESS Teaching Artist, Ginger Commodore, over the years. A well-known



and loved jazz vocalist, she was a member of the Sounds of Blackness for over fifteen years. She met her husband, Bobby, when both were singing with the group. It's become a family affair now as two of their children are part of the current Sounds of Blackness ensemble. Daughter Ashley sings alto, and son Brandon is a drummer with the band.

Who are the people mentioned in the Sounds of Blackness Reading?

- Russell Knighton, an economics and finance major at Macalester College, and founder of Sounds of Blackness, currently works as a banker, professional singer, and the choir director of Pilgrim Baptist Church in St. Paul.
- Ann Bennett-Nesby, one-time soloist for Sounds of Blackness, moved on in 1996 to a solo career with an R&B-oriented album for the Perspective label, *Ann Nesby*.
- Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis were partners and two of the most successful producers and writers of the 1980s. With a long history of pace-setting R&B, club, and pop hits, their music reached its apex on a series of smash records for Janet Jackson. Jimmy Jam, born James Harris III in Minneapolis on June 6, 1959, first met Terry Lewis in high school. Together they formed Flyte Tyme, a popular Twin Cities band which in 1981 evolved into the Time, led by Prince protégé Morris Day.
- Janet Jackson, a dynamic singer/performer and one of the biggest recording artists of the 1980s and '90s, was the only Jackson sibling to escape Michael's shadow.
- Luther Vandross (1951–2005) was an American singer-songwriter and record producer. Background vocalist for many artists, he became the lead singer of the group Change. Vandross sold over 25 million records worldwide and received eight Grammy Awards.
- Stevie Wonder is an American musician, singer-songwriter, record producer, and instrumentalist. A child prodigy, he continued his career of creativity in performance into adult years. He signed with Motown's Tamla label at the age of eleven and still performs and records for Motown. Blind since shortly after birth, Wonder has more than thirty U.S. top ten hit recordings and twenty-two Grammy Awards.



Meet the Sounds of Blackness

A Reading for Students & Teachers

Sounds of Blackness was first known as the Macalester College Black Choir. It was established in 1969 at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota by founder Russell Knighton. Two years later, Macalester sophomore, Gary Hines, became the new director. He changed the name to Sounds of Blackness, opened membership to the broader community, and shaped a big new vision for the 40-member group.

When asked in a *Rolling Stone* interview about his reasons for changing the name, Hines said, "In our **repertoire** we do the whole range of African American music... We wanted our name to reflect the scope of what we're doing." (Gale Musician Profiles, <http://www.answers.com/topic/sounds-of-blackness>)

To expand the group's repertoire beyond **gospel**, Hines created arrangements and composed new songs that drew on many styles. He mixed gospel up with **jazz, reggae**, and the pop styles made popular by stars like Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder. Then he went in the other direction to the roots of African and African American music, creating and arranging songs like *Ubuntu* (a Bantu term for human-kindness), **blues, ragtime, and spirituals**. Sounds of Blackness' performances became more theatrical in the seventies, drawing a large local audience to their annual Christmas Show. The group also released three new albums on a local label.

Good things began to happen for the group as the pop music scene grew in the Twin Cities. Sounds of Blackness expanded beyond their circle of St. Paul fans and began moving up. They sang the backup vocals on several pop singles and albums recorded in the Twin Cities, including the soundtrack for *Batman*. And a new powerful voice joined the group, Ann Bennett-Nesby. Bennett-Nesby immediately became a star soloist for Sounds of Blackness.

The group came to the attention of Jimmy "Jam" Harris and Terry Lewis, the two young producers responsible in part for Janet Jackson's successful career. Jam and Lewis loved the sound of the choir. In the past, other recording companies wanted Sounds of Blackness to narrow their focus to gospel music or R&B, but Jam and Lewis liked their varied repertoire and unique sound. The two **entrepreneurs** took a leap of faith and signed them up as the first release on their new label, Perspective Records. That 1991 album was *The Evolution of Gospel*. Public response was so great that one song, "Optimistic," was released as a single. It quickly rose in the R&B charts to the #1 spot. *The Evolution of Gospel* album won a **Grammy** for Sounds of Blackness in 1991.



Gary Hines

Gary Hines was born in Yonkers, NY in 1952. His mother was a jazz singer and his father a furniture upholsterer. Gary moved with his family from New York to Minnesota



in 1964. Hines grew up in a musical environment. As a five-year old, he and his brothers were part of a fife and drum corps. Sunday mornings were filled with spirituals and gospel. The rest of the week Hines heard the guys sing doo-wop on the street corner, and blues from the old man in the alley. All this was topped off with the jazz, blues, and gospel tunes loaded in the jukebox in his dad's workshop.

Fun fact: Hines was a body-builder and held the title of Mr. Minnesota in 1981.

When interviewed by *Billboard Magazine*, Hines talked about their success with the *Evolution of Gospel*. "This album...is meant to portray the essence of the African American experience through our music. It's an expression of where gospel music has been historically and where we're taking it." (From *Gale Musician Profiles*, <http://www.answers.com/topic/sounds-of-blackness>)

Success continued with the 1994 release, *Africa to America: The Journey of the Drum*, an album that grew out of a concert production first created by Hines in 1975. With success came recognition, including five invitations to sing at the White House during Bill Clinton's administration, and at national broadcasts of the 1996 Summer Olympics. They've won three Grammys, Emmy nominations, NAACP Image Award nominations, and platinum and gold albums. An especially significant tribute came in the form of the International Time for Peace Award. This award recognized and rewarded their music and their message of love and peace for all people on the planet.

