

APOLLO

EDUCATION

THE APOLLO THEATER STUDY GUIDE

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GET ON
BOARD!



“Pardon me, brother, as you stand in your glory. I know you won’t mind if I tell the whole story.”

— From Curtis Mayfield’s *“We The People Who Are Darker Than Blue”*

Curtis Lee Mayfield was born on June 3, 1942 in Chicago, Illinois. Growing up poor in a low-income housing project with his mother and siblings, there was something that enriched young Curtis’ life more than money ever could: music.

Inspired by the uplifting Gospel songs he heard attending his grandmother’s church, by the age of seven Mayfield had learned to play piano, taught himself guitar, and sang in the Northern Jubilee Gospel Singers with his neighborhood friend, Jerry Butler.

In 1957, he joined Butler in a Doo Wop group named The Roosters. Later, changing their name to Jerry Butler and The Impressions, they developed their “Chicago Soul” sound on early hits such as *“For Your Precious Love”*. When Butler left to pursue a solo career in 1958, Mayfield took over as lead singer and songwriter for The Impressions.

In 1963, Mayfield’s *“It’s Alright”* became the first Impressions record to sell one million copies. His songwriting was noticeably optimistic and encouraged messages of hope and perseverance. Nowhere was that more clear than in 1964’s *“Keep On Pushing”* and 1965’s *“People Get Ready”*. Both songs became anthems of the Civil Rights Movement and were commonly sung at marches and protests.

Empowered by the growing sense of Black Pride in America, The Impressions released *“We’re A Winner”* and *“This Is My Country”* in 1968. That same year, Mayfield co-founded the Curtom Records label, knowing it was important to own the rights to his own music and be in control of his own business affairs.

After more than a decade of performing with The Impressions, in 1970 Mayfield released his debut solo album entitled, *Curtis*. Producing uplifting singles such as *“Move On Up”*, *Curtis* also included critical songs like *“We The People Who Are Darker Than Blue”*, which expressed his concern with the drugs and violence he saw consuming African American communities.

In 1972, that concern became a theme in Mayfield’s original score to the movie *“Super Fly”*. The soundtrack sold over two million copies and further expressed his desire for African Americans to display pride and self-respect in their communities.

After a tragic accident that left Mayfield paralyzed from the neck down, he recorded his final album in 1996 while lying on his back. With the same perseverance he demonstrated throughout his career, Curtis Mayfield kept on pushing until his death on December 26, 1999.

In honor of Mayfield’s life and music, he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame not once but twice, first as a member of The Impressions and second as a solo artist. He was also one of only nine artists in GRAMMY history to receive both the Living Legend and Lifetime Achievement Awards.

His influence as a singer, songwriter, instrumentalist, producer, entrepreneur, poet, activist, and more, has inspired generations of artists to produce music with meaningful messages that aspire to impact positive change. Mayfield’s legacy lives on through his music and in the hopes and dreams of all people who are ready to get on board, keep on pushing, and move on up a little higher.

THINK ABOUT IT:

Mayfield’s *“Keep On Pushing”* inspired a sense of hope and perseverance during the Civil Rights Movement, especially for African Americans who endured racial discrimination on a regular basis.

What are other forms of discrimination that exist in the world today? What can you do to bring awareness to such injustices? List three examples and discuss with a partner.



A MESSAGE IN THE MUSIC

"KEEP ON PUSHING"

"I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream." — From Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" Speech

In the months following Dr. King's historic "I Have A Dream" speech, Mayfield was inspired to write his first message song. Released by The Impressions just three weeks before the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, "Keep On Pushing" reflected the same sense of hope and perseverance that Dr. King so beautifully referred to in his speeches.

Becoming an anthem of the Civil Rights Movement, "Keep on Pushing" was often sung by courageous activists who risked their lives demonstrating at sit-ins and protests in the 1960s, particularly in the U.S. South. Over 50 years later, the song continues to inspire hope for anyone who is willing to "keep on pushing" through the hard times in pursuit of their dreams.

DO NOW

See if you can spot Dr. King in the photo above attending the signing of the Civil Rights Act on July 2, 1964. How does Dr. King appear in the photo? What do you think he was thinking in that moment? Where do you think the signing took place and who is the person sitting at the desk signing the act? Discuss with a partner.

DID YOU KNOW:

Dr. King attended the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which banned racial discrimination in schools, workplaces, and public facilities such as restrooms and drinking fountains.

LESSON IN LYRICS 1

What messages can we learn from Mayfield and his music?

Instructions: Review the following lyrics to the song “Keep On Pushing” and pick the lyrics that interest you the most. Discuss the inquiry question with a partner.

OPTION A

*I’ve got to keep on pushing.
I can’t stop now.
Move up a little higher.
Some way, somehow.*

OPTION B

*Now maybe someday,
I’ll reach that higher goal.
I know I can make it,
With just a little bit of soul.*

OPTION C

*A-look-a-yonder.
What’s that I see?
A great big stone wall,
Stands there ahead of me.

