

# ***Mahalia Jackson: Gospel Singer and Civil Rights Champion*** **Teacher's Guide**

## **Introduction**

This Teacher's Guide provides a framework for using *Mahalia Jackson Gospel Singer and Civil Rights Champion* in the classroom as a vehicle to engage students and weave literature into multiple content areas.

The Guide offers many suggestions for interdisciplinary activities that students can do before, during, and after they read the book. These learner-centered activities help students move from solely a comprehension, or knowledge-based way of thinking about historical fiction, to higher levels of critical thought that include analysis and evaluation.

## **Before Reading**

1. Before starting any unit of study, it's a good idea to assess what students already know, or think they know about the subject. If students have at least some knowledge of Jackson or her accomplishments, draw a three-column chart on the blackboard with the headings: *What We Know About Mahalia Jackson*, *What We Want to Know*, and *What We Learned*.

Ask students to respond only to the first two columns. After reading the book and doing some or all of the After Reading activities, revisit the chart with the class to complete the third column (*What We Learned*) and to correct any erroneous information in the first column.

2. If students have no knowledge of Jackson or her accomplishments, you can have them begin reading the book without any prior discussion, or you can review the historical timeframe of the book (i.e., Mahalia's lifespan: 1912 through 1972). You might wish to focus on the Great Depression and the Civil Rights movement, both discussed in the book.

## **During Reading**

While many teachers prefer that students read a book without interruption, others opt to conduct mini-assessments along the way.

1. Have students keep an ongoing literature journal in which they can write about what they're reading and keep an ongoing vocabulary list of unfamiliar words or phrases. You might also wish to provide writing prompts to help students think about what they're reading and to make connections to their own lives. Example of writing prompts:

- At the beginning of the book, Mahalia describes listening to sounds of the city. Have you ever sat quietly, listening to the sounds around you? Try it now. What do you hear?
  - What are some of Mahalia's qualities, or personality traits, that you think helped to shape who she became as an adult? (Students might identify such traits as being adventurous or setting goals for herself.) What personality traits did she have that you didn't like? Why? What are some of YOUR best qualities, or traits of which you are most proud?
  - Mahalia had an amazing singing voice that came naturally to her. What talent(s) do you have that come naturally to you?
2. As students read the book, be sure to keep a map of the United States posted so that they can identify each city and state mentioned.
  3. As they read, have students identify figures of speech (e.g., metaphors and similes), phrases of alliteration, analogies, and language of the time period.

## After Reading

Historical fiction provides wonderful opportunities to weave and blend literature into many different content areas in meaningful ways. Following are a handful of ways for you to integrate a study of Mahalia Jackson in your classroom. Although they are organized by content areas, we encourage you to move across content lines to blend them in natural ways AND to encourage your students to conduct further research on any specific topics of interest.

Assessment: All of the activities can be assessed in traditional ways (i.e., with quizzes and letter grading systems) to determine how well students can memorize and can recount facts. However, since these activities are rooted in discovery, discussion, communication, and collaboration, they lend themselves to more holistic types of assessment that measure achievement of academic skills, behaviors, and even social/emotional growth. We encourage you to use one or more of the following alternative assessments as students complete the activities.

- **Portfolios**—Keep one portfolio of work for each student to measure progress over a specific period of time. Portfolios are a great aid for both student/teacher and parent/teacher conferences. Encourage students to participate in selecting samples of writing, artwork, research notes, etc. to be included in their portfolios.
- **Rubrics**— Create a rubric, or chart (with or without grades or a numerical grading scale) to assess whether or not students have met specific standards and learning goals that you have previously identified.

- **Self-Assessment**—Hold regular teacher/student interviews to listen to students evaluate their own progress and skills.
- **Peer-Assessment**—Have students give and receive constructive feedback to assess such things as collaborative group work and to critique writing.
- **Anecdotal Notes**—As students work individually or in teams, make informal observations of how they solve problems, think critically, conduct research, work with others, and synthesize newly learned information. Add your notes to students' portfolios and share them during parent/teacher conferences.

## Language Arts Connections

1. In Chapter 3, Mahalia says that often it felt like Aunt Duke was “looking straight through her.” Ask students to tell what they think that means and to come up with a list of adjectives that best describe Aunt Duke.
2. On the *What Happened Next?* page at the end of the book, students learn that Mahalia started a series of radio programs in 1954. Have them work in pairs to write a mock radio script about her life.
3. In 1998, the U.S. Postal Service issued a stamp to honor Mahalia Jackson. Learn more about whom the USPS chooses to honor on stamps and why. View the Jackson stamp at <http://www.usps.com/images/stamps/98/gospel.jpg> Then have students design and illustrate their own stamp to depict one special event in Mahalia’s childhood or adulthood.
4. Ask students to find passages in the book that described Mahalia’s family’s economic situation. What passages tell us that, without stating it blatantly, they were very poor? (Examples: Mahalia describing coating her feet with dirt to pretend she had shoes; her aunt stuffing a mattress with Spanish moss and corn husks.)
5. Have students visit the Library of Congress American Memory website to read personal accounts of life during the Great Depression, which the book describes in Chapter 10. The collection, *American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1940*, can be found at: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html>

Students can click the *States* link on the site, then *Illinois* to read documents from the collection. They can also choose other states not mentioned in the book. (NOTE: Teachers will want to review the documents ahead of time to check for both reading levels and subject matter they may deem inappropriate for younger students.) Then have students write their own fictional account of living through the Depression or interview a relative who actually lived through it.

## Social Studies Connections

1. Have students work individually to complete the **WebQuest**, following links to learn more about Mahalia Jackson's life, and then to write a mock interview with her.