Touring has been a highpoint for the group. They accompanied Stevie Wonder to Africa and South America, and Luther Vandross on his five-month tour of the U.S. Other important tours included an extended road trip to Historically Black Colleges (HBCUs), the Christmas Show Tour, and many visits to Japan and the United Kingdom.

Hines feels that the ensemble represents a solid effort to combat the history of **racism** in the music business and bring some balance to the field. "We're aware that, historically, black music and musicians have been taken advantage of, excluded, under-promoted and pushed aside," Hines said in a *Rolling Stone* interview. "We're here to reclaim ownership of African American music."

The music they create has also been a source of healing. A commitment to social causes includes a partnership with domestic violence agencies. The song "She is Love," is both a tribute to mothers, and their statement against domestic violence. Across the country the song is part of the curriculum of domestic violence training sessions and presentations.

Sounds of Blackness has many artistic accomplishments to celebrate, an amazing achievement because the singers are paid little or no salary. They support themselves with day jobs and perform for the love of making music. Currently the group features eight singers and seven instrumentalists.

Selected discography

- *The Evolution of Gospel* (includes "Optimistic"), Perspective/A&M, 1991.
- *The Night Before Christmas ... A Musical Fantasy*, Perspective/A&M, 1992.
- *Africa to America: The Journey of the Drum*, Perspective/A&M, 1994.

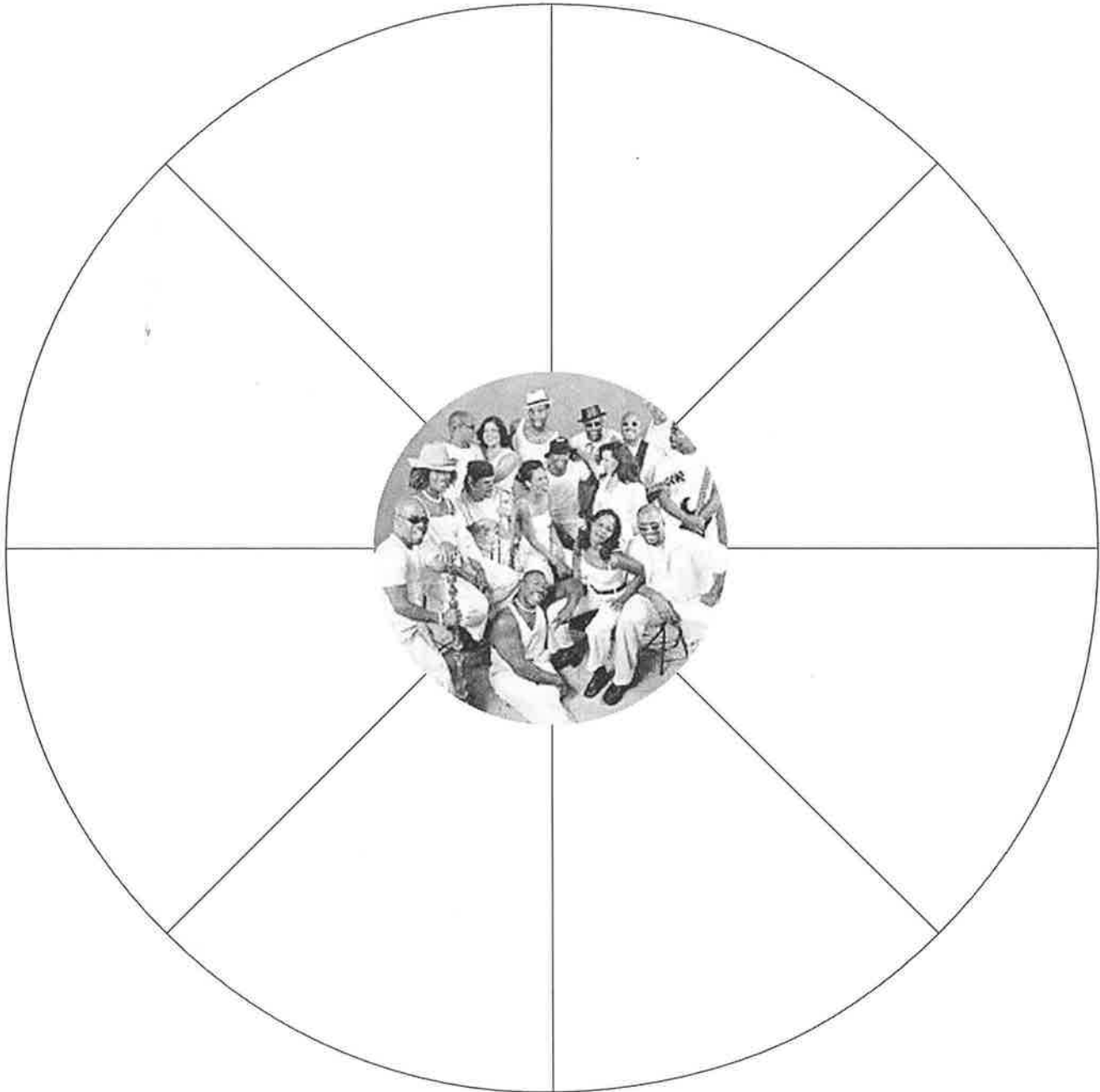


Fun fact: Former American Idol, Paris Bennett, grew up around Sounds of Blackness. Her mother, Jamecia Bennett, grandmother, Ann Bennett-Nesby, and aunt, Shirley Marie Graham, all sang with the group. After American Idol, Paris Bennett also appeared with Sounds of Blackness.



Sounds of Blackness: A Bio Wheel

Now that you've met the Sounds of Blackness, create a Bio Wheel to tell others about this great musical group. Write one fact or piece of information in each section of the wheel.



Name _____

Date _____