But I’ve got my pride,
And I’ll move on aside,
And keep on pushing.*

INQUIRY QUESTION

What is a goal in your life that you have never given up on? What lessons have you learned from the experience? Discuss with a partner.

INQUIRY QUESTION

What goals do you think Mayfield was pushing for when he wrote these lyrics? What is a goal that you hope to achieve and how can you envision accomplishing it? Discuss with a partner.

INQUIRY QUESTION

Did any obstacles get in the way of you accomplishing your goal? If so, what were they and how did you overcome them? Discuss with a partner.

ANSWER

ANSWER

ANSWER



THINK ABOUT IT:

Mayfield and The Impressions were positive role models to many young musicians, particularly those who courageously released songs that promoted political and social change.

Who is a positive role model in your life and how have they inspired you to follow their example? List three examples and discuss with a partner.

*The Impressions.
L- R: Sam Gooden,
Fred Cash, Curtis
Mayfield c. 1965*

"WE'RE A WINNER"

"Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

— From Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" Speech

In addition to hope and perseverance, Mayfield's music inspired a sense of pride and self-respect.

With widespread riots breaking out across the nation in 1967, fear crept into the hearts and minds of many Americans. In response to the reports of violence and unrest, Mayfield felt it was important

DID YOU KNOW:

"We're A Winner" directly influenced Soul music legend James Brown and his hit single "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud", which became a Black Pride anthem upon its release in 1968.

The motto for Curtom Records was "We're A Winner", a reference to The Impressions' uplifting 1968 hit single, as well as Mayfield's optimistic outlook on life and his music.

to write songs that were uplifting and had empowering messages.

As if by fate, the lyrics to "We're A Winner" came to Mayfield in a dream. After The Impressions released the song in 1968, a growing number of African American musicians followed their example and recorded music that promoted the Black Pride Movement.

LESSON IN LYRICS 2

Instructions: Review the following lyrics to the song “We’re A Winner” and pick the lyrics that interest you the most. Discuss the inquiry question with a partner.

OPTION A

We’re a winner, and never let anybody say, boy, you can’t make it.

INQUIRY QUESTION

What do you think it means to be courageous? How have you displayed courage in your life before? Discuss with a partner.

ANSWER

OPTION B

I don’t mind leavin’ here, to show the world we have no fear, ‘cause we’re a winner.

INQUIRY QUESTION

What is something you were afraid to try, but worked up the courage to try anyway? How did you overcome your fear and what lessons have you learned from the experience? Discuss with a partner.

ANSWER

"THIS IS MY COUNTRY"

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

— Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., 1963

Following the tragic assassination of Dr. King in April 1968, Mayfield and The Impressions released *"This Is My Country"*, a song that echoed Dr. King's dream of achieving racial equality in America.

Mayfield understood that Dr. King's dream of righting the wrongs of racism had to do with not just racial, but also economic inequality. Striving for African Americans to *"own as much of themselves as possible,"* Mayfield started his own publishing company, recording studio, and record label, all by the age of 26.



"This Is My Country" was one of the first singles released on Curtom Records, which Mayfield co-founded with Impressions manager Eddie Thomas during the summer of 1968. Telling the story of *"three hundred years or more"* of slavery and sacrifice, the song sent an empowering message of self-worth, and inspired a sense of belonging in African American communities throughout the United States.

THINK ABOUT IT:

"This Is My Country" speaks to Mayfield's desire for African Americans to achieve both economic and racial equality. In the song, he makes reference to the experience of slavery endured by African Americans.

What do you think Mayfield meant by his desire for African Americans to "own as much of themselves as possible"? What challenges do you think he might see in America today? Discuss with a partner.

WORDS TO KNOW

Message Song: Music with a message often related to social change.

Activist: Someone who demonstrates their desire for social change.

Sit-In: A form of demonstration in which activists occupy a public establishment, such as a restaurant, and don't leave until they are granted equal treatment under the law.

Protest: A form of demonstration in which activists march to express their desire for social change.

Racial Discrimination: To be treated unfairly based on the color of one's skin.

Black Pride Movement: A celebration of African American culture and African heritage taking place during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

LESSON IN LYRICS 3

Instructions: Review the following lyrics to the song “This Is My Country” and pick the lyrics that interest you the most. Discuss the inquiry question with a partner.

OPTION A

I've paid three hundred years or more, of slave driving, sweat, and welts on my back.

INQUIRY QUESTION

What is the image that Mayfield is presenting with this lyric? Who do you think he's referring to? Discuss with a partner.

ANSWER

OPTION B

Too many have died in protecting my pride, for me to go second class.

INQUIRY QUESTION

What does it mean to be a citizen? What do you think the terms first-class citizen and second-class citizen mean? What would be the difference between how each class is treated? Discuss with a partner.

ANSWER

A LASTING INFLUENCE

Click here to experience more music by Mayfield and the music of musicians that he inspired.