After completing the book and visiting all of the Web sites, students should write four questions that they would want to ask Mahalia Jackson and then write four responses as if she is really answering. Remind students that they will want to ask questions for which they have found answers (through Web research and/or in the book).

2. Mahalia spent lots of time along the banks of the Mississippi River while growing up in New Orleans. Have students use an atlas to discover through which states the River runs (from Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico in Louisiana). Then have them work in pairs or small groups to create a trivia guide about the Mississippi, including interesting and/or uncommon facts about the river. For example, did they know it's the longest river in North America and that it passes through 10 states? A great place to start research on the Web is at the Mississippi River Parkway Commission Website: <http://www.mississippiriverinfo.com>
3. In Chapter 2 students learn that Mahalia's mother's family had been born on a former slave plantation. Have students conduct research on slavery and slave plantations in the 1800s. Learn about the abolitionist movement of the 1830s and the Underground Railroad, the system of helping slaves escape from the southern slave states into northern "free states" or Canada. Students can share their research by creating a printed class history guide, murals, or even multimedia presentations
4. In Chapter 10, students learn about the Great Depression. Encourage them to investigate that time period in greater depth. How could banks just fail? Could they today? Why or why not? (See Language Arts Connections, #5, and Mathematics Connections, #1, for more.)
5. One of the best ways to make history come alive is through primary sources. Students can view photographs of Mahalia Jackson at the Library of Congress American Memory site (<http://memory.loc.gov>) in the *Creative Americans: Portraits by Carl Van Vechten* Collection. On the home page, click Search, then type Mahalia Jackson into the text box to find related photographs. Don't stop at the photographs! Encourage students to select the wonderful *African-American Odyssey* Collection to learn even more about African-American history.

6. On the *What Happened Next?* page at the end of the book, students learn that Mahalia became very involved in the Civil Rights movement, even participating in the famous March on Washington in 1963, alongside Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Have students research the events of that March and learn more about Jackson's work for civil rights.

### **Science Connections**

1. In Chapter 5, there is a description of a sugar factory and sugar cane. Bring in a sugar cane stalk (available at many markets) and discuss the process by which the cane is turned into granulated and other forms of sugar. "Grow" sugar rock candy to observe crystals under a microscope.
2. The book describes various percussion instruments that Mahalia hears accompanying church congregations. Have students discover the science behind sound. What makes sound and why are some sounds louder than others? What happens when one hits the drumhead with a stick? What are vibration, resonance, and amplification? Challenge students to find and conduct simple experiments related to sound and musical instruments; they can find such experiments in science texts and on the Internet.
3. In Chapters 1 and 4, mentions are made of levees. Ask students if they know what a levee is and where they might find one. (A levee is an embankment used to keep a river from overflowing.) Then conduct some simple science experiments with sand and water in a tray to show the force of water and how a levee works to hold the water back.
4. After reading about steamboats and paddle wheels in Chapter 4, students can make model steamboats with paddle wheels created out of popsicle sticks or other readily available art materials. Challenge them to make models that will really work when placed in water.

### **Mathematics Connections**

1. After learning about the Depression in Chapter 10, have students make a list of common grocery and other items (e.g., quart of milk, notebook, softball) and determine their costs today. Then, using any Consumer Price Index (CPI) calculator on the Web, compare what these same items cost in 1929 when the stock market crashed. For example, an item that costs \$1.00 today would have cost \$0.10 in 1929. Graph the comparisons and find the rates of inflation. A good calculator can be found at:  
<http://www.westegg.com/inflation>
2. Continue learning about what happened to the banks during the Depression years. Help students to understand that in 1929, Federal Deposit Insurance

did not exist. Therefore, people's money was lost when banks closed. Discuss the domino effect of what happened during that time. For example, when the banks failed and closed, sources for credit and capital were gone and, therefore, businesses and factories closed, leaving more and more people unemployed, leading to less purchasing and mortgage foreclosures, further weakening businesses and banks, etc. Have students learn about banks today and what protections there are for individuals and businesses now, when our economy weakens.

3. Help students make the connection between music and math by listening to examples of jazz, rock, rap, and gospel music. Call their attention to musical notation and its connection to the numerical representation of fractions. Have students count beats per measure in different music clips. Challenge them by asking such questions as: How many quarter notes make up a whole note? How many sixteenth notes are in a quarter note?

### **Arts Connections**

1. Play some of Mahalia Jackson's music! Jackson's audio recordings of gospels, hymns, and spirituals have been remastered onto CDs. If you don't want to purchase a CD, students can listen to sound clips of her recordings on <http://www.amazon.com>.
2. Have students discuss the WebQuest (see Social Studies, #1) question. How do they think gospel music is or isn't related to rock music?
3. Have students interpret the lyrics of music sung by Mahalia Jackson. They can visit the *African-American Music, Southern U.S.* Collection at the Library of Congress website: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ftvhtml/ftvhome.html> Ask students how they think contemporary audiences might respond to certain songs.
4. In Chapter 4, students learn about the percussion instruments used in the church to accompany the members of the congregation. Have students experiment playing drums, cymbals, tambourines, and other percussion instruments.
5. Mahalia continually compares gospel music to jazz. How are they similar and how are they different? Have students conduct research and create Venn diagrams (two interlocking circles) to describe the characteristics of each. List the characteristics of gospel music in the left circle and the characteristics of jazz on the right. In the overlapping portion of the circles, list characteristics common to both forms of music.

6. The book mentions such wonderful musicians as Ma Rainey and Louis Armstrong, with whom Mahalia had the good fortune to cross paths during her lifetime. Have students learn about these other famous musicians and play some of their music for all to enjoy.