MAYFIELD SONG:

People Get Ready

*"People, get ready.
There's a train a' coming.
You don't need no ticket.
You just get on board."*

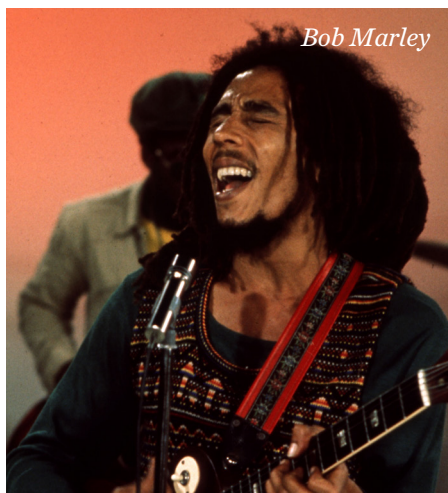
First recorded by The Impressions in 1965, "People Get Ready" was heavily influenced by Mayfield's love for Gospel music. In the tradition of freedom songs such as "This Little Light of Mine" and "We Shall Overcome", "People Get Ready" became an anthem of the Civil Rights Movement, and inspired future generations of artists to "get on board" with Mayfield's meaningful message music.

SONG: One Love/People Get Ready

ARTIST: Bob Marley & the Wailers

"One Love! One Heart! Let's get together and feel alright."

Bob Marley and The Wailers admired Curtis Mayfield, who was revered in their home country of Jamaica. Their 1977 release of "One Love/People Get Ready" was a direct nod to Mayfield's "People Get Ready"; the two songs sharing a similar melody and near-identical lyrics at times. "One Love/People Get Ready" was eventually credited to Marley and Mayfield equally, introducing a new generation of listeners to Mayfield's music.



Bob Marley

SONG: Same Love

ARTIST: Macklemore and Ryan Lewis

"Love is patient. Love is kind."

Sampling "People Get Ready", in 2012 Hip Hop artists Macklemore and Ryan Lewis released "Same Love" in support of same-sex marriage, which was legalized in their home state of Washington the same year.



Macklemore

SONG: Land Of Hope And Dreams

ARTIST: Bruce Springsteen

In 1999, Curtis Mayfield was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame for the second time. Joining him as an inductee, was Rock and Roll legend Bruce Springsteen. That same year, Springsteen wrote the song "Land

Of Hope And Dreams", which was inspired by Mayfield's "People Get Ready" and directly quotes Mayfield's uplifting lyrics.



Bruce Springsteen



THINK ABOUT IT:

Songs like Mayfield's "Move On Up" have been inspiring artists to produce socially conscious music for over half a century. What messages do you hear in music today? Think of at least one social issue you care deeply about, such as homelessness or hunger. Like Mayfield, can you write a song that inspires a sense of hope and perseverance despite such injustice? If needing help, try taking a song you already know and replace the original lyrics with a message all your own, just as artists have done with Mayfield's music for generations.

MAYFIELD SONG:

Move On Up

*"Just move on up,
to a greater day.
With just a little faith,
If you put your mind to it you can
surely do it."*

Curtis Mayfield's 1970 release of "Move On Up" inspired hope and a sense of perseverance in African American communities throughout the United States. While the 1960s brought landmark legislation that helped curb racial discrimination, including the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and Fair Housing Act of 1968, change came slow. "Move On Up" encouraged listeners to remain patient and positive in the face of adversity, inspiring contemporary artists such as John Legend to become modern day messengers for Mayfield's music and messages of social justice.



Angelique Kidjo



John Legend

SONG: **Move On Up**

ARTISTS: Angelique Kidjo featuring John Legend and Bono

In 2010, singer-songwriter Angelique Kidjo teamed up with music superstars John Legend and Bono (of the rock band U2) to cover Mayfield's "Move On Up". Forty years after the original's release, Kidjo's cover not only celebrated Mayfield's musical influence on her growing up in Benin, West Africa, it also served to inspire a sense of hope and perseverance for disadvantaged communities throughout Africa.

MAYFIELD SONG:

Hard Times

*"Havin' hard times in this crazy town.
Havin' hard times, there's no love to be found."*

DO NOW

Check out the original recording of "People Get Ready" and listen carefully to the melody and lyrics. Then listen to the following songs produced by artists who were highly influenced by Mayfield's message music. Do you notice any similarities and/or differences musically? How about in what the lyrics are saying? Take notes as you listen, keeping track of similarities and differences, then get together with a friend and discuss! taking a song you already know and replace the original lyrics with a message all your own, just as artists have done with Mayfield's music for generations.

While Mayfield was revered for his optimism, he also produced music that took a critical look at serious matters affecting African American communities throughout the United States. Growing up in Chicago's Cabrini-Green Project Houses, Mayfield experienced firsthand the hardships of drugs, violence, and poverty in his community.

SONG: **"Hard Times"**

ARTISTS: John Legend and The Roots

In 2010, John Legend teamed up with The Roots to record an album of socially conscious music entitled "Wake Up!", covering Mayfield's "Hard Times", written in 1975. Legend and The Roots are among an impressive list of artists who have covered and/or sampled Mayfield's music.



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